

On Saying Goodbye to Your Pastor

By Pastor Stephen Rasmusson, Winds of the Prairie Ministries, Ivanhoe area
March 2016

Farewell. 'Till we meet again. Later. Go with God.

Saying goodbye is a spiritual practice. And like many spiritual practices, it does not pretend to be easy. Even though life is full of goodbyes, it does not mean that it is easier with practice. Even when we are surrounded by the powerful Easter promises of resurrection and new life, parting always feels like a moment eternally trapped in Holy Saturday, when Hope lies in the tomb and resurrection is not yet. It is a time of confusion for some, anger for others, hope for others, and intense grief for others still. It doesn't help that we Minnesotans are noted for the "long" goodbye.

When a pastor leaves, the process of saying goodbye is even more difficult. The years of spiritual direction, the bedside visits, the moments of celebration and sorrow, of hurt and rejoicing that have shaped each of our experiences together betray the best and worst of human nature. Your pastor has had the privilege of presenting the person of Jesus in word and deed. And your pastor has shown you the deep brokenness of humans who dare to stand in the presence of God.

1. REJOICE: Recall the many times that you have been touched by a new insight into the grace and love of God that have been shown in the teaching and life of your pastor. Don't be afraid to say thank you in person or in a note to your leaving pastor. These moments will carry the spirit of your pastor into deeper service in Christ's name. Our church is a worldwide church, and your former pastor will bring a part of you into the new call. Rejoice that others will be blessed with the unique gift of grace proclaimed through her or his preaching and ministry.

2. RECONCILE: Hopefully your pastor has taught you how to repent, and to accept apologies. Reconciliation is at the center of all human relationships before Christ. We forgive as we have been forgiven. If there is any sorrow for brokenness in the relationship, now is the time to set it right through forgiveness and repentance.

3. RESPECT: Your pastor has had the privilege of serving for a period of time as the person who holds the official office of pastor for you and your friends and family. It is helpful to respect the person of your pastor by respecting the office that he or she has held. When your pastor takes leave, the office stays. This means that, though you will continue to pray for and love the person who is leaving, you do not call on your former pastor to visit you when you are ill, have a crisis, need a funeral or a wedding performed, or the like. The new pastor, the person God will call to fill the "Office of the Pastor" will bring the word of grace into those situations for you.

4. REMEMBER: God is good – all the time. As you reflect in future months and years on the work of God in your faith community when your leaving pastor was among you, do so with an eye to the future. God will have new ventures ahead, new visions of service and deepening of faith, new opportunities that will come with your new pastoral leadership. Look for the hand of God at work in your faith community's past, so that you can more easily see the Spirit in your future.

And finally, don't forget the words at the center of the Lutheran Reformation tradition – Soli Deo Gloria – To God only is the praise. Praise God from whom all blessings flow – now and forever.