

Big Picture Summary

A healthy timeline for congregations considering amalgamation often unfolds over a longer season (18-36 months), but sometimes circumstances require a **compressed 6-12-month process**. In that case, the key is to protect what makes a merger “work” in real life: **trust, transparency, and pastoral care**. Below is a **realistic, pastoral, and sustainable** 6-12-month timeline grounded in change-management best practices *and* congregational life realities.

Typical healthy timeline (compressed process):

When circumstances require a faster process, congregations can aim for a **6-12 month** arc from first discernment to a functioning merged ministry.

- **6 months:** best for “shared ministry / staged merger” where major property and governance decisions can be deferred
- **9 months:** workable for many two-congregation mergers with moderate complexity
- **12 months:** the healthiest “fast” option when property, staffing, or grief dynamics need more space

The goal is **trust before structure** and **relationship before resolution**.

Phase-by-Phase Timeline

Phase 1: Readiness & Discernment (Weeks 1-6)

“Are we even meant to be exploring this together?”

Key work (Weeks 1-6)

- Name realities honestly (attendance, finances, leadership capacity) and agree on a **shared problem statement** within the first 2-3 weeks
- Clarify *why* amalgamation is being considered (mission, sustainability, vitality— just survival) and draft a **one-page purpose statement**
- Meet early with Congregational Support Minister (CSM) to confirm **required steps and earliest possible effective dates**
- Run **2-3** visible trust-building actions (worship swaps, shared meals, pulpit exchange, joint service project) on a **biweekly** cadence

Healthy signs

- There is a **clear decision date**, but it is paired with a transparent process (no surprises)
- Space for grief, fear, and hope
- Leadership is curious, not defensive

Red flags

- "We have to decide *this month*" (compressed schedule without added communication and pastoral supports)
- One congregation driving the agenda
- Avoidance of emotional or historical issues

◆ **Outcome of this phase:** A shared sense that amalgamation is *worth exploring*, not a decision yet.

Phase 2: Relationship Building & Alignment (Weeks 7–16)

"Do we trust one another enough to become something new?"

Key work (Weeks 7-16)

- Intentional relational exercises (story-sharing, values conversations, worship together) at least **every 2 weeks**-not only in committee meetings
- Map differences in culture, theology, governance, and expectations and record them in a **shared 'differences & decisions' log**
- Compare amalgamation models (full merger, shared ministry first, staged approach) and select a **preferred model** by about **Weeks 12-14**
- Name power, identity, and loss early, and create a simple **communication rhythm** (e.g., weekly update + monthly town hall)

Healthy pace in a 6–12 month process

- Regular joint gatherings, not just meetings
- When conflict or anxiety surfaces, leaders **add support** (facilitation, listening circles, extra communication) rather than simply pausing indefinitely
- Naming what each congregation is afraid of losing

◆ **Outcome of this phase:** A **relational foundation** strong enough to carry difficult decisions later.

Phase 3: Decision to Amalgamate (Weeks 17-22)

"Are we choosing to do this?"

Key work (Weeks 17-22)

- Congregational-level discernment (not just board approval)
- Communicate transparently about risks, benefits, and unknowns using a **plain-language Q&A** and at least **2 open forums** before voting
- Formal votes according to polity/denominational requirements
- Draft a **merger framework / terms document** (model choice, governance approach, initial staffing approach, recommended launch date)

Healthy signs

- Decisions are grounded in discernment, not desperation
- Even those who disagree feel heard
- Leaders model calm, open communication

◆ **Outcome of this phase:** A **clear, shared commitment** to move forward together.

Phase 4: Design & Transition (Weeks 23-40)

"How will the new congregation actually work?"

Key work (Weeks 23-40)

- Governance and leadership structure design
- Ministry staffing and roles
- Worship patterns, communication practices, pastoral care systems
- Property decisions (often the most emotionally charged area): in a **12-month** process, aim to decide before launch; in a **6-month staged** process, agree on an **interim property plan** and a clear post-launch decision window
- Naming, branding, and identity creation
- Care plans for members who may choose not to continue

Important note:

This is where **fatigue often hits**. In a 6-12 month process, health is protected by building in **micro-pauses** and **visible milestones** (even when the calendar is tight):

- Short reset weeks (no major decisions) after key milestones
- Public celebrations (e.g., covenant service, shared communion, blessing of a new name) at 2–3 planned points
- Pastoral care check-ins running in parallel (listening circles, home/hospital visitation, follow-up for those who disengage)

◆ **Outcome of this phase:**

A functional *new* congregation—not just two combined systems.

Phase 5: Integration & Stabilization (Months 10-12 and the first year after launch)

“Are we becoming who we said we would be?”

Key work (Months 10-12 and the first year after launch)

- Run a **30/60/90-day** check-in process after launch (what to keep, what to change, what to stop)
- Support new leadership relationships with clear **decision rights**, meeting rhythms, and conflict-resolution pathways
- Rituals of closure and blessing for former congregations
- Re-vision beyond “getting through the merger” by setting **first-year ministry priorities** (e.g., at month 3 and again at month 9)

Healthy signs

- Honest reflection on what’s working and what isn’t
- Willingness to revise early decisions
- Growing sense of ownership of the new congregation

◆ **Outcome of this phase:**

The amalgamation becomes *identity*, not just *history*.

What Shortens or Lengthens the Timeline?

In a 6-12 month process, the question isn’t whether the timeline can be short—it’s what you **refuse to cut**. The items below help you move faster *without* skipping trust-building and pastoral care.

Things that shorten timelines healthily

- Strong pre-existing relationships
- Shared theology and worship culture
- Transparent finances
- Clear denominational guidance and support

Things that push a 6-month process toward 9-12 months (appropriately)

- Property complexity that must be resolved *before* launch (title, maintenance liabilities, sale/lease decisions)
- Historic conflicts or previous failed unions
- Strong congregational identities
- Unresolved grief or fear of loss

Taking **9-12 months** instead of **6** is not failure—it's often **wisdom** when the goal is a stable new ministry, not a rushed legal event.

A General Rule

If the timeline feels “tight,” it probably is.

If there's room for lament, laughter, and disagreement, you're closer to healthy pacing.
