A Resource for the Closing of Congregations

Prepared by the Congregational Asset Management Task Force of the Lower Susquehanna Synod

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Preface: Do Not Be Afraid.

This manual is for congregations that are afraid of the future, congregations that are afraid of failure, and congregations that are afraid that they might have to close. The underlying message we want to share is: Do not be afraid. Be strong and courageous. God has led you this far, and God will never forsake you.

We want you to remember that as followers of Jesus Christ, death is nothing for us to fear. Remember that just as a seed has to die in order to bear much fruit, so death and change can lead to abundant life. This can be just as true for the life of a congregation as it is for individuals.

This manual is for congregations that are beginning to acknowledge that they are mortal. It is for congregations that are wondering about their options for the future. It is for congregations that are wondering if they are sustainable for mission and ministry, and are wondering what the next steps should be. This manual will not give you all the answers. But our hope is that it will help you to begin asking the right questions.

This manual was written by a task force of pastors and lay leaders from within the Lower Susquehanna Synod, all of whom have had experience working with congregations in crisis and transition. We have some familiarity with the practical, legal, financial, pastoral, and spiritual aspects of church closures.

Our purpose is not to close congregations. Rather, we want to help congregations that have acknowledged their mortality to think through their options, and to understand that in some situations, closure can be a faithful and life-giving decision. The purpose of this manual is to offer encouragement for congregations that are wondering about their continued sustainable, and to provide practical guidance to congregations that are considering closure.

God's promise to Joshua as he faced an unknown future is still God's promise to us: "Be strong and courageous; do not be frightened or dismayed, for the Lord your God is with you wherever you go" (Joshua 1:9).

"O God, you have called your servants to ventures of which we cannot see the ending, by paths as yet untrodden, through joys and perils unknown. Give us faith to go out with good courage, not knowing where we go, but only that your hand is leading us and your love supporting us; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen." *(adapted from the Service of Evening Prayer, **Evangelical Lutheran Worship).***

Chapter 1: The End of an Era is not the End of the Story. God is Faithful.

Joshua and the promised land.

Israel had become a great nation while in Egyptian captivity; then God called Moses to lead them out of Egypt into the promised land of Canaan. Moses led the people through the wilderness for forty years. He led them to capture the land east of the Jordan. Then Moses died in sight of the promised land.

How could God allow this to happen? Why didn't God raise Moses from the dead? Moses had been the loyal leader of God's people for forty years, and now, at the time of their deliverance, he was dead. The people of Israel were filled with fear and anxiety.

Joshua, who had served as Moses' personal minister for years, was confused and caught in an extremely difficult situation. If Joshua was expecting consolation and sympathy from God, he was mistaken. God's response to Joshua was: Moses my servant is dead. Now then, you and all these people, get ready to cross the Jordan River into the land that I am about to give them—to the Israelites" (Josh. 1:2).

God was proclaiming the end of an era, but also the continuation of the promise he had made to Moses, the same promise of a place and a people that he had made to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.

God's brutal honesty with Joshua can be a lesson for us today. God's people have always had great responsibilities. We do not have the same challenges or charge that God gave Joshua. But we do have a charge from God, and we will face challenges. Like the people of Israel, we can also get discouraged and fearful, thinking that we cannot succeed. Nothing should be of greater encouragement, when we face these responsibilities, than the assurance that God will help us accomplish them.

If you are part of a congregation that is fearful and anxious about the future of your church, consider the story of Joshua on the verge of the promised land. Can you be honest about the realities of your congregation? If considering your church's future causes you to mourn about its possible lost future, can you celebrate and mourn at the same time? Could God be proclaiming the end of one era, but also continuing his promise in a new way? The lessons Joshua received from God about tough times can be relevant for us today.

Having received instructions and encouragement from the Lord, Joshua began to prepare to cross the Jordan into Canaan. He commanded the officers to instruct the people in the camp to prepare provisions and be ready in three days to cross the Jordan and go into the promised land. Joshua told his people to get prepared and be ready to move forward. These lessons can apply to us as we examine the health and viability of our own congregations.

The temptations of the "good old days".

"The good old days!" How we humans long for the "good old days", even though we know that they will never return, and that maybe they weren't really all that good anyway. In our churches, we also reminisce about how wonderful it used to be back in the "good old days". It is understandable that we would want to return to a more secure past. If only we could develop a new program, start a better Christian Education program, or call a more enthusiastic pastor, then maybe everything would be better. Many of us would rather long for the "good old days" than face difficult realities in the present.

God told Joshua, "Don't live in the past. Prepare for the future. Move one." God wanted the Israelites to look forward, not back. He also wants us to look forward, not back. He wants us to prepare for the future that we cannot see.

After the Israelites crossed the Jordan, eventually Solomon built the temple in Jerusalem. It didn't last long, however. A conquering army destroyed the temple and took many Israelites into captivity. Generations later, returning Israelites began the process of rebuilding their lives, their city, and their temple. As the new temple was being built, those who remembered the glory of Solomon's temple wept. They wept because they felt that the new temple could never compare to Solomon's temple. They wept, not realizing that their longing for the past had shaken their faith in the power of God and his ability to shape a new and glorious future.

We may also weep as we long for our past. The dream of reliving the "good old days" by returning to a period of growth and glory is strong in many of our congregations. Again, this is understandable, for God has done wonderful things through our congregations. Faith has been nurtured and mission has been accomplished through the life of our congregations. But the reality may be that God is telling us, just as he told the Israelites: "Don't look back at the way things were, but look forward to see what I will do".

Be strong and courageous, for God is with you.

God instructed Joshua what to do and how to do it. He told him to observe the law as revealed to Moses, to study it diligently, and obey it. It is much easier to be brave when you have received proper guidance and instruction. We often speak of people who act out of the "courage of their convictions". It is hard to act courageously when we're not sure what is the right thing to do.

When we face the reality that our congregation may be in crisis, we may feel overwhelmed with guilt. When we face the possibility of ending and closure, we may begin to ask ourselves: What did we do wrong? Were we not faithful enough? Will a new building program or a new pastor return us to the "good old days"? But as we ask these questions, also consider: Was God's plan for the Israelites completed once Moses died? Or was God preparing for a new era, a different beginning?

God said to Joshua, "I will give you every place where you set your feet, as I promised Moses" (Joshua 1:3). God promised that he would be with Joshua, just as he had been with Moses. He

would not leave or forsake him. As with Joshua, we too need encouragement and assurance that we can succeed in God's work.

In struggling with the reality of your church, could it be that God has accomplished everything he intended through your particular congregation? Could God be telling you that your work is done, and that a new ministry is being formed? Remember, congregations were not meant to last forever. The kingdom of God is forever, but individual churches are not. We are here because of the legacy of congregations that have come before us. Perhaps, God is telling us to pass that legacy forward in a new fashion, a new form, a new ministry. God's plan will not be stopped by closing the doors of a church building! As God said to Joshua, "Don't live in the past. Prepare for the future. Move on."

Preparing for the future and moving on may mean letting go! Jesus told his disciples, "If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me" (Matthew 16:24). These words should remind us that preparing for the future may be difficult. Remember that the Church has faced tough times throughout its history. In the life of a church, no issue can be tougher than considering the end of an era. Will this experience cause pain, anxiety, confusion, and doubt? Yes. Will you become discouraged and fearful, thinking that you cannot succeed? Possibly. But as you travel through this process, remember to celebrate all that God has accomplished through your ministry. And remember that, as with Joshua, God will never forsake you.

As with Joshua, we need encouragement and assurance that we can succeed in God's work. God has given us all that we need to be successful in serving him. As the psalmist writes, "God is our refuge and strength, an ever-present help in trouble. Therefore, we will not fear" (Psalm 46:1-2).

If your church is at the threshold of closure, you are not alone. The future is not without hope. God still has a plan and a purpose for you. The kingdom will prevail. Keep in mind that the decision to close a congregation can be a faithful and life-giving choice.

God's goal for Joshua was to lead the people into the land of Canaan. Joshua was filled with fear and anxiety with this goal. However, God promised Joshua that he would be with him. With hope and the promise of God's presence, Joshua was able to be strong and courageous.

What is God's goal for you and your congregation? We can face the tough times of our unknown future knowing that God has offered us the promised land of eternal life, and he has assured us that we can successfully reach it. This alone should make us strong and brave enough to face our future together. "The kingdom's ours forever".

Chapter 2: The Life Cycle of a Congregation. Thoughts on Life, Death and Dying, and Leaving a Legacy for the Future

The life cycle of a congregation.

God's kingdom lasts forever, but individual congregations do not. Congregations come into being, live, and eventually, die. This is normal. The stages in the congregational life cycle are birth, growth, mature flourishing, plateau, decline, and dying. (For helpful descriptions of each stage, see Chapter Five of **Legacy Churches** and "Assessing Congregational Viability" in **Ending with Hope**; see permission credits on p. 30).

Times of crisis and transition can provide good opportunities for a congregation to return to the basic questions: What is God calling us to do, at this particular time and place? What is our purpose? Why are we here?

The danger is that it is tempting to avoid wrestling with these questions until it is almost too late. It is better to ask these questions when a congregation is in the flourishing, plateau, or even in the early declining stages of the life cycle. By the time a congregation is actually moving into its death throes, people may be too scare and worn out to do the hard work of corporate discernment. By that time, financial and material resources may also be scarce or worn out.

Therefore it is smart to be proactive about starting this conversation **before** a congregation is moribund. This is just good common sense. It is also better stewardship. The discernment process about a congregation's future (including any ensuing process of transformation or closure) takes a lot of time and energy. Any options such as merger, consolidation, relocation, or closure will also involve significant legal and constitutional work. All this takes time, people, and money. It is wise to plan ahead.

This is analogous to the individual life cycle. We all know that it is wise to acknowledge your own mortality and make plans while you're still reasonably healthy. It is much more difficult to make good end of life decisions and do effective estate planning when you're already enfeebled, exhausted, and have already used up your resources. The problem (with individuals and with congregations) is that we often choose to live in denial of the fact that we are mortal.

Prayer is crucial. Sustained prayer and conversation about the congregation's mission can lead to new directions for ministry and a new sense of focus and purpose. Sometimes, such prayer and conversation help a congregation to identify assets and resources it didn't realize it had, so that ministry in that place can continue for a time in new ways. Here, options such as yoked ministry, cooperative ministry, relocation, and consolidation are worth careful consideration. Depending on the situation, these options may be viable strategies for renewed mission, or they may just postpone inevitable decline.

Sometimes, sustained prayer and conversation about mission leads to the realization that God is calling a congregation to close. Grief is inevitable, but closing may also be an opportunity to use the congregation's resources to continue God's mission in another way or in another place.

There are times when dying may be a more faithful response to God's call than stubborn survival.

Death and dying.

For Christians, dying is okay. Remember how Jesus taught that a seed must die in order to bear much fruit. We lose our life in order to gain it. This is true for individual Christians, but is also true for congregations. If a congregation is clinging to survival for its own sake, and not for the sake of Christ and his mission, then something is amiss.

Just as individuals experiencing change and loss go through stages of grief, so do congregations. It is important to acknowledge the stages of grief as they are experienced by congregational members, lay leaders, and pastoral leaders. The classic stages of grief are denial, bargaining, anger, depression, and acceptance. As with any grief, there is no set time-line, nor is there a set order for moving through these stages. Different issues will affect different people in different ways. Different people within the congregation will be at different places in the grief cycle at any given time. Acknowledge this, and respect where different people are in their grief process.

Good communication is important at any time. In a time of crisis, change and loss, communication is extra important. Do lots of listening. Be open about the process. Involve as many voices as possible in your discernment conversations. Allow everyone to be heard.

Do not underestimate the strength that comes from having companions on the journey. "Mutual conversation and consolation" among the community of believers is truly a means of God's grace. Especially during difficult times, draw on the strength and insight that comes from corporate worship, bible study, and prayer.

Do not underestimate the power and significance of material things. It is normal for people to have powerful emotional attachments to such things as pews, stained glass, cemeteries, communion ware, and even silverware and furniture. This is not simply a matter of idolatry. Every thing in a church develops layers of meaning over time. Every object can accumulate layers of stories and powerful emotional resonance. Find ways to respect and honor the significance of these objects, even—and especially—as you are letting go.

Leaving a legacy.

Closing a congregation does not have to mean an end to ministry. In fact, closing may actually be a way of extending and expanding a congregation's ministry. Just as an individual should plan ahead, so a congregation nearing the end of its life cycle can plan ahead how to use its resources to continue serving God and neighbor in faithful witness. Use the following questions and issues as starting points for your discernment:

- What are the congregation's assets? Look at financial assets, buildings and land, but also consider knowledge, experience, passions, imagination, and spiritual gifts.

- Could the congregation's resources be used to plant a new congregation, or to support mission and evangelism in other ways?

- Could the church building and grounds be used in new ways to serve the local community? (For example, as a senior center, a school, a playground, a worship center for another faith community…)

- Consider the congregation's commitments and energies in the past. This might give a clue as to how existing resources could be invested in the mission of the wider church. (For example, a scholarship fund, or support of camping ministry…)

- Can congregational furnishings and other property be sold, gifted, or re-purposed in ways so that ministry can continue?

- Identify objects and documents have real historical value. Take steps to preserve and archive these so that others can learn from them.

- Find ways to tell, share, celebrate and preserve the congregation's story. This is also a legacy for the wider church.

Chapter 3: The Discernment Process: What is God Calling our Congregation to Do?

Helping a Congregation Make Decisions about its Sustainability

Through this exercise we want to help a congregation to make the proper decision to close or not to close, centered around the question:

> "What is God calling this congregation to do?"

That is the core question of ministry.

Individual congregations like individuals — Moses, Joshua, you and me — are not immortal. The closure of a congregation does not signify failure. A congregation like an individual is born, grows, may get sick, can recover, will age and will eventually die. The churches of the First Century in the Book of Acts are no longer existing, but their legacy lives on in the churches today.

God was not downplaying the significance of Moses leadership with the Hebrew people when God turned to Joshua to push forward when Moses died. God asked Joshua to do the work that needed to be done. Past history and events should be considered a blessing and be celebrated, but time moves on and so must our ways of accomplishing ministry. Look forward and see what God can do.

Every local congregation can trace its lineage to the churches of Acts. However, churches were not meant to last forever. Closing the doors does not stop the plan of God. His plan moves forward even when there are apparent problems in a church. God can use the seed found within a closing church to produce more fruit and enable one's church to provide an eternal legacy.

A decision to close a congregation is not easy. Emotions run high, and a sense of failure may pervade the hearts and minds of those remaining. The question before us is — **"Is this congregation sustainable?"** The main issue is — **Can we make meaningful the Gospel of Jesus Christ?** It takes **money and people** to do ministry in our culture**.**

We live in a culture of bigness — big malls; huge parking lots; massive theaters; enormous office buildings. That is the mindset of people in our culture, and many people will bring that mindset with them when they visit a congregation.

Smaller congregations struggle because they have limited people and limited resources from which they can provide ministry. Often when a congregation is in a fight for survival, it may lose its sense of vision and mission. A congregation needs enough attendance to make itself look, feel and sound alive. A good worship environment is at least 50 adults gathered together. Visitors probably will not return if the church is perceived as dying.

So we can panic or we can plan. We are called to be Kingdom Builders. A congregation that closes can be the beginning of something greater with the purposeful planting of new ministries that spread the good news of Christ.

The starting point for our discernment of viability should always begin with prayer. Then study the congregation's constitution concerning its mission. Discuss:

1. How is this congregation living out its stated mission?

2. What barriers exist that hinder the fulfillment of its mission?

3. Can the congregation overcome these barriers?

Your response to these indicators will reveal areas of concern for ministry.

Continue the discernment process by using the worksheet in **Appendix A**. This worksheet will help you take a realistic look at your congregational attendance trends, to determine your viability for ministry and mission.

Your Conference Dean and the synod staff are always available to help you in this process of determining your viability as a congregation.

Chapter 4: Steps In Closing A Congregation

Important
When closing a congregation, there are two important points always to keep in mind:

1. Congregational leaders must communicate clearly and often with congregation members being completely transparent about the issues to be decided and the meetings to make these decisions.
2. Thorough minutes must be kept of all discussions and actions

Stages of Grief
While going through the process of deciding to close a congregation and then following through with all the steps necessary for the closing, all involved will go through the various stages of grief: denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance. Unfortunately, not everyone will go through the stages in lock-step nor at the same speed.
Understanding of and proper attention to each person's stage in the grief process will facilitate following the steps needed to close the congregation.

Discernment
The ultimate decision to be made by a congregation is what God desires of it. Once a determination is made that it might be best to close, the congregation enters a time of discernment of how to best leave a legacy and provide new life from this closing.

Synod
Whenever the possibility of closing might be an option for congregational leaders, the Bishop's office should be contacted immediately. The Bishop and the Bishop's staff as well as a special synodical committee can provide the resources and guidance needed for congregational leaders.

Decisions
The closing of a congregation involves two primary decisions:

1. When to close, including a process that is to be followed and whenever possible include a final celebration worship service.
2. What to do with the property and resources (worship appointments, Sunday School material, etc) of the congregation.

Records

1. Gather all congregational records, including the parish register, all minute books, and all financial records.
2. Appraise which records are required for the formal closing of the congregation and which need to be archived.
3. Plan for the proper disposal of records no longer needed.
4. Visual materials such as photographs, videotapes, and films also provide a record of the congregation. Determination will need to be made of which visual materials are to be retained and how to best archive them.
5. Develop a list of all records.

Legal

1. Follow the congregation constitution, taking the formal vote needed to dissolve.
2. Upon closing, file legal documents with the synod and Evangelical Lutheran Church in America as well as with county, state and federal governments.
3. Transfer the parish register, minute book, and other legal documents to the Secretary of the Lower Susquehanna Synod.

Membership

Arrange for any remaining members on the congregational role to be transfer membership to another congregation.

Pastor

Finalize any remaining payments to the pastor and any legal records which need filed.

Property

1. Inventory the contents of the building(s).
2. Arrange to secure the building(s) until ownership is transferred. Security includes maintaining fire and liability insurance, keeping the buildings securely locked, designating someone to regularly check the building, and maintaining needed utilities.
3. Discontinue utility services no longer needed.
4. Arrange for the exterior of the property to be maintained (lawn mowing, weed control and snow removal).
5. Decide what to do with the contents and with the building(s).

Financial

1. Catalog all financial accounts.
2. Arrange for bills to be paid promptly until closing is finalized.
3. Plan how to disburse any remaining funds and then disburse them when appropriate, perhaps at a closing worship service. Note: funds must be distributed to "like" organizations, as defined by the Internal Revenue Service.
4. The synod offers the following suggestions for disbursement of remaining congregational funds in ways that can continue the mission and legacy of the congregation:

A congregation could designate funds to provide:

Lower Susquehanna Synod

- *Support to begin a new mission congregation or ministry within the synod*
- *Additional support for a new mission congregation or ministry begun in the synod*
- *Scholarships for seminarians*
- *Camping corporation support*

Evangelical Lutheran Church in America

- *Disaster relief assistance*
- *World Missionary support*
- *New mission congregation development*
- *World hunger projects*

Local

- *Charitable care for residents of the Lutheran Social Service agency serving the congregation*
- *Fire company support (including capital equipment)*
- *Support for the community social service agency*
- *Community library contribution*

Cemetery

If the congregation owns a cemetery, either the ownership must be transferred to another entity or the congregation must provide funds for the annual upkeep of the cemetery.

Use the checklist provided in **Appendix B** to keep track of all the legal, ecclesial, financial, and practical steps involved in closing a congregation.

Chapter 5: Making Closure, Ending in Hope

In the multi-step process of closing, your congregation will experience a variety of emotions of varying degrees: grief and nostalgia, anxiety and hopefulness about the future. Some of the members may feel relieved; some may worry that by closing, your congregation and its witness will be forgotten. A final gathering time and service can be an important way to acknowledge your congregation's history and witness in the community; it can give voice to the pain of loss that many are feeling about closing; it can be a lasting testimony to the community. Gathering with members, friends, the community at large, and other congregations who may be joining in ministry is a public sign that God's mission continues and extends beyond our temporary buildings.

Below are some suggested steps your congregation may want to consider as you together plan for the final gathering and service. We have also included a *Service of Leave-Taking* for use when a congregation is leaving a church-building that has served its mission, or for when a congregation is closing. (See **Appendix C)**.

Steps to consider when planning the final service:

1. Have a meal. For centuries, when Christians gather to mark a life-changing occasion, food is shared. Think what weddings and funerals would be without the meal to share in. Even baptisms and confirmations have their traditional cake or luncheons. Sharing one last meal in the beloved kitchen, using the space of the building that your congregation is leaving, is a testament to your shared spiritual life together in this place.

2. Invite current and former members.

3. Invite the community. This service is their chance to say farewell and Godspeed to your congregation and its witness in the community.

4. Invite the recipients of the church's assets. This can be a public way to show continuity of God's work between your congregation and the recipients of your abundance. Share this information during the service.

5. Invite other congregations. Especially invite a congregation you may be merging with, or a congregation that has been identified as the primary congregation your members will be joining. This can be a powerful testament to the mutual ministry you share in Christ.

6. Plan the service with care and attention. Be intentional about the final procession, where items commonly used in the congregation's worship life are carried out of the building for the last time. Plan who will carry these items and what the person carrying them is to do with them at the end of the procession. You may also wish to incorporate the church's mission statement in a part of the liturgy. See the notes on the service below.

7. Invite the synod worship committee or synod staff worship relator to be a part of the planning process of your final service. They may be able to provide additional resources, vessels, etc. as needed.

Appendix A: Worksheet on Congregational Sustainability

Using attendance figures for the previous ten years, chart your congregation's average attendance. Then use the following questions as a springboard for further discussion.

YES NO

___ ___ 1. Do we have a pattern of growth in attendance?

___ ___ 2. Will our trend of growth, plateau or decline allow us to thrive and develop ministry for the future in this place?

___ ___ 3. Can we maintain our own existence as a congregation and provide ministry in the community, synod and ELCA?

___ ___ 4. Can we survive without some form of life support from bequests, special gifts?

___ ___ 5. Do we have sufficient numbers of people to volunteer for ministry within the congregation and outreach into the community?

___ ___ 6. Are new efforts in evangelism and Christian Education feasible?

___ ___ 7. Are there sufficient funds and interested membership to do ministry within the congregation as well as outreach and evangelism into the community and world?

___ ___ 8. Are we experiencing the presence of first-time visitors on a regular basis?

___ ___ 9. Do they return for a second or a third visit?

___ ___ 10. Do 2O-25% of our first-time visitors eventually join the congregation?

___ ___ 11. Is the congregation's main focus on outreach/evangelism?

___ ___ 12. Is the congregation striving to do more than trying to survive/keep the doors open?

___ ___ 13.Has the congregation grown in the last five years?

___ ___ 14.Do we have enough members to do ministry well?

___ ___ 15.Does giving in the congregation enable "Great Commission" work, or does most of the giving go towards maintenance and survival?

___ ___ 16.Are there young families active in the church?

___ ___ 17. Has the congregation maintained a good level of stewardship including several families (10-12) who tithe faithfully to the congregation?

___ ___ 18. Is the congregation willing/able to adapt its ministry and lifestyle in order to develop the ministries that will meet the needs of a changing community?

___ ___ 19. Is the present facility physically adaptable for use?

___ ___ 20. Can the congregation afford the repairs that are needed to use these facilities for ministry?

If you marked 5 answers "No', we suggest you contact the Assistant to the Bishop for your Conference to discuss the trends that are revealed.

If you marked 8 or more answers "No", this may suggest a serious condition of decline for your congregation. It is time to look courageously and honestly at your situation, and consider what options you have as a congregation.

Appendix B: A Checklist for Steps in Closing a Congregation

Synod

___1. Contact Bishop's Office

Records

___1. Gather all records and make a list

- ___Articles of incorporation, constitution, bylaws
- ___Parish register
- ___Minutes: congregation meetings and congregation council meetings
- ___Minutes: committees and groups (i.e. LCW)
- ___Newsletters
- ___Worship bulletins
- ___Property papers: titles and deeds
- ___Insurance policies
- ___Annual statistical reports
- ___Annual audit reports
- ___Printed histories
- ___Congregational directories
- ___Audio and visual records including photographs, videotape, and films
- ___Church cemetery records *if applicable)*

___2. Appraise which records to maintain and forward to Synod Secretary

___3. Appraise records to archive

___4. Dispose of records not needed

Legal

___1. Engage an attorney if needed

___2. Conduct formal congregational vote to dissolve

___3. File legal documents with Lower Susquehanna Synod and Evangelical Lutheran Church in America

___4. File dissolution forms with county and Commonwealth of Pennsylvania

___5. File dissolution form with Internal Revenue Service

___6. Transfer parish register, minute books, and other legal documents to Secretary of Synod

Membership

___Arrange for transfer of membership for all members

Pastor

___1. Finalize payments to pastor

___2. File any forms related to pastor's end of call

Property

___1.Inventory the contents of the building(s).

___2. Arrange to secure the building(s) until ownership is transferred.

___3. Designate person to check building regularly

___4. Discontinue utility services no longer needed.

___5.Arrange for the exterior of the property to be maintained (lawn mowing, weed control and snow removal).

___6. Decide what to do with the contents and with the building(s).

Financial

___1. Catalog all financial accounts.

___2. Arrange for bills to be paid promptly until closing is finalized.

___3. Plan how to disburse any remaining funds and then disburse them when appropriate.

Cemetery (*if applicable)*

___Transfer ownership

or

___Establish fund for cemetery maintenance in perpetuity

Appendix C: Service of Leave-Taking

NOTES ON THE SERVICE OF LEAVE-TAKING:

Ordinarily the setting for this service is in a building that a congregation is vacating. Whenever an alternative location needs to be arranged (because of serious damage to a structure, for example) this service may be adapted and altered as necessary.

A pastor of the congregation may serve as the presiding minister for this occasion. The synod bishop or another synod representative, if present, may preside at the service or at the sending.

Choices of wording that are appropriate for either the leaving of a church building or the closing of a congregation are provided in italics. Worship leaders will need to select the wording that is appropriate to the given situation, or prepare similar wording suitable to the context.

The presentation of congregational records and assets is normally used only at the closing of a congregation, although the transferring of assets may be appropriate if a congregation is moving to a new building and handing the existing building over to another congregation.

If the congregation is closing, one or more volumes of congregational records may be brought by the secretary, the president, the pastor, or another congregational representative and handed to a leader of another congregation with which the congregation is being merged, or to a person having oversight of regional church archives.

If the congregation is selling property or handing over assets to another congregation, a synod, or other organizations, information about that transfer may be conveyed at this time. Representatives of organizations receiving various assets may come forward to have them presented at this time (for example, the symbolic handing over of keys to a building or the presentation of an official document or a bank check).

If it is desired, some worship appointments that can easily be carried in procession at the conclusion of the service, such as a cross, candles, a Bible or lectionary book, communion vessels, banners, and other items, may lead the congregation as they take leave of the building. If the congregation will be taking the items a short distance to a place that it will occupy next (either to a new building or to the facility of another congregation with which it is merging) the procession may continue directly into the other building. If the congregation is closing and is giving all of its property to other entities, including worship appointments, these items may be carried in procession by people who are assuming custody of them, such as representatives of another congregation, or a regional church archives center. Instructions about how the items are to be handled and where they are to be placed at the conclusion of the procession should be provided to participants ahead of time. Information about where the items are going should also be conveyed to the assembly.

The propers for the Sunday on which the service of leave-taking occurs are normally used. When the service occurs at a time apart from the primary service/s of the congregation, or on a Sunday for which the color is green, propers may be selected from those listed here.

Prayer of the Day

O God, you have promised through your Son to be with your church forever. We give you thanks for those who founded this community of believers and for the signs of your presence in

this congregation throughout its life. As this congregation *name* concludes its time together [in this place], grant that we may ever follow in the way, the truth, and the life, Jesus Christ, our Savior and Lord.

Gospel Acclamation
Alleluia. We have a build- | ing from God,
a house not made with hands, eternal | in the heavens. *Alleluia*. *(2 Cor. 5:1)*

Suggested Readings and Psalms:
Note: you may wish to incorporate Scriptures from the congregation's dedication or founding.
2 Samuel 7:18-29: *The house of Israel*
Isaiah 43:1-7: *The LORD is with Israel*
Isaiah 66:1-2: *Heaven is the throne and earth is the footstool of God*
Jeremiah 29:1-7: *Israel plants gardens in Babylon*

Psalm 46: *The LORD of hosts is with us; the God of Jacob is our stronghold. (Ps. 46:7)*
Psalm 90:12-17: *So teach us to number our days that we may apply our hearts to wisdom. (Ps. 90:12)*
Psalm 103:1-8, 22: *LORD, you are full of compassion and mercy. (Ps. 103:8)*
Psalm 122: *I was glad when they said to me, "Let us go to the house of the LORD." (Ps. 122:1)*
Psalm 136:1-4, 23-26: *God's mercy endures forever. (Ps. 136:1)*

Acts 17:22-31: *God does not live in human shrines*
Ephesians 2:11-22: *No longer strangers and aliens, but members of God's household*
1 Peter 2:4-10: *A living stone, chosen and precious*
Revelation 21:1-4, 22-27: *The temple is the Lamb*

Matthew 6:25-34: *Do not worry about tomorrow*
Matthew 16:13-20: *On this rock I will build my church*
Mark 10:23-31: *How hard it is for the wealthy to enter God's kingdom*
Luke 9:57-62: *Jesus says, "Follow me"*
John 15:1-11: *Christ the vine*

Suggested Hymns *(hymn numbers below are from ELW, Evangelical Lutheran Worship):*
Note: you may wish to incorporate those hymns that are the most valued by the congregation.
308: O Morning Star, How Fair and Bright!
429: In Our Day of Thanksgiving
441: Oh, Happy Day When We Shall Stand
503-505: A Mighty Fortress Is Our God
524: What Is This Place
526: God Is Here!
579: Lord, You Give the Great Commission
596, 597: My Hope Is Built on Nothing Less
627: O Day Full of Grace

632: O God, Our Help in Ages Past
633: We've Come This Far by Faith
639: When We Are Living
645: Christ Is Made the Sure Foundation
647: Glorious Things of You Are Spoken
652: Built on a Rock
654: The Church's One Foundation
656: Blest Be the Tie That Binds
729: The Church of Christ, in Every Age
839, 840: Now Thank We All Our God
858, 859: Praise to the Lord, the Almighty

Service of Leave-Taking

For use when leaving a church building or closing a congregation

The service here may replace or supplement elements of the service of Holy Communion.

GATHERING

Address
Following the prayer of the day the presiding minister introduces the purpose of the service in these or similar words.

Today we gather [for the last time] in this place as the people of *name of congregation*. We give thanks for the ministry that has happened in this *building/congregation*, and for the people who have been fed and nurtured in the Christian faith here. Even as we mark the end of an era in one place, we acknowledge how we all are participants in God's mission that continues beyond this day and these walls.

Former pastors and other leaders of the congregation or its related institutions may offer brief remarks or greetings at this time.

WORD

Thanksgiving for the Means of Grace
Following the sermon and the hymn of the day, the presiding minister addresses the congregation in these or similar words.
At the dedication of a church building, it is customary to ask God's blessing on the places of the word and sacraments. Today we return to these symbols of God's grace in our lives. Because proclaiming the word and celebrating the sacraments are the heart of a congregation's ministry, we give thanks for the ways that God has nurtured this congregation throughout the years and has led us to serve others in Christ's name.

The presiding minister may go to each of the three primary areas where the means of grace are offered in worship: the places of the word, of baptism, and of the sacramental meal. When the

space around each of these centers is large enough to accommodate all worshipers who are present, they may be invited to gather in each of those respective places.

At the place of the word

Let us pray.
O God, your mighty word at the dawn of creation
breathed life into the earth and all of its inhabitants.
By the gift of your incarnate Word in Jesus,
you brought good news of life and salvation to all humankind.
Through your word proclaimed in worship here,
this congregation has been challenged and healed.
Let your voice, which has sounded in this place,
echo in our lives as we proclaim your message of peace
into the places you will send us;
through Jesus Christ, our Savior and Lord.
Amen.

At the place of baptism

O God, through the flood in the time of Noah,
and through the waters of the Red Sea,
you saved your people of old.
Through the waters of baptism in this place,
your people have been born to new life
and have been commissioned for service in Christ's name.
May all the baptized continue to give witness
to your saving grace throughout the world;
through Jesus Christ, our Savior and Lord.
Amen.

At the place of the meal

O God, through manna on a wilderness journey
and through loaves of bread multiplied on a hillside,
you fed people who needed sustenance for their bodies and souls.
May all who have been nourished here with the body and blood of Christ
give themselves away as food for the hungry.
May all who have feasted here welcome others to the banquet of salvation;
through Jesus Christ, our Savior and Lord.
Amen.

PRAYERS OF INTERCESSION

Prayers of intercession are prepared locally for the occasion and include petitions for the church, those in need, and all of God's creation.

One or more of the following petitions may be included in the prayers of intercession.

For the one holy catholic and apostolic church in all times and places,
of which this congregation and its building have been a part,
we give our thanks and praise.

For the men and women who founded this congregation,
who made personal sacrifices in order for it to grow and flourish,
and who used their talents and skills in building up a community of faith,
we give our thanks and praise.

For this congregation's ministries throughout its life,
its gatherings for praise and prayer,
its faithful use of the means of grace,
and its study of the scriptures,
we give our thanks and praise.

For the work of mission this congregation has supported
[here specific names of global mission and relief agencies may be mentioned]
, for our local partners of ministry
[here names of area ecumenical organizations and local mission efforts may be mentioned]
, and for all the lives that have been affected by God's work through us.

For this building that has sheltered *name of congregation* for *number of* years,
that the memory of this place will continue to inspire devotion to the God
who makes all things possible.

For all who hold special attachments to this congregation [and to this building];
for those who have been baptized, nurtured in faith, confirmed, or married in this place;
that the Holy Spirit's gifts continue to sustain them
even as this congregation's outward expression
takes on a new form / comes to a conclusion.

For the members of this congregation,
who will continue gathering as a people of God in *a new place / other communities of faith*,
that today will mark not only the end of an era
but also the beginning of new opportunities for worship and service.

For a congregation that is merging:
For *name/s of other congregation/s*,
with which members of *name of this congregation* are joining,
that various gifts for ministry may be offered and shared,
and that renewal in life and mission may flourish.

For the *name of synod*, its present and past bishops, staff, and other leaders
who have helped this congregation throughout the years,
especially as they have led us to be faithful in our proclamation of the gospel.

For all who have been a part of the ministry of this congregation throughout its life,
those who have remained constant in the face of challenges,
those who have moved away,

and all who have died and now rest in you, we give you thanks,
rejoicing that we are joined together in one eternal communion.

MEAL

PRAYER AFTER COMMUNION
Gracious God, at your table you strengthen us for service
wherever you will send us.
As we leave this place that has been a home for worship and mission,
help us to gather in *our new setting / other settings*
that will provide further opportunities for our life and ministry.
Welcome us forever into your embrace,
until that day when all your people throughout the world
worship together around the throne of Jesus Christ, our Savior and Lord.
Amen.

SENDING

CONGREGATIONAL RECORDS AND ASSETS
When a congregation is closing, A representative of the closing congregation speaks the following or similar words while handing over official congregational records.
In remembrance and with thanksgiving, we hand over the documented history and official records that symbolize the joys and sorrows of the people of God in this place. Receive and preserve them so that the ministry of this congregation may be remembered.

Information about the transfer of congregational assets may be conveyed at this time.

DECLARATION ON LEAVE-TAKING
The presiding minister addresses the assembly. When present, a synod bishop or another synod representative may offer the declaration.

At the leaving of a building
With thanks to God for the work accomplished in this place,
I declare this building to be vacated for the purposes of *name of congregation,*
in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.
May the witness of the people
who have ministered here in the name of Jesus Christ
continue to live on as they leave these walls and begin life in a new place.
Amen.

Or

At the closing of a congregation
With thanks to God for the work accomplished in this place,
I declare this congregation *name of congregation* to be closed
in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.
May the witness of the people
who have ministered in the name of Jesus Christ through *name of congregation*
be undiminished and continue as they leave this place.
Amen.

BLESSING
The presiding minister proclaims God's blessing in these or similar words.
You are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people,
in order that you may proclaim the mighty acts of him
who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light.

Almighty God,
Father, + Son, and Holy Spirit,
bless you now and forever.
Amen.

DISMISSAL
The assisting minister sends the assembly into mission.
Let us go forth in peace,
in the name of Christ. Amen.

PROCESSION
A hymn, psalm, or instrumental music may accompany the assembly as it processes out of the worship space with primary worship vessels and objects (e.g., chalice and paten, pulpit bible, processional and/or altar cross, baptismal shell…).
Note: If you have a closing procession, give careful thought to where the worship items will go after the end of the service.

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Appendix D: Relevant Portions of Model Congregation Constitution

The following portions of the Model Constitution for Congregations deal with matters in relation to closing or disposing of property:

Chapter 5.
POWERS OF THE CONGREGATION

***C5.01.** The powers of this congregation are those necessary to fulfill its purpose.

***C5.02.** The powers of this congregation are vested in the Congregation Meeting called and conducted as provided in this constitution and bylaws.

***C5.03.** Only such authority as is delegated to the Congregation Council or other organizational units in this congregation's governing documents is recognized. All remaining authority is retained by this congregation. This congregation is authorized to:

a. call a pastor as provided in Chapter 9;
b. terminate the call of a pastor as provided in Chapter 9;
c. call a minister of Word and Service;
d. terminate the call of a minister of Word and Service in conformity with the constitution of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America;
e. adopt amendments to the constitution, as provided in Chapter 16, amendments to the bylaws, as specified in Chapter 17, and continuing resolutions, as provided in Chapter 18;
f. approve the annual budget;
g. acquire real and personal property by gift, devise, purchase, or other lawful means;
h. hold title to and use its property for any and all activities consistent with its purpose;
i. sell, mortgage, lease, transfer, or otherwise dispose of its property by any lawful means;
j. elect its [officers][,] [and] Congregation Council, [boards, and committees,] and require [them] [the members of the council] to carry out their duties in accordance with the constitution[,] [and] bylaws[,] [and continuing resolutions]; and
k. terminate its relationship with the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America as provided in Chapter 6.

Chapter 7.
PROPERTY OWNERSHIP

***C7.01.** If this congregation ceases to exist, title to undisposed property shall pass to the *(insert name of synod)* of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America.

***C7.02.** If this congregation is removed from membership in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America according to its procedure for discipline or pursuant to 9.23. of the constitution and bylaws of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, title to property shall continue to reside in this congregation.

***C7.03.** If the voting members of this congregation present at a legally called and conducted special meeting of this congregation vote to transfer to another Lutheran church body, title to property shall continue to reside in this congregation, provided the process for termination of relationship in *C6.05. has been followed. Before this congregation takes action to transfer to another Lutheran church body, it shall consult with representatives of the *(insert name of synod)* .

***C7.04.** If the voting members of this congregation present at a legally called and conducted special meeting of this congregation vote to become independent or relate to a non-Lutheran church body and have followed the process for termination of relationship in *C6.05., title to property of this congregation shall continue to reside in this congregation only with the consent of the Synod Council. The Synod Council, after consultation with this congregation by the process established by the synod, may give approval to the request to become independent or to relate to a non-Lutheran church body, in which case title shall remain with the majority of this congregation. If the Synod Council fails to give such approval, title shall remain with those members who desire to continue as a congregation of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America. In neither case does title to this congregation's property transfer to the synod

***C7.05.** Notwithstanding the provisions of *C7.02. and *C7.03. above, where this congregation has received property from the synod pursuant to a deed or other instrument containing restrictions under provision

9.71.a. of the *Constitution, Bylaws, and Continuing Resolutions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America*, this congregation accepts such restrictions and:

a. Shall not transfer, encumber, mortgage, or in any way burden or impair any right, title, or interest in the property without prior approval of the Synod Council.
b. Shall—upon written demand by the Synod Council, pursuant to †S13.23. of the constitution of the *(insert name of synod)* —reconvey and transfer all right, title, and interest in the property to the synod.

Chapter 10.
CONGREGATION MEETING

C10.03. Notice of all meetings of this congregation shall be given at the services of worship on the preceding two consecutive Sundays and by mail or electronic means, as permitted by state law, to all [voting] members at least 10 days in advance of the date of the meeting.

C10.06. All actions approved by this congregation shall be by majority vote of those voting members present and voting, except as otherwise provided in this constitution or by state law.

Chapter 12.
CONGREGATION COUNCIL

C12.05. The Congregation Council shall be responsible for the financial and property matters of this congregation.

a. The Congregation Council shall be the board of [trustees] [directors] of this congregation and, as such, shall be responsible for maintaining and protecting its property and managing its business and fiscal affairs. It shall have the powers and be subject to the obligations that pertain to such boards under the laws of the State of _____, except as otherwise provided herein.
b. The Congregation Council shall not have the authority to buy, sell, or encumber real property unless specifically authorized to do so by a meeting of this congregation.
c. The Congregation Council may enter into contracts of up to $_____ for items not included in the budget.
d. The Congregation Council shall prepare an annual budget for adoption by this congregation, shall supervise the expenditure of funds in accordance therewith following its adoption, and may incur obligations of more than $_____ in excess of the anticipated receipts only after approval by a Congregation Meeting. The budget shall include this congregation's full indicated share in support of the wider ministry being carried on in collaboration with the synod and churchwide organization.
e. The Congregation Council shall ascertain that the financial affairs of this congregation are being conducted efficiently, giving particular attention to the prompt payment of all obligations and to the regular forwarding of mission support monies to the synod treasurer.
f. The Congregation Council shall be responsible for this congregation's investments and its total insurance program.

Appendix E:

Ministry Team

Oversight Committee-Dissolution of Congregations
Lower Susquehanna Synod-ELCA

The committee is responsible for overseeing all matters involved with the closing of a congregation. The work with a congregation will conclude when the Office of the Bishop and Synod Council determine that all dissolution matters have been satisfactorily resolved and all funds distributed.

Oversight
The committee will work with and advise any remaining congregation officers. If there are no officers, the committee will assume the complete function of dissolving the congregation.

The committee should ensure that official meetings in congregations dealing with closure have thorough meeting minutes. The committee itself also needs to maintain official minutes of all actions and communication with congregations.

Members
Provide for the transfer of membership and for the pastoral care of all members remaining on the membership role.

Records
Bring the Congregation Register up to date. As part of the final actions, see that the Congregation Register and all other congregation records are delivered to the Secretary of Synod.

Property
Until the property is sold, provide for the maintenance of the property (both interior and exterior) and maintain adequate fire and liability insurance.

Oversee the sale and distribution of all items within the building(s).

As soon as possible after the building(s) are emptied, arrange for the sale of building(s) and property.

Cemetery
If the congregation has responsibility for a cemetery, provide for the on-going maintenance and insurance of the cemetery.

If possible, transfer responsibility for the cemetery to another entity. If responsibility cannot be transferred, provide for maintaining the cemetery including sufficient financial resources from the congregation’s assets.

Finances
Until the property is disposed of, provide for the timely payment of bills, the receipt of income, the maintenance of financial records, and the prudent security of all financial assets.

Inventory all assets including investments.

After all property is sold/disposed of, execute the distribution of funds according the established guidelines for dissolution of congregations.

Legal
File all legal dissolution forms with government and ecclesiastical agencies.

Make certain all congregation records, including final financial records, are given to the Secretary of Synod.

Celebration Service
If there are a sufficient number of members remaining at the time of closure of a congregation, the committee should ensure that a worship service of celebration be held at the time of formal closure. Such a worship service, following the suggestions of the book *Legacy Churches*, will celebrate the life of the congregation and the legacy it is leaving. If possible, recipients of any congregational legacy gifts should attend the worship service to receive and acknowledge those gifts.

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Thomas E. McKee, synod secretary

Updated Appendix D related to ELCA Model Constitution for Congregations 2019
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