

Celebrating Pastoral Transitions During COVID-19



Saying goodbye

Many will miss the “last Sunday” celebration this year, with all its emotion and deep sense of closure. What’s also true about that event is that it doesn’t lend itself to depth of conversation with any one person. It’s like attending your own wedding—you’re glad to see the faces and feel the joy together, but it’s not a good time to actually visit with people. Holding that connection as primary, with a substantive goodbye as the goal, this is a time to be creative about connecting pastors with beloved parishioners. The list below is a beginning set of suggestions; perhaps they will spark another idea that would work well in your context.

For pastors

- Walk through the pews or worship seating, remembering who sat where, and give a prayer or thank you for each of them. Have someone else present to record you so that this can be shared with the congregation—maybe just video of part of the praying process, with a summary word from the pastor, so as not to leave anyone out.
- Video the [Blessing and Sending Forth of a Pastor](#) for use in worship on the last day. Perhaps use the freedom of video to record from places besides just the sanctuary, with symbolic items. For example, record from the front door of the church, the children’s wing, the kitchen, food pantry, or other site of significant ministry. Use a variety of laity to receive the symbols from the pastor.
- Pastor writes notes to every family or to each child and/or youth, depending on the size of the church.
- Pastor chooses leaders and others to call personally, as time allows. Video conferencing can be used with groups—these conversations do not have to be lengthy.
- Pastor goes to people’s homes, knock on the door and talk with them from the yard, a safe distance away. Parishioners could do the same for the pastor.
- Show up outside the windows of residents in the nursing home (alert the staff first).
- Pastor provide clarity about boundaries once the move has happened, explaining steps to be taken with social media, etc. Note the pain in leaving in this way, but encourage trust that God will provide for all involved.
- Departing pastor intentionally and publicly finds ways to lift up the gifts of the successor and confer “blessing”—newsletter article, video interview or public conversation between the pastors.

For church members

- Parishioners drive to the church parking lot with words of appreciation for the pastor on signs to hold up in their car windows. Pastor walks through at a safe distance, or the cars pass through as a parade. Perhaps different segments of the church are assigned to go on different days, to allow more opportunity for actual conversation.
- Card shower - People write notes, recalling memories and blessings, and send to the pastor, perhaps to arrive in the mail on a staggered schedule.
- Write chalk messages to the pastor and family on the sidewalk and driveway outside of their home. Arrange for different people to do this once a week, or following a rain. Conversation could also happen in front of the pastor's home at arranged times.
- Give members and participants the opportunity to sign a quilt, book, photo frame, or other item, as is often done in non-virus times. Signing would be managed to provide for distancing and hygiene.

Saying hello

Orienting new pastors

- Current pastor gathers information to share with incoming pastor—video conversation(s) as needed.
- In certain circumstances, new pastor could virtually attend a leadership meeting, to greet people. Care must be taken to respect boundaries on all sides.
- Introductory video of new pastor can be shared in worship prior to arrival—interview with current pastor, or just a statement of greeting by the new pastor/family, intended to build trust and relationship, express appreciation all the way around.
- In the case of a parsonage, offer a virtual tour for the arriving pastor/family.

Welcoming families

- If arriving pastor is married, a representative of the church can reach out to talk about church and community resources.
- Children's ministry leadership spearheads age appropriate welcome—many pastor's children are having to move without proper goodbyes to their friends, and a warm welcome can soften that blow a little.
- Information about schools can be provided by teachers or parents connected to the congregation.

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- Organize meal delivery schedule for new pastor/family—find out likes/dislikes, dietary restrictions. Arrange for delivery observing hygiene and distancing requirements.
- Organize gift card pounding—again check with pastor for favorite or helpful places, or give cards to local places to help introduce the pastor to the community.
- Plan and facilitate virtual gatherings (cottage meetings) for introduction to church participants. These could also take place in the yard of a home with a very small, properly distanced group. Think about ways persons and families might share an introduction to who they are with the pastor, prior to an actual meeting.
- Organize drive by “waves” at specific hours and days for families to greet new pastor/family
- Work with new pastor to create a First 100 Days plan for beginning ministry. Include other helpful voices in this conversation—new members, community leaders, informal congregational influencers.
- See other suggestions on [50 Ways to Welcome a New Pastor](#), and adapt for social distancing requirements.