



A Time for Everything

Opening Prayer

Merciful God, we humbly implore You to cast the bright beams of Your light upon Your Church that we, being instructed by the doctrine of the blessed apostles, may walk in the light of Your truth and finally attain to the light of everlasting life: through Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen.

How would you summarize this passage?

These words are full of wisdom about the way things work in this world. Every matter under heaven has an appointed time. This is true of people, farming, building, emotions, relationships, possessions, communication, conflict, and so on.

Besides what is specifically mentioned in verses 2-8, what else has an appointed season and time?

The simple answer is everything – every matter under heaven has an appointed season. This is true for our congregations as well. This could mean that certain programs and activities should stop. Some congregations in God's Church might also need to bring their ministries to an end. Sometimes we mourn this fact because things aren't like they used to be or because we think we aren't accomplishing as much. However, we should recognize that ending certain programs, activities, and ministries is just the way things go; after all, they are part of "every matter under heaven." With every ending comes a beginning of some sort; ending certain programs or activities can provide opportunities for new initiatives to take place, including a potential congregational partnership, which can be a great blessing.

How do we reconcile a congregation closing or ministry activities stopping if God has promised that His Church will endure and grow?

God makes many good promises to His people and His Church. He promises that the gate of Hades will not overcome His Church (Matt. 16:8). He also promises to continue to grow His Church and His people (Ez. 17:22-23). The Christian should find great comfort in these promises. We hold on to them tightly. And yet we should acknowledge that these promises are given to "the Church," not just a particular congregation. (For more on this, consider the [blog post](#) "Thinking about Church Growth.")

How do we know it's time to bring something to an end?

This question will be answered differently by different people in different contexts. However, there are a few helpful resources to consider. In addition to [The Partnership Project](#), make sure you visit with your district president and circuit visitor. They have resources and documents to help you navigate this topic. Also, Dr. Henry Cloud's book *Necessary Endings* could be helpful, especially chapters 5-6. The book considers "endings" in personal relationships and businesses.

While the book is not specifically written for congregations, many points can be adapted for congregational settings. For example, Dr. Cloud poses four general questions that could be helpful for congregations thinking about ending a program, a ministry, or even a congregation itself. These questions could be asked in terms of growth (new people), effectiveness (spiritual growth of those involved), staffing

(volunteer recruitment or paid staff), and opportunity (difficulty of making it work). The four questions (modified for congregational use) are:

1. What's been happening recently (say, the past 3 years)?
2. Is that good or good enough?
3. Is there anything in place that would make it different in the year to come?
4. If not, am I willing to sign up for more of the same?

A final point worth noting: In first-hand accounts gathered for The Partnership Project, those who explored ending something to create a partnership or closing a congregation often felt like they should have made the decision sooner. Ecclesiastes 3 prompts us to recognize that there's a time when we should be having these important conversations.

If it's time to end a ministry in the Church, how can that be done well?

A good example for us is John the Baptist in John 3:22-30. Read and consider this account. John's disciples complained that all the people were now going to Jesus and His disciples. John recognizes that the Spirit moves where He pleases. John's joy in ministry is completed. He declares, "He must increase, but I must decrease." While this situation is obviously different from what congregations face today, notice that John's focus is on Jesus. It's not about John. And it's not about us, or our convenience, or our building, or our congregation. It's all about Jesus. We should do things in such a way that we use the resources God gives us to promote the mission of God in the best way that we can. Sometimes, that means that something has to end. When it does, other congregations and ministries can be blessed with new members and additional resources. If this happens, it's good to grieve what is ending and to thank God for what He's done throughout the history of the closing congregation, program or ministry.

What can you or your congregation do now, considering this Word from God?

Answers will vary. Responses might range from praying for the Lord's wisdom to asking the four questions above at the next church leadership meeting to doing a book study of *Necessary Endings*.

With whom can you talk about the "season" of your Church and how to move forward in a way that advances the ministry of the Gospel?

Answers will vary. Maybe a discussion needs to be started with congregational leadership. Perhaps the circuit visitor could be invited to walk your group through the documents available on The Partnership Project webpage or the Circuit Visitor Manual. Or an email or call to your district president might be the best next step. Even as you have this conversation, you'll want to be in contact with pastors, elders, or council members of other area LCMS congregations about exploring a partnership that will continue the mission of God for your people and/or in your location.

Closing Prayer

Direct us, O Lord, in all our doings with Your most gracious favor, and further us with Your continual help, that in all our works begun, continued, and ended in You we may glorify your holy name and finally, by Your mercy, obtain eternal salvation; through Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen.