Covenant Commission:

Disbanding: Steps for Closing Well



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# When is it Time?

Like all living things, congregations experience a life cycle, with a birth, a middle and an end. These changes may happen slowly over centuries or much faster. Sometimes it can be difficult to identify the reasons why a congregation may no longer be viable, but often it is due to changes in the surrounding area, such as shifting demographics, social trends, escalating maintenance costs, fewer volunteers and dwindling finances. The decision to disband is often difficult and emotional. It is important to remember that the work of closing well, is a special type of ministry. Those who find themselves carrying out this work are called to oversee the faithful “scattering of seeds” which will be the ongoing legacy of their community of faith. This is a special and very important aspect of congregational ministry.

Although no one wants to close pre-maturely, leaving the decision too late can lead to rushed decisions and missed opportunities. Regularly reviewing a congregation’s financial viability, volunteer strength, energy levels, and sense of purpose (living faith story) helps identify when it may be time to start preparing to disband, amalgamate with another congregation or exploring re-development options. Note that according to the regional council’s property policy, in the case of amalgamation, a congregation will normally take all of its asset into the newly formed congregation. The formula for distribution of assets following disbanding is also detailed in the policy.

# Deciding to Disband as a Congregation

1. The governing body makes a decision to call a congregational meeting to consider making a request to disband. Notice of the meeting, and its purpose, is read during public worship for two Sundays. The meeting may take place the next day (Monday) or any time after that.

## Quorum for the meeting:

A meeting of the congregation or pastoral charge may take place only if a minimum number of full members is present, as follows:

1. for congregations or pastoral charges with 100 or more full members, at least 20 full members must be present;
2. for congregations or pastoral charges with between 30 and 99 full members, at least 10 full members must be present; and
3. for congregations or pastoral charges with fewer than 30 full members, at least 1/3 of the full membership must be present. (Manual 2019, B.5.5)
4. If the congregation decides to disband, a request is sent to the Covenant Commission of the Regional Council. The congregation may propose a date for the final worship service. It is important to leave enough time to complete the work and to celebrate the ministry of the congregation.
5. An official disbanding date will be set after all property has been sold, and a completed copy of the Disbanding - Information and Asset Disbursement Form Instructions has been received by the Covenant Commission.
6. Consultation with the Regional Council and covenant commission is encouraged throughout the disbanding process. The Minister for Congregational Support and Mission is the staff person who can assist you.

## Pastoral Charge Name:

In a multipoint pastoral charge, where one or more points are remaining open, consideration should be given, in conversation with the remaining points, to the name of the pastoral charge. If the name of the pastoral charge is to be changed then there are a number of things to be done by the remaining points.

1. Send a copy of the motion for the name change to the regional council;
2. After the region approves the change, contact Canada Revenue Agency to have the name change recognized;
3. Change letterhead, website, etc.

# Things to do Before the Disbanding Date

## Honour Your History:

* Set the date for the last worship service and decommissioning of the building. Consider who you might invite.
* Plan a celebration honouring the years of faithful ministry, or hold a series of special events in the time leading up to the final service.
* Arrange for registers (baptism, wedding, burial, historic roll), minutes and other documents to be sent to the archives. (see resources for more information)

## Care for your Staff:

* If you have ministry personnel see **The Manual I.3.1.6** *Change Initiated by Community of Faith to End the Pastoral Relationship* (Questions? Contact your [Minister for Pastoral Relations](mailto:dblanchard@united-church.ca?subject=Disbandment%20-%20Ending%20the%20Pastoral%20Relationship))

**Note:** Proper notice (90 days) to all ministry personnel called or appointed starts after the approval of the Human Resources Commission

* Arrange appropriate severance packages for all lay staff. Remember that 90 days notice is the standard used in the United Church.
* Give proper notice to ADP
* Fill out Record of Employment forms, final tax documents etc.

## Care for your Members:

* Arrange for each member to receive a certificate of membership for transferring to a new community of faith. Discuss where members will worship after disbanding. Will they go in a group or groups to nearby congregations? Will they each go their own way? Consider visiting other congregations to explore options.
* Consult with members who are unable to make their own arrangements, or their decision makers, to ensure they are transferred to a new congregation for ongoing pastoral care and other aspects of congregational life.

## Care for your Finances:

* Ensure there are sufficient funds for all closing costs, for example payroll, celebration, building costs including possible demolition, transfer of records to the archives, paying out the year of your Annual Assessments, etc.
* Arrange to have Canada Post forward all mail to a designated Trustee for one year to ensure nothing is missed.
* Arrange for the final charitable tax return to be filed.
* Trustees need to send a letter to CRA requesting a “[voluntary revocation](https://www.canada.ca/en/revenue-agency/services/charities-giving/charities/operating-a-registered-charity/making-changes/request-voluntary-revocation.html)” of charitable status. This will prompt CRA to send the forms to file their final return. Do not complete this step until the assets have been disbursed, the bank account is empty and a disbanding date has been set by the regional council.
* Issue last donor receipts.
* Financial records need to be kept for seven years. Regional Council has arranged storage for financial records. Please ensure boxes are clearly labeled and a list of contents is attached. You can make arrangements to ship your last seven years of financial records to storage by contacting the regional office by calling 1-833-236-0280.

## Care for your Property:

* If you have a cemetery, make arrangements to transfer management to another organization such as the municipality.
* Consult with the regional council about the future of the land and buildings. If the decision is to sell the building, follow the appropriate steps for this process. (See Congregational Property Transactions below)
* Sort through all the furnishings and items belonging to the congregation. See if other United Churches have a need for anything, such as hymn books, laptops, chairs, banners etc. While remembering that trustees are responsible for ensuring fair market value is received, you may choose to have a silent auction for items that do not have a high resale value. You may not simply return items to donor families as this is not permitted by Canada Revenue (see [Consequences of returning donated property](https://www.canada.ca/en/revenue-agency/services/charities-giving/charities/policies-guidance/guidance-016-qualified-donees-consequences-returning-donated-property.html)).
* For any item with a higher retail value, such as a grand piano, solid silver or brass items etc. it is best to seek an appraisal and consult with the covenant commission before selling.

## Scatter Your Seeds:

* Upon disbanding, the assets of the congregation are disbursed according to the property policy of the Regional Council. This policy ensures that the resources of the congregation continue to benefit the ministries of the United Church of Canada.
* This can be a joyful experience as you see how the legacy of your congregation will continue to live on in new ways. This can be part of the celebration as you give thanks to God for the years of faithful stewardship that make it possible for the congregation to strengthen a variety of ministries within the United Church.
* Disbanding congregations are invited to make a proposal for the dispersal of a percentage of the total assets by directing them to specific ministries within the United Church of Canada. This includes, among other options: United Church congregations, church camps, outreach ministries, The United Church Foundation, and Mission and Service. This is your opportunity to direct a third of the assets toward ministries that reflect the interests and concerns of the congregation.

It should also be noted that: “A congregation may give an amount equal to the percentage of its previous year’s revenue that was donated to a non-United Church registered charity to that charity.” For example:

If, in the previous year, the congregation gave X dollars to the local hospice (a registered charity),

and this was equal to 1% of that year’s revenue,

then they may direct 1% of the closing funds to the same hospice.

This 1% is part of the percentage being directed by the congregation.

* Once the congregation has prepared its proposal for the appropriate percentage of its assets, this request is sent to the Regional Council Covenant Commission for review and consideration.
* Once all property has been sold and outstanding expenses have been paid, including the assessment for the current year and any amounts owing from previous years, the congregation completes the Disbanding - Information and Asset Disbursement Form Instructions. This is sent to the Covenant Commission for final review and approval, and a disbanding date is set.
* Upon receiving approval of disbursements and a disbanding date from the Covenant Commission the congregation pays any outstanding expenses, sends cheques to the United Church Ministries identified on the Disbursement form and a cheque payable to the Regional Council for the remaining percentage. This information is also tracked on the form and a copy is sent with the cheque to the Regional Council at PO Box 100, Carlisle, ON L0R 1H0.
* All property should be disposed of before the disbandment date. Any property that is remaining after the effective disbanding date becomes the responsibility of the Regional Council and the regional council will direct the trustees regarding such property.

## Sending Documents to Archives:

Records with permanent value should be deposited at the appropriate Regional Council Archives. Records set for transfer to the Archives should be recommended by the official board, or equivalent body, prior to their transfer. To make transferring of permanently valuable records to the Archives easier it is recommended that records be transferred at five year intervals whenever practical or when a particular book or register is full. Files must be transferred when a community of faith disbands.

Prior to the transfer, congregations should undertake the following steps to get their records ready:

* Always consult the [Regional Council Archivist](mailto:%20egreeno@united-church.ca?subject=Disbanding%20congregation%20files%20to%20transfer) before transferring records
* Based on consultation, provide a list of records being deposited
* Discard any duplicates
* Label and date file folders, registers and other volumes, and cartons
* Ensure that the [Communities of Faith Transfer Form](https://www.unitedchurcharchives.ca/wp-content/uploads/2019/10/Archives-Transfer-Form_communities-of-faith.pdf) is completely filled out for all cartons
* Place one copy of the form in each carton, label the top of the carton clearly with contents and date range, and retain a copy of the form in the congregation’s files for future reference.
* Do not mix the files of different committees, task forces, and officers.
* Do not transfer hanging files, just the inside manila file folders

Note: During Covid all boxes are being dropped off or shipped to the Regional Council office and need to be properly sealed.

~~Transfer the records to the Archives in person. If records need to be shipped via a courier or registered mail please~~[~~contact the Archives~~](https://www.unitedchurcharchives.ca/contact-us/)~~first.~~

Please consult the “[What Do the Archives Want](https://www.unitedchurcharchives.ca/wp-content/uploads/2019/10/What-Do-the-Archives-Want_2019.pdf)” and the “[Sample Retention Schedule](https://www.unitedchurcharchives.ca/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/Sample-Records-Schedule_Congregations.pdf)” sheet for information on records that should be transferred to the Regional Council Archives.

# Additional Resources

[The United Church Manual 2019](https://www.united-church.ca/sites/default/files/the-manual_2019.pdf)

[Trustees Handbook](https://www.united-church.ca/sites/default/files/resources/handbook_trustees.pdf)

[Service for Closing a Church](https://www.united-church.ca/sites/default/files/worship-ideas_worship_closure.pdf)

[Amalgamating – Steps for Beginning Well](https://wowrcucc.ca/wp-content/uploads/2019/09/WOW-CoF-Amalgamating-Steps-for-Amalgamating-Well.docx)

Disbanding - Information and Asset Disbursement Form Instructions

Considering Redevelopment (coming soon)

**Antler River Watershed Regional Council**

[Minister for Congregational Support and Mission](mailto:lallin@united-church.ca)

[ARW Property Policy](https://arwrcucc.ca/wp-content/uploads/2019/09/ARW-Property-Policy.docx)

[ARW Congregational Property Transactions](https://arwrcucc.ca/wp-content/uploads/2019/09/ARW-Congregational-Property-Transactions.docx)

**Horseshoe Falls Regional Council**

[Minister for Congregational Support and Mission](mailto:lallin@united-church.ca)

[HF Property Policy](https://hfrcucc.ca/wp-content/uploads/2019/09/HF-Property-Policy.docx)

[HF Congregational Property Transactions](https://hfrcucc.ca/wp-content/uploads/2019/09/HF-Congregational-Property-Transactions.docx)

**Western Ontario Waterways Regional Council**

[Minister for Congregational Support and Mission](mailto:jneff@united-church.ca)

[WOW Property Policy](https://wowrcucc.ca/wp-content/uploads/2019/09/WOW-Property-Policy.docx)

[WOW Congregational Property Transactions](https://wowrcucc.ca/wp-content/uploads/2019/09/WOW-Congregational-Property-Transactions.docx)

# Letter to Congregation – Option 1

*This letter is a template for you to customise. It could be sent with a tax-receipt, or included in a newsletter or pastoral letter at the time of the sale of the church building. It could come from the community of faith governance body, the minister, the stewardship committee, the treasurer, or whatever you think works best in your situation.*

Dear Friends,

It is difficult to say good-bye to a church building and to a community of faith. A church is a special place, a vessel that contains many powerful and meaningful memories – a spiritual home where we gathered to regularly worship together; the venue where we celebrated Christmas and the birth of Christ; the space where we gathered on Easter to proclaim that amid pain, grief and sadness, God does have the last word- and it is the word of life! As a community of faith, we witnessed baptisms and the beginning of Christian journeys, marriages where two people publicly declared their love and began new lives together, and where, hand in hand and arm in arm, we laid to rest our loved ones and committed them to God’s eternal care.

Nonetheless, we have made a decision, a difficult decision, but the right decision: to disband our community of faith.

Today I invite you to mourn this loss, but also to make an individual commitment that no matter where you choose to go to church, or even if for now you choose not to go anywhere, that you continue to live your faith, and have an impact in the world, in Jesus’ name. There are many ways you can choose to live your faith: regular worship and devotions, sharing your faith with others through witness and example, by good works, and by offering your gifts to those most in need.

With gratitude for all your past generosity, and with the desire to make it easier for you and your household to continue to have an impact with your financial gifts, I share the following information about ways that you can continue to transform and save lives, inspire meaning and purpose, and build a better world through the Mission & Service of the United Church. If you are becoming involved right away in a new community of faith, just ask them for offering envelopes or a form to sign up for Pre-Authorized Remittance (PAR).

If you are taking some time to consider your future involvement with a specific community of faith, you can continue to support the United Church’s shared work through Mission & Service directly. Here’s how:

To give on-line with a credit card, go to: <https://www.united-church.ca/donate>

Donate by phone using your Visa or MasterCard:  
 Toll-free: 1-800-268-3781 ext. 2738

Donate by cheque or money order to:  
 Philanthropy Unit  
 The United Church of Canada  
 3250 Bloor St. West, Suite 200  
 Toronto, ON M8X 2Y4

To change your PAR giving from this community of faith to Mission & Service directly, or to begin giving to Mission & Service directly through PAR (Pre-Authorized Remittance), please contact:

PAR Program Administrator  
 The United Church of Canada  
 3250 Bloor St. West, Suite 200  
 Toronto, Ontario M8X 2Y4  
 Tel: 1-800-268-3781 ext. 3152  
 Fax: 416-231-3103  
 E-mail: [par@united-church.ca](mailto:par@united-church.ca)

Again, thank you for your generosity.

# Letter to Congregation – Option 2

*This letter is a template for you to customise. It could be sent with a tax-receipt, or included in a newsletter or pastoral letter at the time of the sale of the church building. It could come from the community of faith governance body, the minister, the stewardship committee, the treasurer, or whatever you think works best in your situation.*

Dear Friends,

It is difficult to say good-bye to a church building to which we have grown so attached. For many of us, while we know that a church is more than the building, it is nonetheless a special place, a vessel that contains many powerful and meaningful memories – a spiritual home where we gathered to regularly worship together; the venue where we celebrated Christmas and the birth of Christ; the space where we gathered on Easter to proclaim that amid pain, grief and sadness, God does have the last word- and it is the word of life! This church is where we witnessed baptisms and the beginning of Christian journeys, marriages where two people publicly declared their love and began new lives together, and the place where at times, hand in hand and arm in arm, we laid to rest our loved ones and committed them to God’s eternal care. So yes, we know it is just a building, but we know it is also so much more.

Nonetheless, we have made a decision, a difficult decision, but the right decision: to move forward as a community of faith, but to close our building.

Today I invite you to mourn this loss, but also to make an individual commitment to live your faith, and have an impact in the world, in Jesus’ name. There are many ways to do this: regular worship and devotions, sharing your faith with others through witness and example, by good works, and by offering your gifts to those most in need.

With gratitude for all your past generosity, and with the desire to make it easier for you and your household to continue to have an impact with your financial gifts, we share the following information. You can continue to transform and save lives, inspire meaning and purpose, and build a better world through our shared denominational work Mission & Service. You can continue to support the mission and ministry of your community of faith with your regular offerings. Here’s how:

[add information about how regular offerings will be received. Ex. Offering plate, PAR, CanadaHelps, etc.]

If you would rather support Mission & Service directly.

To give on-line with a credit card, go to: <https://www.united-church.ca/donate>

Donate by phone using your Visa or MasterCard:  
 Toll-free: 1-800-268-3781 ext. 2738

Donate by cheque or money order to:  
 Philanthropy Unit  
 The United Church of Canada  
 3250 Bloor St. West, Suite 200  
 Toronto, ON M8X 2Y4

Again, thank you for your generosity.

# Letter to Donors

*This letter is a template for you to customise. It could be sent to donors who are not members or adherents of the community of faith, especially those who may be one-time donors through on-line giving. It could come from the community of faith governance body, the minister, the stewardship committee, the treasurer, or whatever you think works best in your situation.*

Dear friend,

*[option 1: disbanded]*

With gratitude for your generous donation to [name of community of faith] in the last year, we are writing to inform you that unfortunately our community of faith has disbanded. If you are inspired by the values and work of the United Church, we invite you to consider making future donations to the Mission & Service of The United Church of Canada. Mission & Service is how together we live out God’s love in our world.

To give on-line with a credit card go to: <https://www.united-church.ca/donate>

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 Toll-free: 1-800-268-3781 ext. 2738

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