

LEARNING TO STAY

Guide for Leaders—Lent 2026



A Note to Those Leading This Season

This guide is not a script. It is a posture.

This guide is designed to support those leading worship, preaching, prayer, music, and community life throughout Lent 2026. Its purpose is not to prescribe exact words or formats, but to shape a shared posture, a consistent tone, and a trustworthy arc across the season.

This Lent is not about producing outcomes.

It is about forming communities that can remain present—with God, with one another, and with truth—without rushing toward resolution.

The Purpose of This Guide

This guide helps leaders create a season-wide experience of restrained, honest, faithful worship.

The goal is not intensity for its own sake, innovation, or emotional effect.
The goal is steadiness.

Across the season, worship is designed to feel:

- grounded rather than urgent,
- spacious rather than crowded,
- truthful rather than polished,
- patient rather than efficient.

If at any point you feel unsure, underprepared, or tempted to over-function, *that discomfort is not a failure*. It is often a sign that the season's formation is working on leaders as well as congregations.

The Core Theme: Learning to Stay

Lent 2026 is shaped around a simple, demanding practice: learning to stay.

This theme is grounded in Luke's Gospel, particularly Luke 9:51:

"When the days drew near for him to be taken up, he set his face to go to Jerusalem."

From this moment forward, Jesus does not rush, retreat, or avoid what lies ahead. He stays with truth, with love, with people, and with God—through misunderstanding, resistance, grief, and ultimately the cross.

The season invites communities to practice the same posture:

- staying when escape is tempting,
- staying when clarity is unavailable,
- staying when the work feels unfinished.

Leadership Posture for the Season

Leaders are invited to embody the season before explaining it.

This Lent calls for:

- fewer words, chosen carefully;
- fewer explanations, offered humbly;
- fewer emotional cues, allowing people to notice their own responses.

Leaders will most likely be tempted to:

- perform confidence,
- resolve tension prematurely,
- rush toward clarity or application,
- fill silence with reassurance.

Resist those impulses.

If you feel underprepared, uncertain, or exposed, you are not failing.

You are participating in the very formation this season invites. You are safe in Christ's hands. You are also a model for your people. When your people see you following Christ in this way, they will be comforted in their apprehension.

Tone Progression Across the Season

The season follows a deliberate tonal arc from Ash Wednesday through Holy Saturday. This progression is not rigid; let the texts and your community's capacity guide the pace.

Early weeks:

- establish safety, rhythm, and trust;
- introduce silence gently;
- normalize not knowing.

Mid-Lent:

- allow tension to remain unresolved;
- deepen honesty in prayer and reflection;
- resist the urge to "balance" lament with hope too quickly.

Late Lent:

- narrow focus;
- simplify language;
- allow grief, resistance, and loss to stand without commentary.
- Adjust this pacing as needed for your community's capacity.

Holy Saturday:

- hold silence without explanation;
- do not resolve;
- do not rush toward Easter language.

Intensity increases not to overwhelm, but to prepare hearts honestly for resurrection without skipping the cross.

What This Lent Is Not Asking of Leaders

This Lent is not asking leaders to:

- add more programming,
- manufacture emotional experiences,
- solve theological tensions,
- keep people energized,
- make everything feel meaningful every week.

This is not a performance season.

It is not a self-improvement plan.

It is not a test of leadership effectiveness.

Faithfulness this season looks like remaining attentively engaged, not achieving visible success.

Safety and Staying (Important)

“Learning to stay” is not an invitation to remain in harm.

For some, the language of staying may echo experiences of:

- abusive relationships,
- unsafe communities,
- spiritual manipulation.

Leaders should name clearly:

Staying with God and truth sometimes includes boundaries, distance, rest, and asking for help. Staying does not mean enduring harm. It means refusing denial and remaining faithful to what is real.

When the Room Feels Quiet or Resistant

There will be weeks when:

- silence feels awkward,
- participation is low,
- people seem disengaged,
- anxiety rises in the room,
- someone asks, “Can we do something more upbeat?”

When this happens, consider:

- Saying less, not more.
- Keeping the next instruction simple.
- Naming what is happening without fixing it: “We don’t need to rush this.”
- Shortening readings or reflections rather than adding explanation.
- Holding silence 10–20 seconds longer than you want to.
- Returning to one grounding practice (breath, a repeated response, a simple refrain).

Flatness does not always mean failure. Sometimes it means people are no longer being carried by performance or momentum. Naming what is happening—like holding up a mirror—can be helpful.

Leader Scripts (Use Verbatim if Helpful)

Leaders may find it helpful to have words ready when uncertainty arises:

- “We don’t have to solve this today. We’re practicing staying with it.”
- “If you’re not sure what you feel or think, you’re not behind. That is part of the work. This is often where we see God face to face.”
- “Silence is not empty here. It is one way we listen to Christ speaking to us as individuals and as a community of faith.”

These phrases are not explanations. They are anchors.

What to Avoid This Season

Be attentive to habits that work against the season's formation:

- over-explaining scripture,
- turning lament into lesson,
- using silence as punishment or pressure,
- forcing vulnerability,
- rushing to application to relieve discomfort,
- inserting Easter language too early.

Trust that restraint itself is doing work.

How to Recognize Faithfulness This Lent

Success this season is not measured by:

- attendance,
- enthusiasm,
- clarity,
- positive feedback.

Instead, look for signs such as:

- deeper listening,
- fewer rushed conclusions,
- more honest prayers,
- gentler speech,
- patience with ambiguity,
- willingness to remain present.

If people leave Lent more attentive, more compassionate, more patient with themselves and others, then the season has done its work.

A Word to Leaders

You do not need to carry this season alone.

Some weeks will feel thin. Some gatherings will feel unresolved. Some Sundays may feel unresolved. That does not mean nothing is happening.

Formation often looks like steadiness, not momentum.

Choose one small practice for yourself this Lent—ten minutes of quiet, a weekly walk, one honest conversation—so you can lead from steadiness rather than strain.

Above all, remember:
you are also learning to stay.

These Lenten Resources are made by Rev. Matthew J. Skolnik.

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