

Facing Your Church's Uncertain Future

Helpful Practices for Courageous Conversations & Faithful Decisions



United Church of Christ
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DISCERNING, DISCUSSING, & MAKING DECISIONS CONCERNING YOUR CHURCH'S FUTURE

"I served as an interim pastor at a very small congregation that never explicitly discussed or entered into a discernment process regarding their future, but it was often underneath the surface."

"I serve a church that believes they will 'run out of money' in five years. I want to be thinking about how to help them reach a decision on whether or not to continue being church together."

"I am frustrated with their resistance to dealing with the fact that they will have to close due to finances and fatigued leadership within the next two to three years."

"Understand resistance as caring and go one by one for grief counseling to the most resistant. Make sure communication about process is frequent and clear (transparent). But clearly, getting down to the 'nitty gritty' of closing and deciding on a legacy is hard to face."

These comments were shared by ministers who served churches facing uncertain futures in need of conversation to consider their next most faithful

steps. Ministry in such congregations calls for faithful honest—often difficult conversations—which pastors and congregations might sadly avoid. Many congregations, even if vital in mission and service, most likely need to have conversations concerning their capabilities, community relationships, facilities, and finances for the future.

Don't wait to start the conversation. Congregational leaders and/or the pastor need to articulate the questions and comments that are probably already being quietly discussed or privately thought among members. Begin with questions like, "I'm thinking about our future. Will you help me?" It is critically important that a congregation begin the conversation when it has the capacity, energy and leadership to discern their future and take responsible actions for it. With early conversation, closure may not be the only option.

Waiting until a congregation is exhausted to hold the conversation is too late, since any future option—re-visioning, re-missioning, merger, relocation or closure—requires a depth

of organizational strength, leadership assets and willpower. Congregational experiences show that churches that face their future well, no matter what the outcome, do so when congregational leaders, pastors and congregation are all involved in discussing their church's future and making the necessary decisions.

GET READY TO ENGAGE IN DISCUSSION AND DISCERNMENT

- Be attentive to spiritual and Biblical grounding.
- Engage your personal prayers and meditation in discerning God's spirit and word.
- Encourage ongoing prayer groups to pray for the congregation.
- Pray for congregation leaders, members and pastoral leadership.
- Engage your congregation in Bible study (See Bible studies and questions in *Living Legacy Workbook*).
- Contact your Conference and/or Association for counsel, support and resources.
- Engage your congregation in conversations about your church's future.

- Be informed of resources for congregational discernment, assessment, options and visioning, including: Partners in Building (UCC Church Building & Loan Fund); New Beginnings (Hope Partnership); reVision (Center for Progressive Renewal); and, Be the Church: Mission Planning Guide for Congregations (UCC Faith INFO).
- Read resources on closure and legacy, including *Living Legacy: Church Legacy and Closure Workbook Resource*, and *Toward the Better Country: Church Closure and Resurrection*, by L. Gail Irwin (See additional resources list for more books and blogs).
- Don't wait. Start the conversation. Read the blog post: "Let's Have The Conversation," at <http://carducc.wordpress.com>.
- As you discuss, discern, worship, and gather to make decision, use the Liturgies for Leading into a Congregational Decision in this resource.
- Communicate with all members and participants in congregation
- Invite all members and friends to participate in the decision.

- Be ready for members and friends in the congregation to process and respond to the discussion in different ways and times.
- Listens to all concerns and voices.
- Remember that resistant and angry voices may be expressing grief.
- Read "Expressions of Grief in the Faith Community" (Chapter 3), *Toward the Better Country* and *Change and Conflict in Your Congregation (Even If You Hate Both)*.
- Encourage your congregation to pray for the discussion on its future.
- Discuss the church's future with church council and leadership (See "Mind the Gap" and "Is It Time?" (Chapters 1 & 2) *Living Legacy Workbook*; "The Rise and Fall of Sacred Places" (Chapter 2) *Toward the Better Country*); and, *Struggling Congregation Options* from the Mass. Conference (macucc.org/struggling-congregations).
- Establish a study group to review and discuss future options for congregation; including (1) creating strategy for re-visioning and re-missioning for congregation; (2) leaving building and moving to right size facility; (3) leaving building and starting over as a totally new congregation; (4) joining another congregation; (5) giving or selling building to a non-profit organization or another church that serves congregation's mission with agreement for continued worship in facility; or (6) closing congregation and sharing legacy assets with other mission agencies.
- Study group presents proposal to council and congregation for discussion and decision.
- Discuss proposal among leadership and congregation to make a decision, using worship resources on *Leading a Congregational Decision*.

GET STARTED ON NEXT STEPS



IF YOU CHOOSE TO ...

Seek a Process for Re-Visioning and Re-Missioning

- Contact your Conference/Association for consultation and resources
- Contact and engage in a program of assessment and re-visioning, including Partners in Building, UCC Church Building & Loan Fund; Hope Partnership New Beginnings; Be the Church: Mission Planning Guide for Congregations, UCC Faith INFO, and reVision from the Center for Progressive Renewal.
- Set the plan for your future and establish benchmarks for evaluation.
- Get started on your re-visioning and re-missioning plan.
- Celebrate of your decision in worship and keep your congregation's future in prayer.
- Use the Worship Resources for Discernment and Decision-Making as well as for Leaving a Building if your plans include relocation or joining another congregation.



IF YOU CHOOSE TO ...

Culminate the Ministry of the Church through Closure & Legacy

- Contact your Conference and/or Association for support, options and resources.
- Engage in conversation with groups for support in closure and legacy options, including Church Building & Loan Fund for property options and questions; United Church Funds for information on Legacy Fund creation; and/or Center for Progressive Renewal for Threshold Classes and coaching.
- Read resources on closure and legacy, including *Living Legacy: Church Legacy and Closure Workbook* Resource and, *Toward the Better Country: Church Closure and Resurrection*, L. Gail Irwin (See additional resource list of other books and blogs).
- Lift up your congregation's decision to close in worship.

- Use the Worship Resources for Leaving a Building and Closing a Congregation.

 - Get started on your closure and legacy process by studying "Good Practices for Closure and Legacy Process," which includes good practices for:
 - Closure and Legacy Next Steps
 - Membership Care
 - Congregational and Pastoral Leadership
 - Legal Concerns
 - Property Decisions
 - Continuing Your Church's Mission through its Legacy
 - Practices, Assumptions and Attitudes to Avoid Resources
 - Worship Services and Resources
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RESURRECTION FAITH, CHURCH LEGACY & CLOSURE

Grace, peace, comfort and strength be with you in our God who is always with us—in times of both beginnings and endings.

Few church pastors and leaders ever anticipate or hope to engage in the process of ending a congregation's active life. But, if you and your congregation are involved in legacy conversations about closing, you are not alone. A congregation closes every two weeks in the United Church of Christ, and nine congregations close every day among all church traditions in the United States. The average lifespan of a congregation is comparable to the lifespan of an individual (about 70-100 years). In the UCC, the average lifespan was 93 years for congregations that recently closed. Although many congregations live well past 100 years, new ministries and churches will often close in their formative years.

No matter how young or old a congregation is, each congregation has served God's mission in some unique way and as a faithful witness in its time. It is important, that as a congregation comes to the close of its ministry, there be time to gracefully grieve its ending, give thanks for the way God's Spirit has

been present and active throughout the congregation's life, and look toward the sharing of the congregation's legacy for the future of God's mission in the world.

KEEP CENTERED ON GOD'S WORD, PURPOSE AND SPIRIT

In her book, *Toward the Better Country: Church Closure and Resurrection*, the Rev. Gail Irwin, a UCC pastor writes, "In my experience with a church in decline, I learned to say 'This is God's project.' This was not to negate my responsibility for leading the church, but it was a reminder that we are not in complete control of the outcomes of our labor, nor do we get to see God's 'finished product' in our lifetimes. I come to this endeavor with the belief that a faithful reshaping, merger or closure may be more in keeping with God's will than a strenuous effort to stay open at all costs.

Regardless of the shape our churches take in the future, God's project will go on. [...] No local church lasts forever. Only Christ's universal church is eternal. Instead of wondering how long your church will survive, you can change the question to: how well can we live for the time we have been given by God?"

In the life and death of a congregation, just as in our personal lives and deaths, as people of faith, we place our hope and faith in a God of Resurrection. Rev. Gail Cafferata, an Episcopal pastor who experienced a church closure, reflects in her blog, *Mind the Tiller: Leading a Church to Closure*: “The rudder of a closing church is resurrection faith that new life will rise from the death of a congregation. [...] It is faith that God is present in the midst of grief. It is faith that God calls us to be good stewards of our blessings. It is faith that gratitude for ministry we’ve shared brings us closer to one another and to the heart of God.”

As followers of Jesus Christ, even in the midst of congregational grief and death, we look toward another day of the Resurrection God’s working. Rev. Jonathan New, Associate Conference Minister for Stewardship and Financial Development in the United Church of Christ Massachusetts Conference writes: “Part of the uniqueness of this ministry is the special reward that is reserved only for those who are willing to engage a congregation at the deepest possible level with the promise of the gospel – that ours is a God of life and that death doesn’t have the final word. If you’re not willing to go there, this probably isn’t the ministry for you. But, if you are, you’ll know you went to the tomb with the people and helped them move through to life on the other side.”

As a congregation discerns and acts upon decisions to close, staying centered on God’s word, purpose and spirit is critically important and often difficult. As you enter into the closure and legacy decisions be sure to enfold the discussion in prayer and Bible study. Encourage individuals and the congregation to pray for awareness of God’s spirit working in and through the church discussion and decisions. Include prayers for discernment in the congregation’s worship (see *Worship Resources*). Utilize existing prayer and Bible study groups, or start a group to do Bible study and pray together. The *Living Legacy Workbook* includes a Bible Study with Questions that is helpful for congregations to use.

UNDERSTAND CLOSURE AND LEGACY IN LIGHT OF RESURRECTION FAITH

When we hear the word, “closure,” we think of something closing or shutting down, which often has a negative connotation. But closure also means, and includes, a sense of completeness. In light of Christ’s death and Resurrection, the closing of a congregation may be a time of grief, but it can also be a culminating time to faithfully complete the mission of a congregation with thanksgiving for the ways that the Spirit of God has moved through the congregation’s life and death. Helping a church experience a faithful sense of completing ministry and mission with a spirit of thanksgiving is the goal of this template.

If your congregation is considering closure, its story, mission and legacy is probably much more than its present condition. It is important to uncover, discuss and articulate the life-giving core experiences that have shaped and expressed your congregation's mission and ministry as you consider the legacy you've received and the legacy that you can now share with others for future life-giving work. We often think of a legacy only as an amount of money or property left by someone to another person or organization in a will. Certainly that is one definition of legacy, but legacy is also defined by *Macmillan Dictionary* as "something transmitted by or received from a predecessor or from the past; something that continues to exist after an individual or organization is no longer present."

In her blog, *Living Your Legacy: How Will you touch Others' Lives*, Tina Stone writes, "Knowing the legacy I want to leave behind helps me stay focused on what I'm doing in the present so that my goals are in line with that legacy. It offers a concrete sense of purpose in choosing what I am giving my energy to." What is the legacy that your congregation has given its energy to? Articulating the legacy of mission and ministry that has been created and shared through the church's history will help your congregation decide how to share its legacy with others. *The Living Legacy Resource*, Chapter Three, Legacy Inherited: Legacy Futured

provides a helpful tool and process for congregations to explore, discuss and articulate their legacy. Remember, your church legacy includes its mission, core story, members, and historical records, as well as financial and property assets.

See also *Good Practices for Continuing Your Church Mission through Its Legacy* (page 26).

CLOSING THOUGHTS

A pastor that served a closing church recommended these good practices from her experience: "Focus on continued faithful worship and stewardship until closing; involve the whole church in the closing process; once made, understand that the congregation stands on the shoulders of many and that the 'stuff and money' of the congregation have been a gift from many and should be shared in the same manner. We ended our ministry on Easter Sunday and celebrated the Resurrection. It was not a wake. Another pastor who ministered in a closing church also wrote "Remain engaged. Be honest. Be open. Grieve well. Finish with a sense of celebration and hope."

As you discern and make decisions concerning your church's future, legacy and closure, please know that there are those who have done so before you, so you are not alone.

There are people and organizations who can resource and support you. It is always helpful and wise to seek outside counsel while going through a process of discernment and decision-making. The resources and good practices in this template are intended to be a source of help, support and comfort as your congregation's ministry comes to a close with dignity, grace, hope and faith.

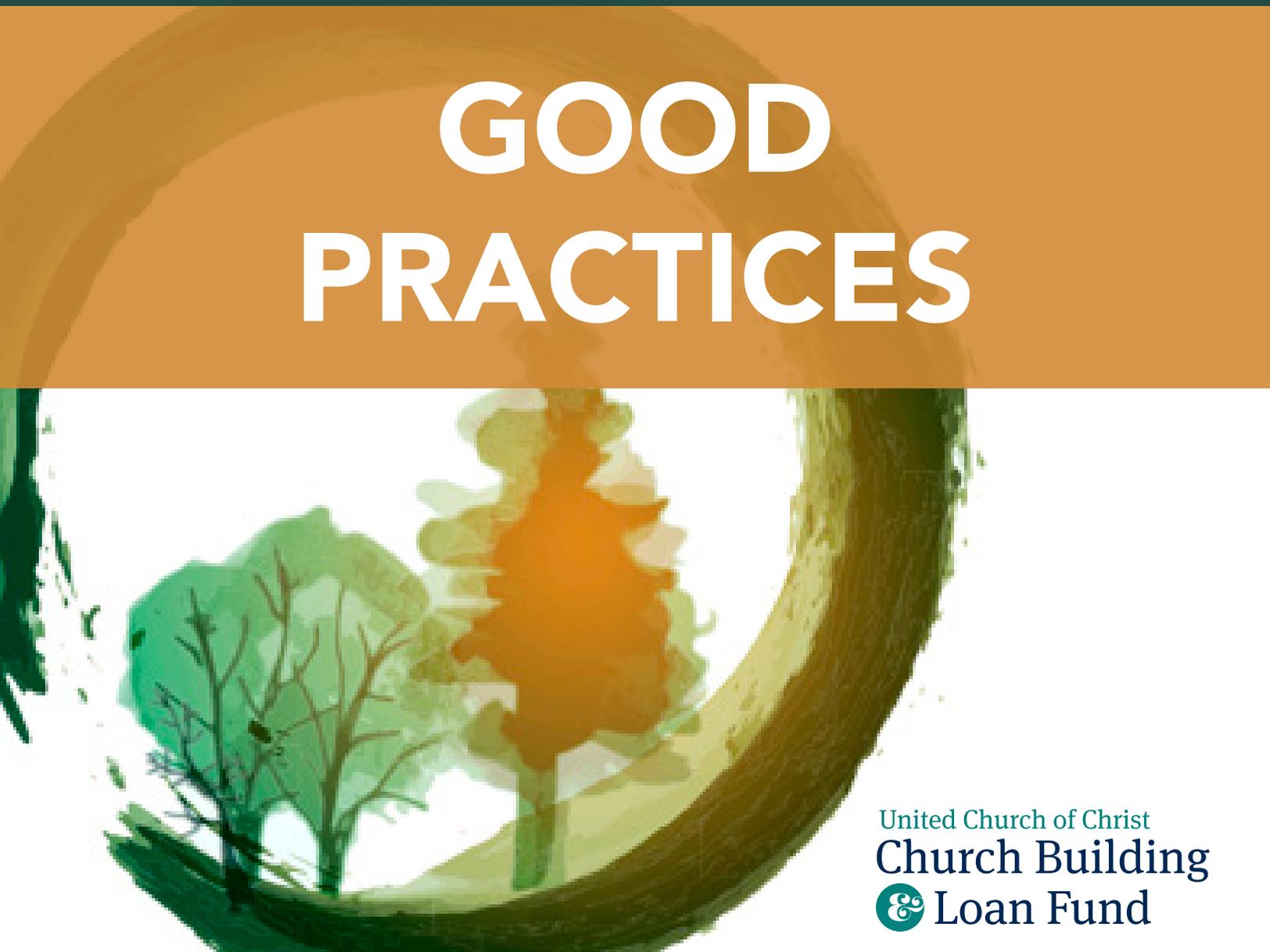
As you prepare to end your church's ministry, may you experience the presence and power of the God of life, death and new life, celebrating the many ways you can pass on your congregation's spirit through a living legacy that will serve God's mission for years to come.

Thanks be to God, whose steadfast love, faithfulness and mission endure forever!

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GOOD PRACTICES



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GOOD PRACTICES FOR CLOSURE AND LEGACY PROCESS

“The decision to close a congregation’s active ministry can be a difficult and emotional chapter in your life together, but, as you will discover, it can also be a time that inspires great communal clarity and gratitude, emotional courage, and grace-filled acceptance of the realities and opportunities before you. Your faithful leadership is critically needed and spiritually indispensable right now. This is no easy task that you have accepted. Yet, gratefully, you have wisely sought the help that you will need to attend to the many conversations, tasks and decisions now facing your congregation, as you discern together what will be the capstone of your church’s legacy.” - *Living Legacy: Church Legacy and Closure*

There are experiences, insight, information and support to make closure a hopeful, grace-filled experience. The purpose of this resource is to present helpful practices for churches making the faithful but difficult decision to end the active life of their congregation in order to share their legacy for future good work. This template is a supplement to the *Living Legacy Workbook* for congregational study and use.

The following good practices for closure and legacy next steps, membership care, congregational and pastoral leadership,

worship, legal matters, property decisions, and legacy stewardship are based on the insights of pastors, conference staff, researchers, lawyers and others who have experienced or studied church closure and legacy.

Also in this resource is a list of practices, attitudes and assumptions to avoid. These good (and bad) practices are presented to inform the discussion, decision-making and process in your congregation.

Although there are many common questions and concerns in closing congregations, each congregation’s situation is unique. Some of the good practices may address your congregation’s situation, others may not. If you have questions about the good practices in this resources contact your Conference or Association Office, or email legacychurch@ucc.org.



GOOD PRACTICES FOR CLOSURE & LEGACY NEXT STEPS

- Contact Your Conference and Association for support, options and resources.
- Engage in conversation for support in closure and legacy options, including the UCC Church Building & Loan Fund for property options and questions; United Church Funds for information on Legacy Fund creation; and, Center for Progressive Renewal for Threshold Classes and coaching.
- Engage in conversation with needed legal, property, financial and pastoral assistance.
- Read your church constitution and by-laws on closure and legacy process.
- Review the quorum clause in advance of any congregational vote, to see if it is achievable or needs to be amended.
- If your governing documents do not include an asset distribution clause, see a distribution clause example in Legal Issues in Church Dissolution (Chapter 7) *Living Legacy Workbook*.
- Create a Closure and Legacy Team to coordinate tasks and discussions.
- Have the Closure and Legacy team study the *Living Legacy Workbook*.
- The church Closure and Legacy team establishes a timeline that includes:
 1. Congregational discussion and decision on Legacy (See Living Legacy Chapter 3);
 2. Congregational meeting to vote on closure and legacy assets distribution (see Leading into a Congregation Decision Worship Resource);
 3. Notification to Conference and/or Association;
 4. Notification to organizations and groups that rent or use church facility;
 5. Disposition of real estate and building property;
 6. Archiving of church records and historic materials;
 7. Decision on transferring church members to other congregations;
 8. Setting date for closing Service of Thanksgiving and Communion (See Leaving a Building and Closing a Congregation Worship Resources)

9. Cleaning and clearing out the church facility and property;
10. Preparing church building for being vacant (if necessary)
11. Demolition of church building (if necessary);
12. Authorization of small group of leaders to make decisions after church closure (i.e., there are financial, legal and property decisions that need to be made after a congregation's closing service); and,
13. After closure, check to see if church is still listed on the United Church of Christ website ("Find a Church"). If it is, please contact your Conference and/or Association.

GOOD PRACTICES FOR MEMBERSHIP CARE

- Communicate with all members and participants in congregation.
- Invite all members and friends to participate in closure decision.
- Read “Expressions of Grief in the Faith Community” (Chapter 3) *Toward the Better Country*.
- Be ready for members and friends in the congregation to process and respond to the closure decision in different ways and times.
- Listens to all concerns and voices.
- Remember that resistant and angry voices may be expressing grief.
- Find ways and rituals for grief to be expressed.
- Involve members in Legacy discussion and decision-making (See discussion guide in “Legacy Inherited, Legacy Futured,” *Living Legacy Workbook*).
- Be aware that church members and friends often have difficulty finding new church homes.
- Contacting Conference and/or Association to assist on identifying possible churches;
- Help members locate other congregations to consider transferring their membership;
- Visit local churches to choose congregation to receive church members.
- Discuss with other local congregations the possibilities for the ongoing care of elderly and housebound members.
- Request local churches receive church members.
- Prepare Church Membership Certificates for members to take to new churches.
- Collect and archive church membership records and other historical materials.
- Plan worship services that lift up the congregation’s history, mission and legacy (See *Worship Resources Closing Services*).

-  Prepare liturgy of commissioning and sending forth of members to other congregation (See Worship Resources Closing Services).
-  Ask neighboring churches and pastors to check on how previous members and friends are doing after closure.

GOOD PRACTICES FOR PASTORS AND CONGREGATIONAL LEADERSHIP

- Listen for and to God's Word and Spirit.
- Support and pray for each other in leadership.
- Read "Role of Legacy Pastor" (Chapter 4) *Living Legacy Workbook*; *Discerning the Failure to Thrive: Lay Leaders, Pastors* (Chapters 4 & 5) *Toward the Better Country*.
- Pastors and leaders in closing congregations can experience stress due to grief and failed expectations.
- Research suggests that affirmation of pastors and congregational leaders by family, friends, colleagues, congregations and judicatories can diminish the stress and challenges associated with closing a church.
- Congregational leaders taking responsibility for the closure process and decision strengthen the congregational outcome and the pastor's ministry
- Read blogs on Church Closure, Leadership and Pastors (see Resource Section).
- Leading a congregation through transition and closure is not a ministry to which every pastor feels called or has the gifts to do
- Pastors should attend to their future calling and life needs while ministering a congregation through transition.
- Congregational leaders also look to find a new congregation to participate in and share their gifts.
- Pastors and congregational leaders together review the UCC Ethical Codes and Ethical Departures Guidelines (See Resources for the Relationship between Pastors and Congregations).
- Ministering in a congregation until it closes, may not be the best choice for a pastor or for the congregation.
- Leaving, rather than staying until a congregation uses up all available financial resources, may be a better and as well as ethical choice for a pastor.

- Congregations looking for pastoral leadership during the closing process should consult with their conference for a pastor with specialized training in transition and closure.
- Participation and communication with a ministerial peer group is helpful for pastors.
- Participation in coaching programs, workshop or seminars on closure and legacy is helpful for church leaders and pastors.
- Transparent and timely communications with congregation is important for congregational leaders and pastors.
- Listen for and to the wisdom of the congregation.
- Look for members' talents and energy to share responsibilities and tasks.
- Be prepared for resistance, anger and conflict.
- Read Expressions of Grief in the Faith Community, Ch. 3, *Toward the Better Country and Change and Conflict in your Congregation* (See resource section).
- It is the responsibility of authorized congregational officers and leaders to attend to final church property and closure affairs.
- Pastors' calls end after the closing service when regular meetings, ministry and worship are done, any other agreement would need to be authorized and documented.
- When the church closing is also an ending of a pastor's ministry in the congregation, plan a time to include the liturgy for Time of Passage: Farewell/Ending an Authorized Ministry in the UCC Book of Worship.
- Appoint an authorized leadership group to continue any work and decisions needed after closing worship.
- Maintain liability insurance for leadership throughout closure.

GOOD PRACTICES FOR LEGAL CONCERNS

- Gather Church Constitution, By-Laws, Mortgages, and all legal documents.
- Seek local, experienced legal counsel with knowledge of IRS, state and local regulations.
- Contact your Conference or Association for legal counsel reference and advice.
- Read "Legal Issues in Church Dissolution and Merger" (Chapter 7), Living Legacy Workbook.
- Follow Church Constitution and State laws in proposing and voting a resolution of dissolution.
- Determine the effect of any real property restrictions on a church's decision to dissolve.
- Read and provide for insurance policy liability coverage before and after closure.
- Notify all creditors that the church will be dissolving.
- Pay all congregation debts prior to dissolution.
- Review church rental and lease agreements.
- Notify all organizations that lease, rent or use the church facility of church closure.
- Keep detailed records of the creditors notified and debts paid.
- Notify your state's Department of Taxation and other applicable entities that the church is dissolving.
- Distribute legacy assets as set forth in church's governing documents and IRS regulations. Assets of a dissolving church may not be transferred or paid to any individual or to a non-exempt organization.
- Prepare and file articles (certificate) of dissolution according to state law requirements.
- Prepare notification of dissolution needed by Conference and/or Association.
- Appoint and authorize leadership team for decisions after closing service.
- Notify Post Office to forward mail to appropriate person after closing.

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GOOD PRACTICES FOR PROPERTY DECISIONS

- Create list of all church real estate and property (e.g., worship facilities, parsonages, school buildings, cemeteries, vacant land).
- Gather documents and deeds on all church real estate and property.
- Determine the effect of any real property restrictions. Note: Cemeteries, columbaria, and/or memorial gardens require legal counsel on local and state regulations to consider possible options, as well as attention to, and communication with, families of those interred.
- Assess real estate and property condition, needs and value.
- Follow Church Constitution and State laws in proposing and voting disposition of property.
- Consult with your Conference and/or Association on property options.
- Consult with real estate and legal counsel.
- Read “Church Buildings as Living Legacies” (Chapter 5) *Living Legacy Workbook*.
- Consult with insurance carrier for continuing insurance during disposition of property.
- Contact UCC Church Building & Loan Fund for property options.
- Consider options for disposition of church real estate and property: (1) Donate or transfer ownership to the Conference or Association; (2) donate or transfer ownership to a not for profit organization; (3) re-purpose or redevelop property; or (4) sell property.
- Take inventory of church furniture, office equipment, worship resources, etc.
- Plan for disposition of church furniture, office equipment, worship resources, etc. (1) by including in sale of property; (2) donating to other churches, non-profit community organizations; or (3) selling in an estate sale and add income to legacy assets for distribution.

 Make plan for cleaning out facility.

 Collect keys to the facilities, all doors and locks.

If the church facility will be vacant:
arrange for locks to be changed;

1. Arrange for locks to be changed;
2. Install security and alarm system;
3. Assign Caretaker to contact periodic inspections;
4. Take current photos and notes off current condition;
5. Arrange for lawn care and snow removal;
6. Remove all signage in area welcoming passerby to church;
7. Set thermostats to appropriate range;
8. Secure all doors, windows and other openings;
9. Bring all outdoor items inside;
10. Notify local police and fire departments, neighbors and utility providers that building will be vacant; and,
11. Contact Insurance Board (www.insuranceboard.org) for helpful guide.

 If church needs to be demolished, set aside finances to do so.

 Authorize group to make continuing property and financial decisions after church closure.

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GOOD PRACTICES FOR CONTINUING YOUR CHURCH MISSION THROUGH ITS LEGACY

Your church legacy includes its mission, core story, members, and historical records, as well as financial and property assets.

- Read "Legacy Inherited – Legacy Futured" (Chapter 3) Living Legacy Workbook.
- Explore your legacy using the Legacy Study Guide (Chapter 3) Living Legacy Workbook.
- Discuss your legacy in the congregation using conversation guide in Chapter 3 in the Living Legacy Workbook.
- Include all members and friends in legacy discussion and decision making.
- Draft a Legacy Covenant that expresses the congregation's mission, spirit and history (Note: this is not the legal document that will be required for asset distribution).
- Contact your Conference and/or Association for legacy counsel and option.

Your church records and historical materials are part of your legacy.

- Collect and organize your church records and archival materials (See Congregational Library and Society of American Archivists' recommendations on sorting, organizing and donating records).
- Consider (and contact) options for distributing church archival materials to UCC Related Archives, Conference and/or Association, Local Historical Society, Local Seminary, College or Public Library.
- Check the archive recipient's guidelines for donation.
- Invite the recipient of archival materials to worship with congregation.

Your Church Members' talents are gifts to share with other congregations.

- Be aware that church members and friends often have difficulty finding new church homes.
- Contact your Conference and/or Association to assist on identifying possible churches.
- Help members locate other congregations to consider transferring their membership.
- Visit local churches to choose congregation to receive church members.
- Discuss with other local congregations, pastors, and ministers the possibilities for the ongoing care of elderly and housebound members.
- Request local churches receive church members.
- Prepare Church Membership Certificates for Members to take to new churches.
- Prepare liturgy of commissioning and sending forth of members to other congregation (See Closing a Congregation Service in Worship Resources).
- Ask neighboring churches and pastors to check on how previous members and friends are doing after closure.

Your Financial Assets are Legacy Gifts to share for future mission.

- Organize inventory of your church assets and financial information
- Notify all creditors that the church will be dissolving.
- Pay all congregation debts prior to dissolution.
- Keep detailed records of the creditors notified and the debts paid.
- Follow Church Constitution, State laws and IRS regulations in proposing and voting on distribution of legacy assets. Note: Assets of a dissolving church may not be transferred or paid to any individual or to a non-exempt organization.
- The effect of any real property restrictions should be determined well in advance of a church's decision to dissolve.
- Consult with your Conference and/or Association on Legacy questions.
- Consider how your church will select an investment manager for its Legacy assets who reflects the faith and values of the congregation and the UCC.

-  Contact United Church Funds for Legacy Fund Establishment questions.
-  Read "Financial Assets as Living Legacies" (Chapter 6) in *Living Legacy Workbook*.
-  Prepare Legacy statement that specifies congregation's intent for legacy assets.
-  Notify recipients of legacy contributions.
-  Celebrate your legacy and legacy gifts in closing service of worship (See Closing a Congregation Service in Worship Resources).
-  Invite legacy recipients to worship with congregation.

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PRACTICES, ASSUMPTIONS & ATTITUDES TO AVOID

- ✗ Doing nothing until the “money runs out” or “last person dies.”
- ✗ Waiting too long to start a conversation on your church’s future.
- ✗ Getting angry with others (e.g., pastor, church leaders, wider church) for church decline.
- ✗ Believing that church closure is unfaithful failure, rather than faithful missional decision.
- ✗ Trying to do closure without legal, realty, and legacy counsel.
- ✗ Neither notifying, communicating with, nor seeking counsel from your Association and/or Conference.
- ✗ Having one person be responsible for everything, including finances.
- ✗ Pastor serving as treasurer.
- ✗ Not providing for cost of insurance on building after closure (but before disposition).
- ✗ Not providing for insurance on authorized leaders who are making decision after closure.
- ✗ Not providing for cost of demolition of building, if necessary.
- ✗ Expecting the pastor to continue to work during, and after, closure without compensation.
- ✗ Not planning or providing for the clean-up of church facility, office and property
- ✗ Giving money from sale of closed church to individuals in, or outside, of the church.
- ✗ Leaving church members on their own to find new congregations to belong.
- ✗ Planning legacy gifts without contacting recipient organization for guidance.
- ✗ Planning and distributing legacy gifts to recipients not congruent with the church’s mission and ministry.
- ✗ Closing without having a service of Thanksgiving for your church’s life, ministry and legacy.



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Facing Your Church's Uncertain Future

Helpful Practices for Courageous Conversations & Faithful Decisions

WORSHIP RESOURCES



United Church of Christ
Church Building
& Loan Fund

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WORSHIP RESOURCES

INTRODUCTION TO LITURGIES

This is a set of liturgies to accompany the process towards making decisions concerning a church's future including legacy and closure. Noting the difficulty and importance of this decision, these liturgies serve to frame and guide congregations in two stages in the process.

The hymns and hymn numbers in all these liturgies reference *The New Century Hymnal*.

Congregations can modify aspects of each service to accommodate their particular needs.

STAGE 1 – DISCERNMENT

Deciding upon the future of a congregation is a momentous decision. Though congregations might have used the resources in the *Living Legacy Handbook*, the discussion leading to a decision should be guided by the Holy Spirit. Rather than cast this process as a congregational meeting, consider invoking the Holy Spirit with liturgy to remain faithful to our discipleship.

Unlike most congregational discussions, there should be a "chaplain" designated to discern the movement of the Spirit. During the Discussion portion, the chaplain should listen carefully. This

person has the authority to stop the discussion at any time in order to invoke the Spirit through prayer, either aloud or silent. The chaplain may also work with the pastor identify a reading or hymn to clarify a point that was made or to summarize the progress of the discussion. The chaplain also will record major points and ideas to reflect back to the participants in the Reflection portion. The chaplain should be another clergy person who is not a member of the congregation.

There are three different liturgies to accompany discernment. Each draw upon a different reading: Psalm 90, Luke 13:6-9, and Matthew 6:19-21.

Note: The Psalter reading for Psalm 90 is on Page 680 in the *New Century Hymnal*.

STAGE 2 – CLOSING

There are two different liturgies to accompany closing. The first, *Living Bones*, covers congregations leaving their buildings and remaining together as a congregation. The second, *Ending and a New Beginning*, covers congregations ending their ministry and dissolving as a church.



LIVING BONES

Use this liturgy when a congregation leaves its facility and chooses to remain together to continue its ministries in a new location. It is based upon Ezekiel 37:1-12.

"The hand of God came upon me, and God brought me out by the Holy Spirit and set me down in the middle of a valley; it was full of bones. God led me all around them; there were very many lying in the valley, and they were very dry. God said to me, "Mortal, can these bones live?" I answered, "O God, you know." Then God said to me, "Prophecy to these bones, and say to them: O dry bones, hear the word of the One. Thus says God to these bones: I will cause breath to enter you, and you shall live. I will lay sinews on you, and will cause flesh to come upon you, and cover you with skin, and put breath in you, and you shall live; and you shall know that I am God.

*So I prophesied as I had been commanded; and as I prophesied, suddenly there was a noise, a rattling, and the bones came together, bone to its bone. I looked, and there were sinews on them, and flesh had come upon them, and skin had covered them; but there was no breath in them. Then God said to me, "Prophecy to the breath, prophesy, mortal, and say to the breath: Thus says God: Come from the four winds, O breath, and breathe upon these slain, that they may live." I prophesied as God commanded me, and the breath came into them, and they lived, and stood on their feet, a vast multitude."
- Ezekiel 37:1-12, NSRV (Adapted)*

The service is divided into two parts. Part One is the dry bones 37:1-6. This addresses the end of the congregation's life in their current structure. Part Two is the Spirit bringing the bones back to life, the balance of the pericope.

The service also offers two liturgical options. Following a short opening, congregations using Option A either move from place to place in the facility, or take a visual tour using images of different rooms in the church. In each place the congregation offers its remembrances of each location followed by prayer. Option B is the congregation remains in the sanctuary without seeing images of the different rooms, but the congregation will share its remembrances of each place in the facility.

Note: This liturgy can also be used for congregations who are closing as well.

ENDING AND A NEW BEGINNING

Use this liturgy when a congregation chose to close its ministry and disband as a congregation. This liturgy's design presumes that the congregation will pass on artifacts and assets to other congregations, community agencies, and instrumentalities of the United Church of Christ. As such, this liturgy uses Revelations 21:1-6 to help people look forward.

"Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more. And I saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying,

*'See, the home of God is among mortals.
God will dwell with them;
they will be God's peoples,
and God will be with them;*

*God will wipe every tear from their eyes.
Death will be no more;
mourning and crying and pain will be no more,
for the first things have passed away.'*

And the one who was seated on the throne said, "See, I am making all things new." Also God said, "Write this, for these words are trustworthy and true." Then God said to me, "It is done! I am the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end. To the thirsty I will give water as a gift from the spring of the water of life."

- Revelations 21:1-6, NRSV, Adapted

During this service, the congregation will have an opportunity to share remembrances and reflections upon its ministries in the Sharing Memories portion. Sharing them can be simple to elaborate. A simple remembrance would be people sharing their memories verbally. A more elaborate one would be a slide show of the congregation's ministries. The most elaborate would be a timeline from the first year of the congregation's history to the present and beyond.

Though this service can stand alone, the author suggests thinking of this service as the conclusion of three events. The first event is a final social gathering, such as a church supper. If the congregation chooses to use a timeline¹, this would be an appropriate time to make it together. It offers an opportunity to reminisce and to put many of the details, such as a pastor's tenure and membership, that would take too long during the service. It may also help to clarify fuzzy dates and events for the service. The second event is a separate service to acknowledge the end of the current pastor's service to the congregation. It would be a service primarily for the congregation with participation from the local association. The liturgy to end a pastor's ministry would come from the *United Church of Christ Book of Worship*. Some modification might be necessary to accommodate the pastor if the pastor will celebrate communion at the final service. This might be done a week before the final service or even the

morning of the final service.

The accompanying liturgy is the final service of the three events. The congregation should invite all the living clergy who served the congregation. The congregation should also invite recipients of the congregation's artifacts and assets. The congregation should have at least a representative from the association or the conference or both in attendance.

During this service, a representative from the wider church, either the Conference or the Association, will bless the clergy who have served the congregation and will commission the current membership to continue their ministries in other settings. Recipients of artifacts and assets will describe to the congregation how they will be used. The congregation will respond urging them to be stewards of their legacy. Communion concludes this service. Either the current pastor can celebrate, or if that pastor chooses to receive communion with the congregation, another clergy can celebrate.

A WORD ON CLOSING A CHURCH

Some congregations designate various artifacts, including the church building, as sacred. Terms have included consecrated, commissioned, and dedicated. These artifacts served to facilitate the congregation's ministry. When a church closes its building, some artifacts may go to another congregation while others may remain behind.

As these artifacts also hold deep meaning and memory for many people, both closing liturgies include an acknowledgement of these artifacts in the communion invitation's introduction. Congregations not wishing to acknowledge these artifacts, including the building, can choose not to use the communion introduction.

¹Using a timeline. Create a simple timeline on a large roll of kraft paper. Delineate periods in the congregation's history in decade increments. For congregations with a long history, the initial years could be delineated in 50-year increments with later years by decades. Mark major events and ministries on the timeline, especially those events older than any member of the congregation. Include the names of pastors and their years of ministry on the timeline. Include ordinations. Let the current congregation mark recent events on the timeline. Invite parishioners to mark their names and the year they joined the congregation on the timeline. This may have to be done in the social hall. The final line should mark the day of this service. Leave adequate space to show the future ministries where during this service visual representations of the congregation's disbursements can be put on the timeline. As this timeline becomes a sacred object as a result of this service, it should be preserved and made accessible for historians and the public. The congregation can give it to the local library or to the Congregational Library for its archives.

OTHER NOTES AND RESOURCES

Though the above liturgies link closely with the respective reading, users are free to draw upon other texts if they are more appropriate. The following are other suggested texts:

Hebrew Scripture

- Genesis 12:1-9*
- Deuteronomy 34:1-8*
- Ecclesiastes 3:1-8*
- Jeremiah 31:1-6, 31-34

Epistles

- 1 Corinthians 3:6-9
- Ephesians 6:18-20*
- Philippians 4:1-9
- 1 Thessalonians 5:12-25*
- 2 Thessalonians 2:13-3:5

Gospel

- Matthew 9:35-38
- John 15:1-11
- John 16:25-28, 32-33
- John 21:15-18*

**Indicates suggested readings for a service to acknowledge the end of a pastor's service to the congregation.*

As with scripture, users are not bound to the hymns in the liturgies. These are other suggested hymns from the *New Century Hymnal*:

"Immortal, Invisible, God Only Wise" (1)

"The God of Abraham Praise" (24)

"God of the Sparrow God of the Whale" (32)

"Una Espiga (Sheaves of Summer)" (338)

"Let Us Talents and Tongues Employ" (347)

"What Gift Can We Bring?" (370)

"We Would Be Building" (607)

"O Day of God, Draw Near" (611)

"Carmina, Pueblo di Dios (Go Forth, O People of God)" (614)

ABOUT THE WORSHIP WRITER

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WORSHIP RESOURCE

LEADING TO A CONGREGATIONAL DECISION

BASED UPON PSALM 90

CALL TO WORSHIP

- One: Sisters and brothers, members and friends in faith. We gather as the body of Christ to discern the movement of the Holy Spirit.
- Many: **As the body of Christ we are mindful that we incarnate Jesus in our work and ministry.**
- One: Bring your sorrows and laments for the past.
- Many: **And we will share our dreams and visions for the future.**
- One: God is abides with us in this time and place. Come and let us open ourselves to the urgings of the Spirit.

HYMN

No. 25. "O God, Our Help in Ages Past"

RESPONSIVE PRAYER FOR DISCERNMENT

(Divide the congregation in two, such as A are men and B are women or A is left and B is right)

- One: Timeless and eternal God, you have been our dwelling place for generations. These walls have witnessed life's ebbs and flows:
- A: **babies baptized**
- B: **children confirmed**
- A: **couples married**
- B: **lives celebrated**
- One: Though we might imagine this place as timeless as you, we face a hard reality that this place is not you. As we discern our future as the body of Christ.
- A: **Open our ears to hear a new song.**
- B: **Open our eyes to see new possibilities.**
- A: **Open our hearts to new expressions of love.**
- One: May our discernment remain faithful to the lessons Jesus taught.
- All: **Grant that by your presence among us at this time, we will listen before speaking and to speak in love. May our decision prosper our ministries to make real your presence in our community. Amen.**

DISCUSSION

REFLECTION

(From the chaplain's notes)

PSALTER

Page 680, Psalm 90

UNISON PRAYER OF THANKSGIVING

Everlasting and faithful One, we are thankful for your presence and your Holy Spirit which guided our discussion. We trust that our discussions and our decision pleased you. We pray that our decision will make Jesus real beyond the walls of this church. As our ministry takes on a new shape and direction, we pray that it will continue the story Jesus began long ago. Amen.

BENEDICTION

Worship Resource
WORSHIP RESOURCE

LEADING TO A CONGREGATIONAL DECISION

BASED UPON LUKE 13:6-9

CALL TO WORSHIP

One: Put on your gardening shoes. Get your gloves. We have work to do.

Many: **Our garden was our pride and joy.**

One: Today, we must nourish and water our garden.

Many: **We will reclaim our garden with love and tender care.**

SCRIPTURE

Luke 13:6-9

UNISON PRAYER FOR DISCERNMENT

Our garden seems tired, O God. We are, however, not prepared to let it go. We must tend it, giving it water and compost. We must weed it so the nutrients will nourish our crops and invigorate their growth. Help us tend our garden. Give us time to discern what we can do. Grant that your Holy Spirit will guide us in our discussions and our decisions. Let us not lose sight of Jesus' call for our ministries to bear fruit again. Amen.

HYMN

No. 586 "Come to Tend God's Garden"

DISCUSSION

REFLECTION

(From the chaplain's notes)

HYMN

No. 270 "Like the Murmur of the Dove's Song"

UNISON PRAYER OF THANKSGIVING

Farmer God, thank you for the gift of time to reclaim our garden. Thank you for being with us and giving us the strength to undertake this labor. You gave us a vision. We have looked ahead to see what is possible with the resources we have. We leave this meeting with hope for our future and the promise that our garden will bear fruit to feed our community once again. Amen.

BENEDICTION

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WORSHIP RESOURCE

LEADING TO A CONGREGATIONAL DECISION

BASED UPON MATTHEW 6:19-21

CALL TO WORSHIP

One: We are stewards of the Word and stewards of this church's ministry.
Many: **All that we have is God's. The Holy One entrusted everything to us.**
One: Today, God calls us to be responsible stewards.
Many: **Today, we will lay claim to that which we treasure in our hearts.**

SCRIPTURE: Matthew 6:19-21

UNISON PRAYER FOR DISCERNMENT

Faithful God, these walls have witnessed the momentous events in people's lives. For that we hold all that is here sacred. Yet, we groan under its weight as we hold onto all of this. We have to face some difficult questions. Jesus taught us to that our treasure is in heaven. Come Holy Spirit, turn us to see our treasure in heaven and to set aside our treasure on earth. Amen.

HYMN: No. 313 "Like a Tree Beside the Water"

DISCUSSION

REFLECTION

(From the chaplain's notes)

HYMN: No. 306 "The Church of Christ in Every Age"

UNISON PRAYER OF THANKSGIVING

Patient God, thank you for guiding us through our discussions. You helped us separate our heavenly and earthly treasures from each other. We have clarity and can see the path set before us. Lead us and we will follow the path you set before us. Amen.

BENEDICTION

WORSHIP RESOURCE

LIVING BONES: LEAVING A CHURCH BUILDING

BASED UPON EZEKIAL 37: 1-12

AN ENDING

CALL TO WORSHIP

- One: Friends, come into this sacred place to give thanks to the Almighty who has accompanied us on our journey.
- Many: **We stand at the threshold. We look back and we look ahead.**
- One: We gather to say farewell to this place as we look forward to a new beginning.
- Many: **We say farewell with gratitude as we leave with hopeful anticipation.**
- One: Come friends. Let us worship and praise God together.

HYMN

No. 70, "God Is Here as We Your People"

UNISON PRAYER OF INVOCATION

Faithful and eternal God, you have tended and cared for us in this place across generations. The time has come for us to leave. Under your watchfulness we have collected memories of family, friends, and strangers who have been a part of our lives as this body of Christ. You have helped us through life-changing events. Here we have learned to be faithful disciples of Jesus. In this time together, let our memories strengthen us as a congregation to walk together towards a new future. Amen.

SCRIPTURE

Ezekial 37: 1-6

OPTION A

Note: The order of this section will be a function of the order in which the congregation goes through its final tour. The sanctuary portion, however, should be last. Additional prayers for spaces not included in this option can be added.

KITCHEN PRAYER

O God, here we prepared food to share with family, neighbors, and friends. Here we made friends as we prepared roasts and casseroles, baked cookies and pies, and brewed countless pots of coffee. Here we made food for joyful fellowship suppers and sad funeral receptions. From here we made sure all were fed. Let us take time to share our memories. We have learned to be faithful disciples of Jesus. In this time together, let our memories strengthen us as a congregation to walk together towards a new future. Amen.

PRAYER RESPONSE

(After sharing memories) **We will carry these memories imprinted upon our hearts. Amen.**

CHURCH SCHOOL PRAYER

O God, here we learned our first lessons about Jesus. Here we taught our children discipleship. Here we discovered the upside down world of the gospel. Moved by your Spirit and through our learning, we have grown in our faith. Over time, we have come to trust Jesus' teachings. They have given us a firm foundation upon which to build our lives and further our ministries. Let us take time to share our memories.

PRAYER RESPONSE

(After sharing memories) **We will carry these memories imprinted upon our hearts. Amen.**

SOCIAL HALL PRAYER

O God, when we listen carefully we can hear the faint echoes of church functions long gone by. We remember with fond joy suppers and gatherings which brought us closer together. We came here as strangers and left as friends. While we remember weeping sad tears in our common losses, we also remember weeping joyful tears as we shared laughter together. We remember celebrations and annual meetings. Here, we built and strengthened our community. Let us take time to share our memories.

PRAYER RESPONSE

(After sharing memories) **We will carry these memories imprinted upon our hearts. Amen.**

SANCTUARY PRAYER

O God, this sanctuary has been this church's heart. Here we have heard the word proclaimed beginning with the Rev. _____ (name of the first pastor to preach in this sanctuary). We have heard words which have inspired us and words which have comforted us. We have heard music which gave us joy and music which made us weep. We have made promises at baptisms and witnessed covenant promises made in marriage. Here we have grieved the deaths of family members, friends, and neighbors. Here we were made into the body of Christ. Let us take time to share our memories.

PRAYER RESPONSE

(After sharing memories) **We will carry these memories imprinted upon our hearts. Amen.**

HYMN

No. 522, "I Love to Tell the Story"

OPTION B

REMEMBRANCE LITANY

One: Timeless God of memory, this church has been a place of comfort and inspiration, a place of community and witness, and a place where hope was born and peace was found. It has served generations of families, friends, and neighbors. O God, we remember

Many: **And give thanks.**

One: This sanctuary has been the heart of this church. The word was first proclaimed beginning with the Rev. _____ (fill in the pastor's name) and has since inspired, challenged, and comforted people who have worshiped here. O God, we remember

Many: **And give thanks.**

One: We have celebrated baptisms and weddings. We have grieved at funerals and memorials. We have sung hymns and read the Word. O God, we remember

Many: **And give thanks.**

One" Here in this church we have served countless meals and in so doing have forged friendships as well as supported each other in sorrow. We have been fed and nourished to be your instruments of grace. O God, we remember

Many: **And give thanks.**

One: Here in this church our children learned life's lessons. We taught them about You, Jesus, and the Holy Spirit. They learned stories that they will tell to their children and their children's children. O God, we remember

Many: **And give thanks**

One: Here we have welcomed the stranger who became a friend. Here we healed broken spirits and given hope to the hopeless. Here we have learned to be Christ to our community. O God we remember

Many: **And give thanks.**

One: Listen, O God, to our stories

SHARING STORIES

(Congregation will share stories. After all the stories are finished, say Amen.)

HYMN

No. 522, "I Love to Tell the Story"

(Note: At this point, the service finishes in the sanctuary and is the same for both Option A and Option B)

THE FUTURE

SCRIPTURE

Ezekial 37: 7-23

PRAYER

Steadfast and gracious God, we cannot thank you enough for your guidance which brought us to this time and place. This is not the end, but the beginning of a new life for us, the body of Christ. You have heard the stories we shared. Seal them in our hearts as we prepare to leave this place. We will take them with us into our future. Let your Spirit renew us. Let them open our ministries to new possibilities and opportunities. Amen.

HYMN

No. 410, "If You But Trust in God to Guide You"

SHARING OUR HOPES AND DREAMS

(Congregation will share hopes and dreams of its future)

LORD'S PRAYER

HYMN

No. 332, "As We Gather at Your Table"

COMMUNION

INVITATION

As we have spoken our prayers, sung our hymns, and shared our memories, God has been with us. Indeed, God has been in this place since we began worshipping in this church. The pulpit, the font, the table, (add other artifacts, such as musical instruments, as appropriate) as well as this sanctuary, have been dedicated to helping all of us proclaim the gospel through our ministries. All of them have special meaning for us. As we leave this place we will hold these in our hearts.

Leaving this place, this bread and this cup will nourish us. It will sustain us in our journey to our new home.

(Words of invitation provided by the celebrant)

PRAYER OF CONFESSION

One: We confess, O God, that though we decided that our future will be better after we leave this place

Many: **We still harbor some doubts.**

One: We have difficulty letting go of our past

Many: **We want to hold on a little longer.**

One: Though we have great hopes for our new future,

Many: **We cannot be certain.**

All: **Forgive us. Help us to trust that you will leave with us and stay with us as we travel into our future. Amen.**

SILENT PRAYER AND REFLECTION

WORDS OF ASSURANCE

COMMUNION PRAYER

One: God be with you.

Many: **And also with you.**

One: Lift up your hearts.

Many: **We lift them to God.**

One: Let us give thanks to God most high..

Many: **It is good to give God thanks and praise**

One: Indeed it is right in all times and places to give God thanks and praise. We give thanks to God for Creation and for entrusting us as its stewards. We remember God never left our forebears, beginning with Abraham, as they

wandered from place to place. Indeed by their wandering, Israel became a great nation.

We remember Jesus and his ministry and how he traveled among the people he served. We remember that he healed people where they were. We remember that he spoke truth to power in the public square and for that he stirred fear among the authorities. For that, they executed him on a Roman cross.

Yet, he slipped the shackles of death and emerged from the tomb three days later. He taught and served the people until his ascension forty days later to be with You and the Holy Spirit forever and ever. By his death and resurrection we are reminded that life always overcomes death. We proclaim this along with the saints who spoke these words before us in this place

Many: **Holy, holy, holy. God of love and majesty. The whole universe sings of your glory, O God Most High. Blessed is the One who comes in the name of our God. Glory to God in the Highest.**

WORDS OF INSTITUTION

O God, we have come a long way. We have come to this point in our life together as a congregation in this place. We are only the latest of many generations who have celebrated this sacred meal around this table.

**As we conclude our time at this table we know You will not abandon us.
You will guide us on the path of love and light
You will instill in us the power and courage to proclaim your peace and
justice through our ministries of healing and grace wherever we will be.**

This, my friends, is our final meal at this table in this church. Let us remember this meal as we remember the final meal Jesus shared with his disciples long ago. Just as we recalled our ministry here, they recalled their ministry with Jesus. At one point Jesus took bread and after giving thanks and blessing it, he broke it and gave it to them saying, "Take, eat. This is my body broken for you. As often as you eat it, remember me." Later, after supper, he took a cup and after giving thanks and blessing it, he gave it to them saying, "Drink this, all of you. This is my blood of the new covenant poured out for the forgiveness of sins. As often as you drink of it, remember me."

By this bread and this cup, we boldly proclaim:

Christ has died. Christ is risen. Christ will come again.

CONSECRATION

SHARING THE FEAST

PRAYER OF THANKSGIVING

One: You have fed us at this table in this church, O God, for decades too numerous to count. We have been part of a long line of saints who have gathered in this church, and who now will depart never to return.

Many: **Thank you for this meal. Thank you for the stories we have shared. Thank you for your presence throughout our time in this place. We leave strengthened for our ministries to proclaim the gospel of Jesus Christ as we leave our past behind to enter our future. Amen.**

HYMN

No. 76, "Sent Forth by God's Blessing"

DEPARTING PRAYER

O God, you have watched over this church since _____ (year built). You have been a faithful presence in the life of this body of Christ. You have witnessed our celebrations and our sorrows. You have been a calming presence to us in our times of turmoil. We have shared our final stories. We have broken bread and shared the cup for the final time. As we leave this church, we will carry our memories with us. We leave this place with your Holy Spirit to live and flourish in our ministries of grace as we, the body of Christ, step into our future. Amen.

BENEDICTION

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WORSHIP RESOURCE

ENDING AND A NEW BEGINNING: CLOSING A CONGREGATION

BASED UPON REVELATION 21: 1-6A

AN ENDING

CALL TO WORSHIP

- One: Jesus said, "Come to me, all you that are weary and carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest." This is a day of ending and a new beginning.
- Many: **We have labored together for many generations. Our time has come to set our burdens down.**
- One: Come, all who have hope and believe in resurrection.
- Many: **Though we gather one last time as the body of Christ, we come to celebrate our ministry born anew.**
- One: We have come this far by faith. Let us give God our thanks and praise.

HYMN

No. 308, "At the Font We Start Our Journey"

RESPONSIVE PRAYER OF INVOCATION

- One: Eternal and steadfast God, we have come this day to close our ministry as this body of Christ.
- Many: **We give thanks to you for your abiding presence throughout our discernment.**
- One: Though filled with sadness, we are also filled with hope
- Many: **knowing that the ministries begun here will continue.**
- One: They will flourish in ways and places,
- Many: **though we might not yet know or understand at this time.**
- One: We gather having faith that the Church is eternal.
- Many: **We draw comfort knowing that we were a chapter in its proclamation of Christ's gospel.**
- One: Come among us in this time of worship. Wipe away our tears and fill our hearts with joy. Amen.

GLORIA

SCRIPTURE

Revelation 21: 1-6a

A NEW BEGINNING

PRAYER FOR THE END OF A MINISTRY

Note: The pastor for this congregation should lead this prayer.

Eternal God, you have been our abiding presence. You called us to be the body of Christ to serve our community and the world. We have shared our joys and sorrows. We have celebrated baptisms, confirmations, and marriages. We have watched our children grow. We have grieved the death of loved ones. We have forged friendships. We have proclaimed the gospel's light through our ministries. We remember especially (*name various ministries and missions in the immediate and wider community*) _____ and are grateful in the ways these ministries have nurtured and shaped our faith. We give thanks for the power of your Holy Spirit that sustained us from the day we were founded in _____. Write these memories and ministries on our hearts so we can carry them for the rest of our days. Amen.

HYMN

No. 603, "Giver of Life Where'er They Be"

BLESSING THE CLERGY

Note: Invite the clergy who have served the congregation and who are present at this service to stand. Introduce them by name to the congregation along with the years of their tenure. This should be led by a representative from the association or conference.

O God, beginning with the Rev. _____ (name of the first pastor), your Holy Spirit called pastors to serve this congregation. Each brought a unique set of gifts to further the ministry of this church. (addressing the clergy) You have been this congregation's spiritual guide. We are grateful for your service of preaching and teaching. We honor your steadfast leadership and your wise counsel. We give thanks for raising disciples and sending them forth into the world. We pray that God's blessing will remain with you as you continue to serve Jesus the Christ. Amen.

LITANY FOR OUR MINISTRY AS NEW MISSIONS

Note: Representatives from churches, denominational entities, and agencies receiving financial or physical assets from the church should briefly describe how the asset they receive will be used where indicated. If using a timeline, a graphic representation of the asset could be affixed to the timeline in the space after its final line as each representative comes forward. The pattern for this litany will be the same for each recipient of the asset. The recipient should come forward when the celebrant calls out the name.

Church Moderator: The church is eternal. Though ministries may die, ministries are also born. A local church has its own life. Its ministries are its stories. Like mortal life, a local church's life comes to an end. Our resurrection faith, however, reminds us that all life is eternal. Though _____ (name of local church) will no longer create new stories, its stories will live through other ministries. Today the stories of _____ (name of local church) will pass to others, whose ministries will continue the legacy begun here.

After the first recipient, begin here

Church Moderator: The ministry of this congregation will continue through _____ (name asset), which we gave to _____ (name recipient)

Recipient: *Representative acknowledges the gift and describes how it will continue the congregation's ministries.*

All: **We are grateful that you will be a steward of _____ (name asset). We take comfort knowing that our legacy will continue through you.**

COMMISSIONING THE MEMBERSHIP

(Led by association or conference representative)

Leader: The _____ (name of congregation) has borne witness to the gospel in this community since _____ (year of establishment). This church has been a faithful partner in covenant with the _____ (name of association).

Today, while we honor your ministries, we also grieve its end here in this place. We give thanks for your service and partnership in ministry.

People: **With sadness we acknowledge the end of our ministry as this body of Christ. We give thanks for the Holy Spirit's guidance and presence in our ministries. We are grateful that we have been able to be a covenantal partner in ministry with the _____ (name of association) and accept your thanks for our service.**

Leader: As believers in eternal life in Christ, this ending is also a beginning of a new life of ministry. Your service to God in Christ goes on. On behalf of this association, I urge you not to falter in your ministry. You have spiritual gifts to use to bring about God's realm of peace and justice on earth. Use them wherever the Spirit will lead you.

People: **We leave this place knowing that the river of life goes on. We give thanks for the spiritual gifts which we have nurtured here. We now take them into new settings of ministry to further Christ's love in this community.**

LORD'S PRAYER

HYMN

No. 562, "Take My Gifts"

COMMUNION

INVITATION

We are bound as the body of Christ by the bread and the cup. Generations have come and gone and all of them have been served at this table set for all of us. As we have spoken our prayers, sung our hymns, and shared our memories, God has been with us. All that we see now have been dedicated to helping us be this body of Christ to proclaim the gospel through our ministries. We hold all of these along with our memories of this place in our hearts as we go forth to continue our ministries as the Spirit leads us. This bread and this cup will nourish us and sustain as we journey to our new homes.

(Words of invitation provided by the celebrant)

UNISON PRAYER OF CONFESSION

We confess that despite our faith in resurrection's promise, we come to this table with sadness.

We look back with some regret that we are here.

We dwell in memories of what was and what has been.

We forget the enduring and implicit promise of this table that in Christ there is no end.

Forgive us.

Set our faces toward the future.

Open our eyes to see new ministries.

Open our hands to release what was.

Assure us that our ministry will continue beyond this generation and the next.

Go forth with us as we travel into our future. Amen.

SILENT PRAYER AND REFLECTION

WORDS OF ASSURANCE

COMMUNION PRAYER

One: God be with you.

Many: **And also with you.**

One: Lift up your hearts.

Many: **We lift them to God.**

One: Let us give thanks to God most high.

Many: **It is good to give God thanks and praise.**

One: Indeed it is right in all times and places to give God thanks and praise. Our faith reminds us that endings are also beginnings. We remember the Flood after which God made a covenant with us to preserve life. We remember Judah's exile and that upon its return became a light to all nations.

We remember the greatest lesson of endings and beginnings in Jesus, who proclaimed the kingdom of God was at hand. He healed people. He questioned authority. He taught that love casts out fear and that life always has the final word. The authorities condemned him for that and put him on a cross to die.

Yet, he slipped the shackles of death and emerged from the tomb three days later. He taught and served the people until his ascension forty days later to be with You and the Holy Spirit forever and ever. By his death and resurrection we know that life always overcomes death. We proclaim this along with the saints who spoke these words before us in this place.

Many: **Holy, holy, holy. God of love and majesty. The whole universe sings of your glory, O God Most High. Blessed is the One who comes in the name of our God. Glory to God in the Highest.**

WORDS OF INSTITUTION

Just as Jesus gathered one last time with his disciples, we gather at this table. Though it is the last time for us in this time and place, we know that this ending is a beginning.

As we conclude our time at this table in this place we know You will not abandon us.

Your Holy Spirit will continue to give life to the ministries we birthed.

You will guide us on the path of love and light to serve You in new places and in new ways.

Friends, we are resurrection people. This is our final meal together. Let us hold the memory of this meal in our hearts just as we remember the final meal Jesus shared with his disciples long ago. As we recalled our ministry here, they recalled their ministry with Jesus. At one point Jesus took bread and after giving thanks and blessing it, he broke it and gave it to them saying, "Take, eat. This is my body broken for you. As often as you eat it, remember me." Later, after supper, he took a cup and after giving thanks and blessing it, he gave it to them saying, "Drink this, all of you. This is my blood of the new covenant poured out for the forgiveness of sins. As often as you drink of it, remember me."

Though the disciples did not know when they gathered at this table what was to come, we do. We know that our ministry will not end because our ministries proclaim resurrection's promise that life always triumphs over death. Thus, by this bread and this cup, we boldly proclaim:

Christ has died. Christ is risen. Christ will come again.

CONSECRATION

SHARING THE FEAST

UNISON PRAYER OF THANKSGIVING

Loving and eternal God, we give thanks for your presence in this church and your guidance in our ministries of healing grace. Thank you for the stories we have shared. Thank you for this meal. You have blessed us in ways more than we can imagine. We depart confident that our ministries will live on. We leave strengthened to continue to carry Christ's message of love into our community and the world so all might know your peace and your justice. Amen.

HYMN

No. 39, "In the Midst of New Dimensions"

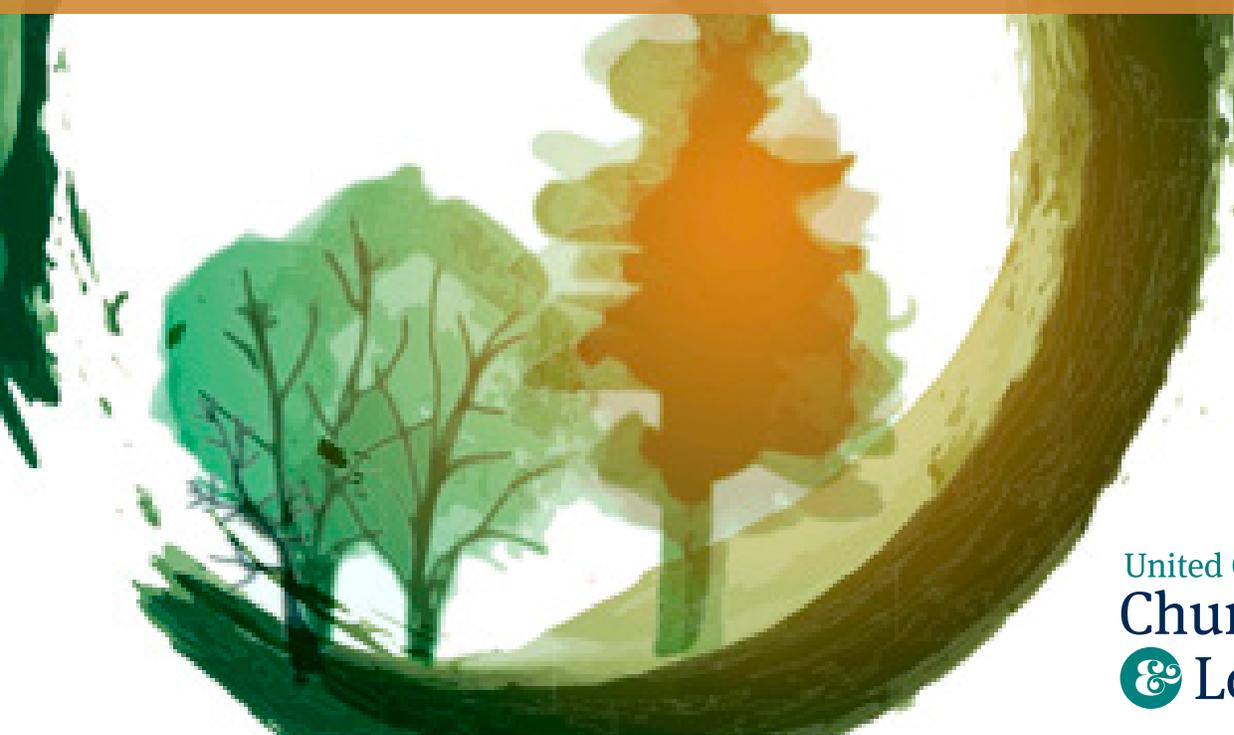
BENEDICTION

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FACING AN UNCERTAIN FUTURE

Helpful Practices for Courageous Conversations & Faithful Decisions

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES



United Church of Christ
Church Building
& Loan Fund

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RESOURCES FOR LEGACY AND CLOSURE

ORGANIZATIONS THAT SUPPORT AND RESOURCE CONGREGATIONS

CONFERENCES AND ASSOCIATIONS

Conferences and Associations offer programs, staff and resources for congregations engaged in discernment and decision-making about their future.

For Conference contact information, visit www.ucc.org/about-us_conference

Explore the UCC Massachusetts Conference programs: www.macucc.org/strugglingcongregations

UCC LEGACY CHURCH AND CLOSURES RESOURCES

The United Church of Christ Church Building & Loan Fund and United Church Funds offer the *Living Legacy Workbook* as a discernment and decision-making resource for “legacy congregations” that conclude their ministry and seed new ministries.

www.ucc.org/legacychurch
✉ legacychurch@ucc.org
☎ 216-736-3839

UNITED CHURCH OF CHRIST CHURCH BUILDING & LOAN FUND

The United Church of Christ Church Building & Loan Fund (CB&LF) offers consultation with congregations to review and assess factors such as the location and market value of church property and the demand for other missional uses in the community where the church is located. Whether you're looking to buy, renovate or sell church property, or need assistance with a planning process, CB&LF provides support and several programs to carry out your mission; including Partners in Building, Partners in Mission and Partners in Vision.

www.cbllfund.org
✉ infocblf@ucc.org
☎ 216-736-3894

UNITED CHURCH OF CHRIST CORNERSTONE FUND

The United Church of Christ Cornerstone Fund offers fixed-income investment options for both churches (and affiliated UCC ministries) and individuals, including term notes and IRAs. The Cornerstone Fund also provides competitive, low-cost real estate loans to UCC congregations and ministries.

www.cornerstonefund.org
✉ info@cornerstonefund.org
☎ 888-822-3863

UNITED CHURCH FUNDS

United Church Funds (UCF) offers a diverse family of socially responsible investment funds to churches and faith-based organizations. UCF assists congregations to set up endowments or trusts options to manage their legacy assets upon closure. In addition, UCF offers planned giving services for individuals that might be interested in making a planned gift.

www.ucfunds.org
✉ legacy@ucfunds.org
☎ 877-806-4989

UNITED CHURCH OF CHRIST FAITH INFO TEAM

From workshops to webinars, resources to prayerful conversations of support, we are here to help the church today, and the church as it can be, with the help of God. *Be the Church: Mission Planning Guide for Congregations* helps congregations move towards their goals with intention, using an assessment based on the *Be the Church* banner to provide a current snapshot of where they are; and then the logic model to get to where they want to be, together.

www.ucc.org/bethechurch
✉ daviesc@ucc.org
☎ 216-736-3827

HOPE PARTNERSHIP

Hope Partnership is an ecumenical organization that offers tools to congregations at different stages in their ministry, including New Beginnings, which provides a comprehensive report of a congregation's strengths and challenges, as well as a realistic picture of possible future directions with training in a discernment process to bring a congregation to the point of making a decision.

🌐 www.hopeecu.org
✉ info@hopepmt.org
☎ 800-274-1883

CENTER FOR PROGRESSIVE RENEWAL

The Center for Progressive Renewal offers training, classes and coaching for congregational leaders, including reVision program for creating a new vision for your congregation as well as classes and coaching for Threshold congregations facing significant decisions about their future.

🌐 www.progressiverenewal.org
✉ gregg@progressiverenewal.org
☎ 888-249-8244, ext. 706

PARTNERS FOR SACRED PLACES

Partners for Sacred Places helps congregations and others with a stake in older religious properties make the most of them as civic assets by providing group training opportunities, funding and other consulting services.

🌐 www.sacredplaces.org
✉ partners@sacredplaces.org
☎ 215-567-3234

BOOKS ON CHURCH LEGACY & CLOSURE

Living Legacy: Church Legacy and Closure, United Church Press, 2015
www.ucc.org/legacychurch/

Toward the Better Country: Church Closure and Resurrection, G. Irwin, Resource Publications, 2014

Finishing with Grace – A Guide to Selling, Merging or Closing Your Church, L. Hilliard & G. Switzer, 2010

Ending with Hope: A Resource for Closing Congregations, B. Gaede, Alban Institute, 2002

Legacy Churches, S. Gray, F. Dumond, Church Smart, 2009

Mind the Tiller: Pastoral Leadership in Closing Churches, G. Cafferata, Westminster John Knox (COMING FALL 2019)

BOOKS ON DISCERNMENT & CONVERSATION

Memories, Hopes, and Conversations: Appreciative Inquiry and Congregational Change, M. Branson, Alban Institute, 2004

Change and Conflict in your Congregation (Even If You Hate Both) How to Implement Conscious Choices, Manage Emotions, and Build a Thriving Christian Community, A. Bradshaw, Quality Paperback, 2015

Spiritlinking Leadership: Working Through Resistance to Organizational Change, D. Markha, Paulist Press, 1999

MINISTERIAL AND CONGREGATIONAL ETHICS

Resources for the relationship between pastors and congregations: *Ethical Codes*, UCC Resources
<https://www.uccfiles.com/pdf/ASF-EthicalCodes.pdf>

Resources for the relationship between pastors and congregations: *Ethical Departure Guidelines*, UCC Resources,
<https://www.uccfiles.com/pdf/ASF-EthicalDepartureGuidelines.pdf>

Times of Passage and Farewell/Ending an Authorized Ministry, Book of Worship, United Church of Christ, p. 252

CHURCH RECORDS AND ARCHIVES

Congregational Library and Archives – Church Closing/Record Donation
www.congregationallibrary.org/for-churches/closing-donation

United Church of Christ Historical Council
www.ucc.org/about-us/archives/historical-council/

Society of American Archivists
www.archivists.org/publications/brochures/donating-orgrecs

ARTICLES AND CONVERSATIONS ON CHURCH DISCERNMENT, BUILDINGS, CLOSURE, & LEGACY (CONTINUED)

"Ministry in Times of Church Discernment and Closure," Webinar Recording, Church Building & Loan Fund resources, www.cbifund.org/learn/resources

"A win-win': Using local church buildings to address the affordable-housing crisis," Hannah Natason, *Washington Post*, July 16, 2018

"Church of the Redeemer Recommends Members Transplant to Spring Glen" *United Church of Christ Connecticut Conference Website News*, 8/30/2018

Vital Signs & Statistics, a blog of the United Church of Christ Center for Analytics, Research & Data, www.carducc.wordpress.com

- "Bringing on the Future: Letting Go to Let Come," 4/30/2018
- "Let's Have the Conversation," 10/9/2017
- "Caring for Pastors in Closing Congregations," 7/10/17
- "Mind the Tiller: Leading a Church to Closure," 10/20/2016
- "Singing the Lord's Song in a Foreign Land: Pastors' Journeys through the Closing of Their Churches," 4/18/2016
- "Dignity for Pastors Who Close Churches," 3/30/2015
- "No One Should Have To Do This Alone!," 9/11/2014
- "What do 111 Closed Congregations Tell Us?," 10/31/2016
- "Research on Closed Churches and Their Pastors," 2/7/2014
- "What's Your Legacy?," 2/12/2018
- "Final Act of Faith: Closing Congregations Nurture Next Generation of Mission," 3/6/2017

'Finally Beloved, ... Think about these things,' writes Paul to the Philippians as he was in prison, unsure about his future, but sure about God's grace, presence and power. During these times of transition, change and uncertainty in the life of the church and congregations, we too like Paul can face the future knowing that God is with us no matter what the future brings.



The purpose of this resource is to present helpful practices for churches facing faithful but difficult conversations and decisions about their future. My appreciation and encouragement go to pastors, leaders and members of congregations who are seeking the Spirit's guidance in their discussions and choices. I hope the insights, reflections, practices and resource of this resource are beneficial support for your ministry and congregation. I pray that this resource is a good addition to the *Living Legacy Workbook* as well as other existing resources.

I am grateful for all those pastors and church leaders who shared their experiences and insights that led to the creation of this resource. I am thankful for all that I have learned from the writing and wisdom of the pastors and authors, Rev. Gail Irwin and Rev. Gail Cafferata. I thank colleagues in the UCC National Ministries and related organizations that read and made helpful recommendations. I especially thank a group of Conference Ministry colleagues who reviewed and commented on the resource: Rev. David Ackerman, Rev. Cheryl Burke, Rev. Bonnie Bates, Rev. Jonathan New, and Rev. Freeman Palmer. It's been a delight to work with Rev. Quentin Chin in the writing of the Worship Resources as well as Ann Poston in the design of the resource. I am glad to work with the leaders and staff of the UCC Church Building & Loan Fund who support and make this Legacy and Closure Ministry possible.

Finally, I give thanks to God who will complete the good work God has started in our lives, congregations and world.

Rev. David Schoen
Minister for Church Legacy and Closure,
United Church of Christ Church Building & Loan Fund

United Church of Christ
**Church Building
& Loan Fund**

www.cbllfund.org

UCC Church Building & Loan Fund offers a program for assessing churches, leadership, and property in a regional cluster. The assessment includes a demographic study of the cluster to inform a strategic regional approach to the optimal missional use of church property. The goal is to assist participating congregations, Association and Conference leaders: 1) to co-create future ministries and missional activities in the context of neighborhood and regional needs, and 2) to employ a holistic approach to making decisions on the highest and best missional uses of church real estate assets. For more information please contact CB&LF Associate Director Susan Mitchell at mitchells@ucc.org.

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