

Saying good-bye to my congregation

I had to make room for conversations of thanks, forgiveness, love, and good-bye.

by [Peter Ilgenfritz](#) in the [November 6, 2019](#) issue



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It was mid-September, just a few days after the congregation had received my letter letting them know I'd be leaving my position as pastor at the end of December. I'd served the congregation for 24 years. I wasn't worn out or burnt out, but I felt called to discover the next chapter of my life and ministry. I felt like I did my senior year of high school: that I'd completed my story here and was excited—and terrified—to discover the new story that was beckoning me.

I met for coffee with Sharon, a church member who had known me a long time, and shared with her how I'd made my decision to leave and what I hoped might come next. Before I could run off to my next appointment, she said, "It sounds like you want to spend this fall worrying about what you're going to do next year. But I have another thought. What if instead you were present here this fall with us? I mean, what if you were present with your grief and the work of letting go? That would be

the best preparation for you and for us for whatever comes next. In January you'll know what you need to do."

I sat back in my chair. I told her that her advice sounded like the gospel. I always know it's a gospel word when my first reaction is "I don't like this," my second "I don't want to do this," and my third "This is so true and exactly what I need to believe and do." I wondered if I had enough faith to do it.

As a pastor I'd supported many parishioners in their times of grief, but I hadn't always been attentive to my own. I hadn't always done the endings in my own life as well as I wanted. I needed someone to show me how to be present in this time.

And then I thought about Roger. Several years earlier Roger was told that he had but a few months to live. He'd lived a long and rich life, but he had one more thing he wanted to do: he wanted to use his last months for saying good-bye well. Propped in his living room chair with a view of the birds fluttering at the feeder and a cherry tree blooming in pink petals, he invited his family and friends in for conversations of thank you, forgiveness, love, and good-bye.

Roger had asked me to sit with him for one of those conversations. He shared that he felt bad about something that he said or didn't say to me years ago. I saw how the sharing left him released and free. I felt a deeper connection between us now that something had been cleared away. Roger gave me the model I was looking for.

For the next months, I cleared some days on my calendar each week to make room for conversations of thank you, forgiveness, love, and good-bye. I scheduled final gatherings with the groups at church I worked with for similar conversations. It was a time for us to have the conversations we'd been postponing—about where we had been hurt, and where we were hurting, and where we needed God's grace.

These sessions were a chance to reflect on the difference we've made in each other's lives. I was struck by how the gifts we pass on are not only the ones we are intentional about, like a sermon, but are in the way we walk through our days.

I met with one woman who years earlier had asked for her granddaughter to be baptized. We said no at the time because we had a rule requiring the child's parents to be members. The church's rules had changed over the years, but the hurt still remained decades later. An ending opened the opportunity for acknowledgment of the hurt, an offering of apology, and a commitment to continue to grow and change.

Just as important as the sharing of individual stories was making room for grace myself. I'd been a highly successful "fixer" in my ministry and always had one more trick to try, one more tweak to offer in order to bring about a solution. But as I neared the conclusion of my ministry in that place, something new was required. I was forced to let things be, without attempting a fix.

I needed to learn to be present with things as they were, not as they were supposed to be or as I wanted them to be. I learned that completion is not in a final flurry of fixing; grace provides the completion that is needed. I knew more than ever before how much I needed God's grace to hold me and the congregation.

On the final Sunday, I asked the members of the congregation for their forgiveness, and they asked me for theirs. Something had happened in the past months of conversations that made these words real. I walked down the center aisle, tearful, and with my heart full. It was in some ways a messy ending, as endings perhaps always are. But it was a good ending.

A version of this article appears in the print edition under the title "Finishing well."