

Liturgy for the Closing of a Church

NOTE: *This service may be readily adapted to church amalgamation.*

The circumstances surrounding the closing of each church are different. Some churches are closed with joy, for the burden of keeping them open fell on a few shoulders, and all are aware that this was the appropriate time for closure. But in some faith communities the decision to close a church divided the congregation and was bitterly opposed until the end. There will be much grief and upset where division has been a factor. The liturgy will reflect the situation. This liturgy includes elements of joy and grief, and the creative liturgist will craft her/his service order accordingly. There are other church-closing liturgies. The liturgist should consult them and use them as necessary. (See, for example, *Celebrate God's Presence: "Resources for Marking the Closure of a Church,"* pages 706–709.)

Prelude

Centring Song or Hymn

Time of Silence

Call to Worship

God, whose creative glory we see in the rushing wind and the swirling waters,
and whose love is revealed in the smile of a child,
will remain with us.

God, whom we have discovered in the scriptures, and who has discovered us,
and who comes clear to us in Jesus and in the lives of the saints,
will remain with us.

God, whom we encounter in the worship and service of faith communities,
whose Spirit is within the pastoral caring and the justice-seeking of this church,
will remain with us.

God, gracefully known in the hard places of our earthly life's journey,
and who laughs and celebrates joyfully with us here,
will remain with us.

God, who will be with us as this life ends,
who is with us in time and beyond time,
will remain with us.

Let us worship our loving and faithful God.

Significant Words from the Hebrew and Christian Scriptures

Words of certainty from the apostle Paul:

Neither death, nor life...nor things present, nor things to come...nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

(Romans 8:38–39)

Words of compassion from the psalmist:

Even though I walk through the darkest valley, I fear no evil; for you are with me; your rod and your staff—they comfort me. (Psalm 23:4)

Words of adventure from Genesis:

Now the Lord said to Abram, “Go from your country and your kindred and your father’s house to the land that I will show you...I will bless you, and make your name great.”

(Genesis 12:1–2)

Words of thanksgiving from a gospel writer:

Then one of them, when he saw that he was healed, turned back, praising God...He prostrated himself at Jesus’ feet and thanked him. (Luke 17:15–16)

(The liturgist may add her/his own “words.”)

The words of scripture are good words for us, words we can trust.

We thank God for God’s eternally relevant Word. Amen.

*Hymn or Song***A Statement of Purpose**

We are gathered today to leave this church building which has been a faith community home for us. We are gathered to move on to << insert name >> faith community.

Litany of Thanksgiving

Leader: After the words “Loving God” the response is “We give you thanks.”

Worship leader (*at front of church*): The baptismal font, the communion table, the pulpit, this whole worship space, enable us to thankfully remember the countless services of worship and sacraments celebrated in this place, and to bring to mind the ministers and lay leaders who have led worship. (*time of silent remembering*)

For this worship space, Loving God,

We give you thanks.

Board chair or other person in a leadership role (*with hand on the front pew or chair*):

These pews/chairs and the worshippers here today are reminders of the congregations who have gathered over the years for the Sunday services, funerals, weddings, and other celebrations that have taken place here. (*time of silent remembering*)

For worshippers over the years, Loving God,

We give you thanks.

(A table at the front of the church holds symbols of the life of the church.)

Sunday school student or leader: These crafts and pictures, these curriculum books and CDs, these Christmas-pageant clothes are reminders of the hundreds of students who over the years have begun their Christian journey in this place. (*time of silent remembering*)

For wonder-full young persons, Loving God,

We give you thanks.

United Church Women leader or member: This jellied salad, this coffee urn, and this petition for << insert appropriate words >> bring to mind the many happy times of eating, learning, and working together. *(time of silent remembering)*

For a caring and giving fellowship, Loving God,

We give you thanks.

Study-group leader or member: This Bible and this study-group material remind us of much laughter, much earnest discussion, many good friendships forged as we met together. *(time of silent remembering)*

For learning and for friendship around the table, Loving God,

We give you thanks.

(The choir sings a verse of a favourite hymn or song.)

Choir member: This song reminds us of the congregation, the choir members, the organists, the pianists, and all the other musicians who have proclaimed their faith here in hymns and songs. *(time of silent remembering)*

(Sung) For voices in harmony, for voices united, Loving God,

We give you thanks.

Building-committee member: This hammer, these drill bits are symbols of the many hours dedicated men and women put in over the years to maintain this building. *(time of silent remembering)*

For hard work inside and outside the church, Loving God,

We give you thanks.

Worship leader: We come together with so many good and treasured memories, but with a strong sense of grief at saying farewell to this hallowed place.

We come together, also, with great hope for continuing our life of faith at << insert name of faith community you will be joining or of new place of worship >>.

For the life of this faith community which will continue on, Loving God,

We give you thanks.

Hymn or Song

Prayer of Approach

Eternal God,

**God of the present time, of ages past and of all the ages that are to be,
we worship you.**

Loving God,

**God of the compassionate act and of selfless caring,
we welcome you.**

God of the church,

**who brings us together to worship, to learn, and to serve,
we respond to you.**

God, whose will is revealed in Jesus Christ,
who proclaimed the just and sharing way,
who accepted the unaccepted,
and whose unswerving love took him to the cross,
we glorify you. Amen.

A Time of Remembering

During this time members of the faith community share treasured memories. The persons sharing should represent the range of age and gender, years of service, and areas of worship and service of the church being closed. The sharing time should be no more than two minutes per person and no more than 20 minutes in all. It would be good if some of the sharing is done by families together. Some people may be uncomfortable or unable to share their memories; they may ask someone else to speak for them.

During the sharing, photographs of the life of the church may be projected on a screen. The memories might include

- a service that affected a member in a special way
- a wedding or funeral for a well-loved family member or friend
- a fun Sunday school story
- a humorous story of church life
- a wonderful church meal
- a time of serving in the local community
- a life-changing encounter with a minister or church member
- an inspirational moment in a worship service or in a Bible-study or learning group
- a musical or choir experience

This verbal and visual sharing of memories will be followed by a brief time of sharing memories with those around you.

This prayer to make holy (hallow) these memories, might follow.

Loving God,

We offer you our memories of this << insert name >> faith community, so dear to our hearts.

We offer you the memories that we have heard.

We offer you the memories that we have expressed.

We offer you the memories that we keep deep within ourselves.

As you have blessed us in the listening and in the telling,

So you will bless us as we bring them to mind and share them in the coming days.

We pray in the name of Jesus Christ, who told wonderful stories and shared his experience with his disciples. Amen.

Letting Go the Hard Feelings

Hard feelings often arise from the closure of a church and the breakup and scattering of a faith community. This service is not for reviving old arguments about whether the church should close or to name those who were instrumental in its closing. Members should try to let go feelings that have held them captive and to look toward a revived life of faith within another church or faith community. The following prayer encourages the letting go of negative feelings—some of which may be deeply held and could be detrimental to congregants' future life of faith and the life of faith of the churches to which they will go.

If this is a natural and happy closing, the following prayer will be left out.

A Prayer of Letting Go

There is anger that you have expressed around the closing of this church, there is anger you have held tight within yourselves.

We let our anger go, we accept Christ's way of renewal and peace.

There is inaction that has held you back, there is apathy that has bound you in the closing of this church.

We let our apathy and inaction go, we are ready to work with new Christian friends in a new situation.

There is a sense of "What might have been," that you have clung to, a reluctance to face the realities of the faith community.

We let the old possibilities go, we are ready to grasp fresh possibilities as members of another faith community.

There is a clinging to familiar patterns of worship, a clinging to familiar ways of serving in the community.

We let our patterns go, we are ready to serve with new friends in new ways.

We will now have two minutes of silent reflection. During this time you may offer God the feelings, emotions, and attitudes that you wish to let go. We trust God will accept them and deal gracefully with them. (time of reflection)

A possible action here might be the burning of the ballot forms that were used when the decision to close the church was made: the ballots are burned...there is silence until the flames are extinguished.

Feelings have burned hot and strong among the members of this faith community.

The cooling Spirit of God's peace is among us now. Amen.

Words of Assurance

God hears our deepest feelings of heart and mind and spirit and has heard you this morning/afternoon.

We will continue to offer these feelings as we let go this faith community.

God will continue to listen to us.

God will go with you in your new ventures of life and faith, God is eternally to be trusted. God's peace, which passes all knowledge and understanding, will be your peace.

Thanks be to God. Amen.

Bible Readings

Genesis 12:1–9 (*Abraham goes to new territory in faith.*)
 Ruth 1 (*Ruth risks a change of family and place.*)
 Psalm 16 (*Confidence in God*)
 Psalm 46 (*God is with us.*)
 Psalm 103 (*Merciful and loving God*)
 Isaiah 40:1–11 (*Words of hope and comfort*)
 Isaiah 43:1–7 (*Do not be afraid.*)
 Isaiah 66:1–2 (*Don't worry about the building.*)
 Matthew 6:25–34 (*Do not worry; God cares.*)
 Matthew 25:34–40 (*Who do we care for?*)
 Luke 9:57–62 (*Do not look back.*)
 John 15:1–11 (*The vine and the branches*)
 Acts 17:22–34a (*God does not live in temples.*)
 Ephesians 2:17–22 (*One in Christ*)
 1 Peter 2:4–10 (*Building the faith community*)
 1 Corinthians 1:10–17 (*No divisions!*)

*Anthem or Song**Sermon or Reflection**Hymn or Song*

The sacrament of holy communion may be celebrated.

A Statement: The Church Is Closed

Minister: Today we have celebrated with thanksgiving the life and work of the faith community of << insert name >>. It has served as a witness to God's presence for << insert number >> years. It has provided refuge, comfort, and challenges for God's people. It has served for generations the faithful people of this community.

Presbytery representative: This building, dedicated and named << insert name >> together with the land on which it stands, and all objects remaining in it, we now commend to other purposes. We declare that as of << insert date >> it is no longer the place of meeting of a congregation of The United Church of Canada.

A Prayer of Moving on in Faith

When the chosen people left the land of Egypt for the uncertainty of the wilderness,
You, O God, went with them. You inspired and directed Moses and the people to the Promised Land.

You will be with us now as we move on.

When the prophets knew for certain that the old values and traditions would no longer serve your purpose, nor bring closer your realm,

You, O God, showed the doubters a new way, and revealed fresh opportunities to the closed-minded.

Ever-faithful God, you will be with us as we move on.

When Jesus realized that the trusted structures and the traditional leaders could no longer serve your purpose, when Jesus knew it was time for a change,

You, O God, were at the heart of his ministry, you sustained him all the way to the cross.

We move on to fresh ways of worship,

We move on to serve in << insert name >> church/new faith communities.

We move on to work with new partners to build up the life of the United Church and of the whole church of Jesus Christ.

With you, we move on to strive for justice and peace in our local community and throughout the world (with the Mission and Service Fund).

We move on to sing the familiar hymns with familiar friends,

With you we move on to sing new songs with new friends. Amen.

The Lord's Prayer, spoken or sung (*Voices United* 959)

An Offering of Symbols

Given by the closing church to the faith community/communities receiving their members.

The significance of this act is to promote the reality and continuity of the faith community in another place, with other persons. The symbols may be as large as a font or a stained glass window or as small as a Sunday school chair or a saucepan from the kitchen.

A Time of Welcoming

Members of the congregation receiving members and adherents from the closing church will welcome them. The minister and board chair or equivalent will speak warm and encouraging words.

A New Creed (*Voices United* 918)

A statement of belief which unites and defines

Hymn or Song

Commissioning

God remains with us,

Though we let go of our cherished place.

God remains with us,

Though we sing new songs and worship in new ways.

God remains with us,

Though we serve in different ways and pursue different causes.

God remains with us,

Though we find new friends in our new congregation.

God's love remains with us,

God's justice will inspire us,

God's realm will call us to action.

God is eternally for you and with you.

Thanks be to God!

Blessing

God of Ruth the adventurer,

Be with us.

God of Jesus, fearless and faithful one,

Be with us.

Holy Spirit, forming and reforming faith community,

Be with us.

Song

Walk to the New Church: members of the closing church and receiving church together. Books, pictures, objects of faith, and useful items from the closing church are carried by the members of the two faith communities.

or

Share A Meal: If most of the members and adherents will be received by one local church then they might go to the receiving church for a meal. If the membership is to be dispersed then a final meal will follow the worship service in this place.

Hymns and Songs**in *Voices United***

374 Come and Find the Quiet Centre
 236 Now Thank We All Our God
 274 Your Hand, O God, Has Guided
 558 We Gather Here to Bid Farewell
 649 Walk with Me
 602 Blest Be the Tie That Binds
 639 One More Step Along the World I
 Go
 651 Guide Me, O Thou Great Jehovah
 633 Bless Now, O God, the Journey
 601 The Church of Christ in Every Age
 420 Go to the World
 421 Lead On, O Cloud of Presence
 422/423 God Be with You till We Meet
 Again
 690 From the Slave Pens of the Delta
 806 O God, Our Help in Ages Past
 884 You Shall Go Out with Joy
*And others that resonate with the theme
 of the service*

Hymns and Songs in *More Voices*

173 Put Peace into Each Other's Hands
 169 When Hands Reach Out Beyond
 Divides
 154 Deep in Our Hearts
 115 Behold, Behold, I Make All Things
 New
 90 Don't Be Afraid
 84 In You There Is a Refuge
 79 Spirit, Open My Heart
 65 When We Are Tested
 62 There Is Room for All
 42 Praise God for This Holy Ground
 34 All Is Done for the Glory
 14 Where Two or Three Are Gathered
 7 Gather Us In
 2 Come All You People
*And others that resonate with the theme
 of the service*

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