

AN ORDER OF FAREWELL TO A PASTOR

This order may be used within a service of worship on the last Sunday before a pastor moves to another congregation or retires, or it may take place at a special service.

As a "Response to the Word", the lay leader or another designated leader comes forward and announces that the time has come to say farewell to the pastor.

One or more persons may recall with thanksgiving the pastor's ministry.

A gift or symbol may be given with appropriate words of thanks.

A stole may be left to put on the next pastor.

The pastor and congregation may release one another with these or similar words:

Pastor --

I thank you, the members and friends of **NAME** United Methodist Church.
for the love and support you have shown me while I have ministered among you.

I am grateful for the ways my leadership has been accepted.
I ask forgiveness for the mistakes I have made.
As I leave, I carry with me all that I have learned here.

Congregation --

**We receive your thankfulness, offer forgiveness,
and accept that you now leave to minister elsewhere.
We express our gratitude for your time among us.
We ask your forgiveness for our mistakes.
Your influence on our faith and faithfulness
will not leave us with your departure.**

Pastor --

I accept your gratitude and forgiveness, and I forgive you,
trusting that our time together and our parting are pleasing to God.
I release you from turning to me and depending on me.
I encourage your continuing ministry here and will pray for you
and for your new pastor, **NAME** .

The pastor may pray extemporaneously, or the pastor and congregation may join in the following prayer:

**Eternal God, whose steadfast love for us is from everlasting to everlasting,
we give you thanks for cherished memories and commend one another into
your care as we move in new directions. Keep us one in your love forever,
through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.**

A hymn may be sung.

"The Right Start: Beginning Ministry in a New Setting"

Resources Suggested by Lovett H. Weems, Jr.

- Ammerman, Nancy T., et al., eds. *Studying Congregations*, Abingdon, 1998.
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- _____ *The Way of Transition: Embracing Life's Most Difficult Moments*, Perseus, 2001.
- Callahan, Kennon L. *A New Beginning for Pastors and Congregations*, Jossey-Bass, 1999.
- *Clayton, Paul C. *Letters to Lee: Mentoring the New Minister*. Alban Institute, 1999.
- Coyner, Michael J. *Making a Good Move*. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2000.
- Dudley, Carl S. and Nancy T. Ammerman, *Congregations in Transition: A Guide for Analyzing, Assessing, and Adapting in Changing Communities*, Jossey-Bass, 2002.
- Farris, Lawrence W. *Ten Commandments for Pastors Leaving a Congregation*, Eerdmans, 2006.
- _____ *Ten Commandments for Pastors New to a Congregation*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003.
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- Jenkins, Michael. *Letters to New Pastors*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2006.
- McGriff, E. Carver and M. Kent Millard. *The Passion Driven Congregation*. Nashville: Abingdon, 2003.
- #Norris, Kathleen. *Dakota: A Spiritual Geography*. New York: Ticknor & Fields, 1993.
- Oswald, Roy M. *New Beginnings: The Pastorate Start-Up Workbook*. Alban Institute, 1989.
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- Weems, Lovett H., Jr. *Church Leadership: Vision, Team, Culture, and Integrity*, Abingdon, 1993.
- _____ *Take the Next Step: Leading Lasting Change in the Church*. Nashville: Abingdon, 2003.
- White, Edward A. *Saying Goodbye: A Time of Growth for Congregations and Pastors*. Alban, 1990.
- * indicates a book especially relevant for recent seminary graduates
- # indicates a book especially relevant for clergy entering small, rural communities

Rituals and Liturgies for Beginning and Ending

by Susan Sonnenday Vogel

Dean of the Chapel, Saint Paul School of Theology, and author of
And Then Mark Died: Letters of Grief Love, and Faith, Abingdon, 2003,
and *What About Divine Healing?* Abingdon, 2004.

O God, our help in ages past,
Our hope for years to come,
Be Thou our guide while life shall last
And our eternal home.

Background

When I was first asked to do a prepare *Rituals and Liturgies for Beginning and Ending* for the "Right Start" seminars a few years ago, I was glad to say "yes." I love to plan and lead worship. I could do that! I will research what resources are available.

Then two things happened. First, my husband and I were asked to serve an interim pastorate in a local congregation. You may know that United Methodists normally have interim pastorates only if there is a problem. And, second, my brother, a Presbyterian minister, decided to leave the congregation he had served for twenty years.

Why rituals and liturgy?

Out of those experiences, I not only discovered some new ways of doing liturgy and ritual for beginning and ending. I also grew clearer about the "why."

It is crucial to lift up the significance of what is happening. When we leave or enter a setting it is crucial to say or embody, "This has been important, so our leave taking needs to reflect that importance. This beginning is full of new possibilities: we need to lift up its significance."

Rituals bind us together. They give us structure: We can say things through ritual and liturgy that we want to say, but have trouble saying one to one.

Which rituals and liturgy?

Remember: Culture, culture, culture

You know the adage about the three things most important when dealing with real estate?

Location, location, location

As you plan, your culture and context will be among the most important shaping influences. Of course, you will bring the theological and historical foundations of your tradition. You will draw from a wide range of sources—and probably make some of it up as you go along.

But finally, what you plan for beginnings and endings will look much different from what someone down the road or down the street will shape—even if they are drawing from some of the same traditions and resources. Sample liturgies are just that: samples, examples, crafted for particular cultures. It is probably unwise to imitate any of them precisely.

What fits for your situation? What will help lift up the significance of this moment and bind together this community of faith? What will help us say to one another that which we want and need to say?

Endings

We start with endings—since you are going to need to do endings before you are ready to move to the beginning.

Some are beginning a first appointment, but all will be coming to some kind of ending. Some have been important parts of congregations as lay leaders, youth directors, or church school teachers. You may not have been the pastor in charge, or even on staff. But what kinds of rituals might be possible as that community of faith sends you out?

One thing I have learned in recent years—and many of you have too—is that any change, even those that are wonderful and which we celebrate, every change is experienced as loss. And all of us involved in that change and loss need to take time to grieve it appropriately. AND, all grieving (I am learning) takes much longer than we think, and probably longer than we think it should.

What does that mean? We need to get started on our leaving soon—as soon as we know we are leaving. Some worry about being a “lame duck.” We have to continue our work. But if you are faithfully doing your leaving, you are doing the very important work that will lay foundations for the next chapter of the congregation.

There are many good-byes. Endings with people who have been special, and times of forgiving and being forgiven when there have been problems.

It is important not to save the “main events” until the very end. There must be time to do the things that will acknowledge the sadness and grieving, offer opportunities for forgiving, and celebrate what has been good. Then, when you get to the end, you can be celebrating the whole ministry and transition.

Look at some examples:

Some of your “leaving” you cannot orchestrate. But many of you are responsible for worship—or can have some say in it.

When my brother, John, made a decision to leave his Presbyterian church, he developed a series of sermons: “What we have learned in our twenty years together.” When the field education director at Saint Paul School of Theology retired, he preached, “What you have taught me about ministry.”

The East Ohio United Methodist Conference “Move Pack” (Guide to a Good Move for Pastors and Families) offers suggestions for sermon starters during the last four weeks in the place you are leaving. There are also children’s sermons about change. Some change is good, they say, but still hard. They remind us that “We do not stop loving.”

When one faculty member at Saint Paul completed her work as dean and another completed thirty years of teaching, we invited people to write what they valued and remembered. We put those remembrances into a litany and linked them with scripture: a psalm to lift up thanks.

Local churches may want to invite members to share what they want to remember, and the pastor who is leaving may want to add what he or she wants to remember. A litany can bring order and liturgy to those remembrances.

Transition liturgies should acknowledge the pain and ambiguity of change, and also the looking toward hope. Living with the contradictions is challenging. But a wise priest has written:

“Beware of synthesists in sheep's clothing, out to rob you of the richness of multiple and contradictory truths.”

(Thomas Woodward, *Turning Things Upside Down*, Seabury Press, 1975, 10)

Kathleen Norris has helped me see how lament psalms capture important truths as she explains what a Benedictine sister taught her:

“[The Psalms] defeat our tendency to try to be holy without being human first.”

“The psalms make us uncomfortable because they don't allow us to deny either the depth of our pain or the possibility of its transformation into praise.” (The Cloister Walk, 96)

The contemporary *Psalms of Lament* that Ann Weems wrote in the years following the death of her son offers helpful prayer resources in times of difficult change, as does Blair Gilmer Meeks's *Standing in the Circle of Grief*. While these resources are generally not directly transferable to our farewell rituals, church leaders can use them for personal meditation and reflection, and then translate the spirit of them into liturgy.

A service of symbols is suggested in some examples included here. One could connect that liturgy with a series of sermons and carry it out over several weeks instead of handing over all of the symbols on the last Sunday. Both the service of symbols and the yoke liturgy, used together or alone, can be coordinated with the welcoming service for the incoming pastor.

In any of these services, it will be important to be attentive to who, from the congregation, is involved. That will signal the leader's understanding of who, and what, is "important."

Beginnings

Remember: Culture, culture, culture

As with endings, the culture of your new context will help shape the service. Your attempts to learn what is important to your new congregation, before you are there, will speak volumes about what it means to love the people. You only get one first Sunday. Ask for help: What are the hymns that will be familiar? What is the feel of things? The spirit of the congregation? Is healing needed?

As suggested above, you may be able to work with the previous pastor to use a service of receiving symbols or a yoke liturgy (though neither of these is dependent upon their having been used in the farewell service preceding). Would either of these fit the culture? Or is something simpler needed?

You may have an opportunity, on the first Sunday, to link with someone who is especially important to the congregation. One new pastor invited a much beloved retired bishop who had been serving the congregation at the time he was elected to the episcopacy. "Passing the mantle," literally and figuratively, became an important part of the new pastor's identity in the early days of his ministry at the church.

Again, it is important to ask, "Who should participate?"

Some new pastors may want to use some of the special rituals of the church on the first Sunday or early in their ministry. For example, early in our ministry at the church where we served an interim pastorate, we used a Renewal of Covenant service, connecting it with our history as United Methodists. We asked the choir director to teach and lead the hymn that Charles Wesley had written for the Covenant Renewal service. (Come Let Us Use the Grace Divine), since it was unfamiliar to many. Having the "familiar" music director introduce a new hymn (rather than the new pastor doing so) seemed to be well received. Similarly, we did a Renewal of Baptism service. Although the congregation was not familiar with "renewing baptism," it was in the context of what was very familiar—the baptismal ritual.

Concluding Words

Perhaps most important in these times of transition is the spiritual health and formation of the leader who is in the midst of change. The rich resources of our many traditions will help carry us through what cannot help but be difficult, though exhilarating, times.

Calm our spirits with Thy great tranquilities, and deal with our disorder with redemptive tenderness that we may be instruments in Thy hands, to serve thy purposes and share in Thy work in the world. Let us be transparent, that Thy Light may not be dimmed in us and through us no harm may come to those whose trust we have and whose hands are in our hands. Leave us not alone. Leave us not alone. Amen. (adapted from Howard Thurman)

Through many dangers, toils, and snares,
I have already come;
tis grace hath brought me safe thus far,
and grace will lead me home.

A Service of Celebration and Farewell - The Right Start Sample Service A

Greeting and Welcome

Prelude

*Call to Worship

Leader: God has been our help in ages past,

People: Our hope for years to come.

Leader: God has been our safe home,

People: Our shelter in the face of every storm.

Leader: So we come with praise,

People: And we bring our prayer:

All: God, be our guide forevermore.

*Hymn of Praise

O God, Our Help in Ages Past

UMH #117

Opening Prayer

**O God, Giver of every gift, now and in times past,
we remember your mighty acts that have given us strength and endurance through
hardship and loss.**

We remember your steadfast love that has brought joy and new life.

Be with us all in these days of change.

**We give thanks for all that has been good in our ministry together,
and we confess with sadness those times when we have hurt one another
or failed to live our ministry together faithfully.**

Forgive us, and help us forgive one another.

Be now our shelter and our guide, this day and forevermore.

Through Christ, the One in whom we have known grace and healing. Amen.

Words of Assurance to One Another

**May we all know the assurance of God's forgiveness through Jesus Christ,
offer forgiveness to one another, and know forgiveness in our own hearts.
And may we all live in the promise that we can begin anew. Thanks be to God.**

*Affirmation of Faith

The Apostles Creed

*Gloria Patri

Call to Prayer #2195 (The Faith We Sing Hymnal) *In the Lord I'll Be Ever Thankful*

Pastoral Prayer

Lord's Prayer

Scripture Reading

2 Corinthians 9:6-15

Leader: This is the Word of God.

People: Thanks be to God.

Message

"For Our Life Together: Give Thanks!"

*Hymn of Response

Give Thanks with a Grateful Heart

#2036 (TFWS Hymnal)

Litany of Response

Dear friends, you have allowed us to share the responsibilities of the ordained ministry in your midst. It is time for us to return to you these symbols of our life together. Will you hold them in trust until you offer them to your new pastor?

We will.

We were called among you to baptize. Here is water that symbolizes God's gift of belonging to this family in Christ.

(A vessel of water is presented to a family whose child was recently baptized.)

There is one Lord, one Faith, one Baptism.

We were called among you to proclaim the Good News. Here is the Bible, from which we have endeavored to preach a faithful word.

(A Bible is presented to a lay leader.)

Thanks be to God for the Good News of Jesus Christ.

We were called among you to lead worship, to plan and guide our prayer and praise. Here are the hymnals from which we have drawn music and liturgy.

(Hymnals presented to worship chair, music director and choir member.)

We bring our praise and thanksgiving.

We were called among you to offer the sacrament of Holy Communion. Receive now this chalice as a symbol of our life in communion.

(A chalice is presented to the laywoman who is responsible for preparing the elements.)

Taste and see that the Lord is good.

We were called among you to teach. Here are United Methodist resources we have used in our teaching and learning.

(Curriculum materials are presented to representatives of several classes.)

Thanks be to God who causes us to grow in wisdom.

We were called among you to help provide order and keep the covenant that strengthens us as United Methodists. Here is the Book of Discipline that guides our life together.

(The Book of Discipline is presented to the Administrative Board chair.)

We are bound together in Christ Jesus.

We were called among you to help us all be good stewards of our resources. We return to you the congregation's budget records and the keys to this church building.

(Records and keys are given to Trustee and Finance chairs.)

May we all prove to be faithful stewards of God's marvelous gifts.

We were called among you to lead us all in our mission to this community and all the world. This globe reminds us of our commitments to God's people everywhere.

(Globe is presented to Mission chair and others in mission activities.)

We go to all the world in Christ's name.

Hymn of Thanks

In the Lord I'll Be Ever Thankful

#2195 (TFWS Hymnal)

We Bring our Tithes and Offerings

*The Doxology

(As the ushers bring forth the offering, the persons who have received the symbols from the pastor come forward also.)

Litany of Dedication

Pastor: And now, it is time for new beginnings. Today we complete our calling as your pastor. You will look now to your new pastor for all the privileges and responsibilities that are a part of pastoral leadership in this congregation. We will always be bonded with you as sisters and brothers in Christ, and we promise to hold you and your new pastoral family in prayer.

This is the beginning of our new relationship with you, and you with us, in Christ Jesus. As a symbol of this new relationship, we leave our stoles at the altar. They have been signs of our work in Christ's service among you.

People: We receive these stoles as symbols of your ministry among us. We send you forth now with our prayers and blessing, for this is a day of new beginnings.

*Hymn for Going Forth *This is a Day of New Beginnings*, stanzas 1 through 3 #383 (UMH)

*Benediction

*Congregational Response *This is a Day of New Beginnings*, stanza 4 #383 (UMH)

*Postlude

*All who are able may stand.

(Litany of Response is adapted from litanies in the *United Methodist Book of Worship* # 595 "An Order for the Celebration of an Appointment," and Metropolitan Chicago Synod of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America farewell service at <http://www.mtselca.org/farewell.html>. Litany of dedication adapted from Yoke of Christ liturgy in East Ohio Conference "A Guide to a Good Move for Pastors and Families."

A Service of Celebration and Farewell - The Right Start Sample Service B

[These resources may be used as part of the final Sunday morning worship before a pastor leaves or retires, or they may become part of a special service. They also can be adapted when another staff member leaves the congregation.]

Pastor: Sisters and brothers in Christ, we have been partners in the mission and ministry of this congregation for _____ years. It is now time to give thanks for the life we have shared in Christ. It is also time for us to complete our work together as pastor and congregation. For everything there is a season—a time to begin our ministry and a time to complete our ministry in this place.

Pastor: We have had our good times and our painful challenges.

People: We have shared our joys and sorrows.

Pastor: Through it all, God in Christ has been our Rock and our Salvation.

People: God has strengthened us to bear one another's heavy burdens.

ALL: Thanks be to God!

Hymn *Amazing Grace* stanzas 1, 2 and 3 UMH # 378

Prayer in Unison

**O God, Giver of every good gift,
we remember your mighty acts that have given us strength and endurance
through the years..**

We remember your steadfast love that has brought joy and new life.

Be with us all in these days of change.

**We give thanks for all that has been good in our ministry together,
and we remember with sadness our hard times.**

Be now our shelter and our guide, this day and forevermore.

Through Christ, the One in whom we know grace and healing. Amen.

Blessing (The pastor and congregation speak the blessing to each other.)

The Lord bless you and keep you, and give you peace.

Hymn *Blest Be the Tie that Binds* UMH # 557

(Opening words adapted from Metropolitan Chicago Synod
of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America farewell
service at <http://www.mtselca.org/farewell.html>.)

A Service of Celebration and Welcome - The Right Start Sample Service C

Greeting and Welcome

Prelude

*Call to Worship

Leader: God has been our help in ages past,

People: Our hope for years to come.

Leader: God has been our safe home,

People: Our shelter in the face of every storm.

Leader: So we come with praise,

People: And we bring our prayer:

All: God, be our guide forevermore.

*Hymn of Praise

O God, Our Help in Ages Past

UMH #117

Opening Prayer

O God, Giver of every gift, now and in times past,
we remember your mighty acts that have given us strength and endurance through hardship and loss.

We remember your steadfast love that has brought joy and new life.

Be with us all in these days of change.

We rejoice in the opportunities that lie ahead of us.

Open now our hearts to hear anew your call upon our lives.

Plant your dreams and visions deep within our souls.

Then speak afresh your promise to stay with us,
that we may be bold to make real the dreams
and bring life to the visions.

For we pray through Jesus Christ,
the One in whom we have known grace and new life. Amen.

*Affirmation of Faith

The Apostles Creed

*Gloria Patri

Litany of Welcome

Lay leaders: Dear friends, the bishop has appointed a new pastor, Name _____), to live among us now with all the privileges and responsibilities of pastoral ministry. This stole represents our covenant to serve Christ together as pastor and people. We place this stole on your shoulders as a symbol of our ministry. This is the beginning of our new relationship with you, and you with us, in Christ Jesus.

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New pastor: I accept this stole and will wear it as a symbol of our covenant to serve Christ together.

Sometimes the burdens will be heavy, but we are bound together in Christ. He has promised that his yoke is easy and his burden light. I ask for your prayers, and I promise my faithfulness.

People:

We will share the yoke of Christ with you.

You are called among us to baptize. Here is water that symbolizes God's gift of belonging to this family in Christ.

(A vessel of water is presented by a family whose child was recently baptized.)

There is one Lord, one Faith, one Baptism.

You are called among us to proclaim the Good News. Here is the Bible, from which we trust you will preach a faithful word.

(A Bible is presented by a lay leader.)

Thanks be to God for the Good News of Jesus Christ.

You are called among us to lead worship, to plan and guide our prayer and praise. Here are the hymnals from which to draw music and liturgy.

(Hymnals presented by worship chair, music director and choir member.)

We bring our praise and thanksgiving.

You are called among us to offer the sacrament of Holy Communion. Receive now this chalice as a symbol of our life in communion.

(A chalice is presented by the laywoman who is responsible for preparing the element.)

Taste and see that the Lord is good.

You are called among us to teach. Here are United Methodist resources you may use in our teaching and learning together.

(Curriculum materials are presented by representatives of several classes.)

Thanks be to God who causes us to grow in wisdom.

You are called among us to help provide order and keep the covenant that strengthens us as United Methodists. Here is the Book of Discipline that guides our life together.

(The Book of Discipline is presented by the Administrative Board chair.)

We are bound together in Christ Jesus.

You are called among us to help us all be good stewards of our resources. We share with you the congregation's budget records and the keys to this church building.

(Records and keys are given by Trustee and Finance chairs.)

May we all prove to be faithful stewards of God's marvelous gifts.

You are called among us to lead in our mission to this community and all the world. This globe reminds us of our commitments to God's people everywhere.

(Globe is presented by Mission chair and others in mission activities.)

We go to all the world in Christ's name.

In Christ's name, we welcome you, and today we renew our pledge to Support this congregation with our prayers, our presence, our gifts and our service. Thanks be to God!

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Pastoral Prayer

Lord's Prayer

Scripture Reading 2 Corinthians 9:6-15

Leader: This is the Word of God.

People: Thanks be to God.

Message "For A New Beginning: Give Thanks!"

*Hymn of Response *This is a Day of New Beginnings*, stanzas 1 through 3 UMH #383

Our Response through our Tithes and Offerings

*The Doxology

*Congregational Response *This is a Day of New Beginnings*, stanza 4 UMH #383

*Postlude

*All who are able may stand.

(Litany of Welcome is adapted from resources from Yoke of Christ liturgy in East Ohio Conference "A Guide to a Good Move for Pastors and Families," *United Methodist Book of Worship* #595 "An Order for the Celebration of an Appointment," and Metropolitan Chicago Synod of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America farewell service at <http://lwwwmcelca.org/farewell.html>.)

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A Service of Celebration and Welcome -
The Right Start Sample Service D

Service of Welcome

Lay Leader: Dear friends, today we welcome [Name _____], who has been appointed to serve as our pastor. We believe that [Name _____] is well qualified and has been prayerfully appointed by our bishop.

[Name _____], you have been sent to live among us as a preacher of the Word of God; a minister of the Sacraments; and a sustainer of love, order and discipleship of the people of God.

New Pastor: Today I affirm my commitment to live faithfully among you as your pastor, depending on God's grace and power.

Congregation: Blessed are those who trust in you, O Lord, our God, for in your presence is fullness of joy.

Lay Leader: People of God, will you do your part as we begin a new chapter of our ministry in this place?

Congregation: We reaffirm our commitment to support this congregation with our prayers, our presence, our gifts, our service, and our witness.

ALL: Blessed are those who strength is in you, O God, for a day in your courts is better than a thousand elsewhere.

New Pastor: Let us pray. Eternal God, strengthen and sustain us in our ministries together. Give to all of us patience, courage, and wisdom so to care for one another and challenge one another that together we may follow Jesus Christ. Help us to live together in love and offer our gifts and talents in your service, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Congregation: Lord God, bless the ministries of your Church. We thank you for the variety of gifts you have bestowed upon us. Draw us together in one Spirit, that each of us may use our differing gifts as member of one body. May your Word be proclaimed with faithfulness, and may we be doers of your Word and not hearers only. We trust the future that rests in your hands, in the name of Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Hymn

[Choose a hymn of commitment familiar to the congregation. Examples from the *United Methodist Hymnal*: #347, *Spirit Song*; #339, *Take My Life and Let It Be*; #413, *A Charge to Keep I Have*. Consider inviting the congregation to change the words of the hymns such as the last two listed so that they reflect the congregation as a whole (*we* and *our*, instead of *me* and *my*). Take *our* life and let it be consecrated Lord to Thee; take *our* moments and *our* day...; A charge to keep *we* have...]

(This liturgy is adapted from ~ Order for the Celebration of an Appointment,"
The United Methodist Book of Worship. #595.)

Worship Resources from the East Ohio Conference *Move Pack*

(Used by permission)

Sermon Starters—Leaving

- Title: "Standing on the Promises"
Text: 1 Corinthians 3:5-11
Synopsis: Paul refers to leaders who each built on the other's work; no one's work was complete in and of itself "So I have been among you as a builder building on a foundation laid by others. My work is far from complete, but I trust in the line of leadership of which I have been part, and I trust in the One who undergirds that line: God, the giver of growth, Christ the sure foundation." "In the midst of all that is unfinished, we have hope in the promises of God. *(Use examples of human promises that help, sustain, and bring hope in the midst of transition: baptismal vows, confirmation vows, marriage vows.)* If such joy, comfort, and hope is true of human promises, how much more so of God's promises. *"(Cite favorite scripture promises. Give an example of being sustained in a difficult life passage by a promise of God.)* So today, as we look ahead, may we decide to stand on the promises of God, to put our hand in God's, and walk boldly into the unknown, confident in the foundation we have in Christ."
- Title: "Never Hidden, Never Alone"
Text: Psalm 139:1-18
Synopsis: This is an intimate psalm that gives perspective for the sweep of life in both its travels and travails. God is present in change and knows completely what is in the mind and heart of each person present on the day of leave-taking. Despite loss, the community is bound together for all time with the knowledge that God is always present even as leadership comes and goes.
- Title: "Love Never Ends"
Text: Romans 8 (Selected Verses); 1 Corinthians 13
Synopsis: Although the present pastoral relationship is coming to a conclusion, the love of God shared together will never end. The Communion text has a phrase to remind us of the fact that every time we take the elements, we are joining with all those who have faithfully lived and died in worshipping and glorifying God. Each communion recalls before God all the other times when this Sacrament has been celebrated—from the Upper Room right down to the present hour. Conclude the service with the celebration of Holy Communion to symbolize the bond that unites us all.

Children's Message—Leaving

- Title: "Nothing Separates Us From Love"
Objects Needed: A kitchen timer and a long tape measure
Scripture Reference: 1 Corinthians 13: 7-8
Synopsis: "Neither time nor space can separate us from those we love. I wonder, will we still be friends in five seconds?" Set the timer and make it ring in five seconds. "Are we still friends?" (Yes.) Continue to ask the question about still being friends after increasing lengths of time. "If I could set this timer for a day/week/month/year, would we still be friends?"

Affirm that, yes, you'll still be friends. No amount of time will change that. The passage of time doesn't change the love between friends.

Next, ask for a volunteer to hold one end of the tape measure. Have the person stand two feet from you and ask, "Are we still friends?" (Yes.) Have the person stand six feet from you and ask, "Are we still friends?" (Yes.) Send the person halfway down the aisle and ask the same question with the same response. Send the person to the back of the church with the same question and response. Would we still be friends? Continue to use increasing distances. "No amount of distance can change the love between friends. St. Paul says something like that in his letter to the Corinthians." Read *1 Corinthians* 13:7-8. Close with prayer.

Title: "It's All In a Picture"

Objects Needed: A camera.

Synopsis: "Take out a camera and ask the children how they remember things. Answer: "Take pictures!" How else do they remember things? Possible answers: writing, imagining, dreaming, and talking about things. Then ask them to pose for a picture—just them. Then ask the children to ask the congregation to stand up and wave—make sure the kids are asking—and take a picture of everyone waving. Tell them you will remember them in all the ways they mentioned and you will pray for them, too.

Children's Messages—Welcoming

Title: "You're Important To Me!"

Synopsis: Invite the children forward and tell them your name. Ask them to repeat it. Then ask them to shout their names all at once on the count of three. Tell them you now know each one of them, right? Share an object important to you that you might keep in your office for when they visit. Have them name an object important to them. If reasonable, have them to bring their objects in to show You next week before/after the service.

Title: "New Shoes"

Object Needed: A pair of old running shoes, new sneakers in a bag.

Synopsis: Have all the children forward. Hold up the old shoes. "I have something to show you today. Tell me, how would you describe these? (Dirty, worn, old or the brand name.) Well, all those things that you say describe these shoes. I have to tell you they are my favorite running shoes. I have had them for at least four years. I really don't want to replace them. (Give examples of previous use.) My son/daughter/wife/husband said it was time to get a new pair. But I really didn't want a new pair. Some of you may feel that same way about Pastor _____. You were comfortable with him/her. You did a lot of fun stuff with her/him. You really didn't want a change. And it is okay to feel that way. I know I am a new shoe for you. (Show new sneaker.) I want you to give me a try. Just like you try on a new shoe. We'll do fun and important things together. Pretty soon you'll break me in and we'll be like old friends. We'll be real comfortable.

"From Strangers to Friends"

Galatians 3: 23-29

First Sermon at St. Paul United Methodist Church
Michael Roberts, Arkansas Conference

(This sermon is shared as an example of an attempt to take the "context" of a first sermon in a new congregation seriously. The text is from the lectionary for that Sunday.)

Driving into Fort Smith last week, I had the strangest feeling. I had been here a few times, but this time was different. This time I was coming as *your* pastor. And that caused a strange sensation. As I was driving up, I realized that you all are a bunch of strangers. We were sent here, Dede and I, and eagerly came here to be your pastors—to love you, to provide spiritual leadership among you, to help us discover your place in ministry, and to be your friends. But then it dawned on me. We came here to do all this, and we don't even know you. To us, you are like the people I passed in the grocery store or on the street—strangers. We are here—to love you, but we don't even know you.

Needless to say, this was a very anxious moment for me—a scary moment. This realization made me ask, "Could I do it? Would I be accepted? What does the future hold?" I felt like the man who went to the psychologist to *overcome* his anxiety. The psychologist told him that if he wanted to make any progress, he was going to have to stop saying words like *don't* and *can't* and *not*. "Can you do that?" asked the psychologist. The man thought for a moment and then said, "I don't see why not." That's the way I felt. "Mike, can you do it?" "I don't see why not."

Yes, you are a bunch of strangers. It's just a fact, I can't get around it. I'm only beginning to learn your names. And yet I am here with you this morning, worshiping God with you, not as a stranger but as a friend.

I suppose that all of this can be turned around. To you I am a stranger—we are strangers. Just a few weeks ago you had not even heard of the _____ family. And yet you have welcomed us with opened arms, helped us move, fed us, invited us to be a part of your family. And you've done all this without knowing us. You've taken a great risk and reached out to us as friends, and we thank you for it.

The more I thought about this, the more I realized how much this says about who we are as Christians. Simply because we are here and because you have given us such a warm welcome, show us that we are capable of loving those we don't even know. Christians can do that. We can care for strangers—even call them our brothers and sisters. As Christians, we are a people who proclaim that love comes before knowing, (*get that—love comes before knowing*), care comes before friendship, trust comes before people prove themselves trustworthy. That's how we are called to live and act in the world; that is the Christ-like way.

I think Paul says it well in his letter to the Galatians. First, let me set the context. In this letter we see Paul, who is a Jewish Christian, involved in a debate with other Jewish Christians over how the Gentiles should be treated. Some Jewish Christians did not want to associate with Gentiles because the Gentiles were different. They did not follow the Jewish law, specifically the ritual laws—the laws of circumcision, the food laws, the worship laws. Many Jewish Christians wanted the Gentiles to accept these practices before they would accept them as equals. Paul is arguing against such a position. To put conditions on salvation—to turn faith into a bunch of *do's* and *don'ts* is to take away God's love and grace. In Christ we can live by love, not by law.

V. 25 reads: "Now that faith has come we are no longer under a custodian; for in Christ we are all made children of God, through faith." That's who we are—children of God. In Christ we can now live in a personal relationship with a loving father, a father who claims us and loves us even before we are aware of it. It is this love that unites us.

One thing that Paul has against these ritual-laws is their power to separate. The laws of circumcision, for example, separated the Jew from the Gentile, and the male from the female. The food laws and laws about who could worship did the same thing. Paul tells us that Christ has broken down these dividing walls. For too long, he says, we have looked upon the Gentiles as outsiders, the uncircumcised, strangers, "those people." No longer can we have that attitude. In Christ all such distinctions, all barriers, are dismantled. We are saved, not by the laws we follow, or because of the group we belong to: we are saved by the grace of Christ. So Paul goes on to say in v.28, (It is a verse that I believe is one of the most important verses in all the Bible. Paul says) "In Christ there is no Jew or Gentile, no slave or free, no male or female, for we are all one in Christ."

That's why we can love those we don't even know, because the walls between us and the stranger have already been torn down. A pathway for relationship has already been established. Christ has already united us as brothers and sisters. He has torn down the dividing walls between us and united us together in love: We are all one in Christ.

I think of a story that comes from Gert Behanna. She was converted to Christianity at the age of 60 and became an evangelist. She tells us this beautiful story about loving those we don't know and reaching out to strangers. She says, "I travel around the country speaking for God, that's my calling, but in the process I'm forced to use gas station restrooms that are almost always filthy. I used to complain about this to God. I'd say, 'Lord, if I'm your servant, how come I've got to use these nasty restrooms?' And then one day, as I tried to do what I had to do without touching the seat, and as I complained about this, God seemed to say to me 'Gert. I come into these restrooms too, right after you.' Somehow, I've never thought about that," she says, "but from that moment on I never leave a public restroom without cleaning the mirror, or wiping out the sink or picking up the towels off the floor."

That's part of her testimony and I think it's a great one. Instead of bemoaning the mess she found, Gert Behanna began to think of the person who would come in after her. She realized that this person, whoever it might be, was a person whom God loved. God was indeed coming in after her.

I believe we could all do something like that. There are countless ways that we can exercise our calling to love those we don't yet know and reach out to the stranger in need. That's what the church does.

Paul says, "In Christ there is no Jew or Gentile, no slave or free, no male or female, for we are all one in Christ." This is reality, folks. It's not reality as far as the world is concerned—the world still sees all the barriers and boundaries—but it is reality as far as God is concerned. God, through his son Jesus Christ, has united us together as his family. This means that wherever we go or whatever we do, there will be people there who love us and care for us even before they know us. It's a great blessing. We know about it first hand. But it is also a great challenge. The challenge is for us to go forth from here to reach out to others, to look upon strangers as brothers and sisters, to share Christian friendship with everyone we meet, to share God's love and our faith with them. It's a tall order, but I think we are up to it.

I pray that we can all go forth today to meet this challenge together. I hope that we can go forth not as strangers but as friends. Amen.

“All Things New”

by Sally Dyck

As I was driving back to my office after taking my husband to the airport, I was a little worried because he was flying on an airline that had had a plane crash the day before. My concern prompted me to reflect on my life as I sped along. "I love my life!" I thought to myself.

I was driving my beloved 10-year-old car. I thought to myself, "I like my car!" I couldn't imagine getting a new one. I thought about the house that my husband and I had owned for 13 years and after all the work we'd put into it, it was just the way we wanted it. "I like my house!" We had owned the house for the last 13 years because I had served the same church for that long, and, yes, "I love my church!" All of this was motivated by my original concern for my husband, so I concluded my litany by saying, "I love my husband of 21 years!" (You can tell from this litany that I'm not quick to change major components of my life!)

I dared to think out loud, "What a wonderful life! What could go wrong on a day like today?" I no sooner walked into my office than I was handed a message, requesting me to call the bishop. After reaching him, I discovered that everything in my life was about to change—except my husband.

Within weeks, the house was sold. I purchased a new car (my old sports car wasn't going to do well out in the hills where I was to be the new district superintendent). I said goodbye to my wonderful church and all my friends, and I moved away from the city I had lived in for the last 20 years.

"I am making all things new," it says in the scriptures (Revelation 21:5). I discovered that "all things new" can be a painful experience. Suddenly I had a new address and phone number (which I frequently forgot) and a new home (where I didn't always know where things were.) I had a new car with features that were a mystery to me at times (one night I couldn't find the switch to turn on the bright headlights.) I had a new job in a new office in a new town with a new set of people to work with and to develop into friends. Quite frankly, "all things new" brought a new experience of many tears and frustrations, loneliness and uncertainty.

Throughout the experience, the greatest discovery for me was how much we as a society, even the church, minimize the grief, sadness, and loss that all of us experience when we move—whether it's a planned and accepted move or not. As a pastor, I know that people are forever dealing with their anger in one way or another. I learned that some anger is really redirected and unresolved sadness. It's a lot easier to be mad than sad. Some people encouraged me to be mad because it's not as 'scary' as sad—but I've just felt sad.

None of the things on my list of "all things new" was life threatening, but all of them brought a sense of loss and a corresponding sense of grief. I cannot bring myself to say that everything is all right. It probably will be, but I am not there yet. Psalm 30:11 says that God will turn our sadness (mourning) into joy. I wait upon the Lord.

Lewis Center for Church Leadership

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