

Episcopal Diocese of Eastern Michigan



TRANSITION MINISTRY:

When the Priest is Leaving

Some guidance for Wardens and Vestries

If your Rector or Priest-in-Charge informs you that she or he is leaving your parish to take a new position or to retire, it can feel like a blow to the gut. It's very common to experience a variety of feelings ranging from bewilderment and betrayal to joy and excitement about new things for the priest and for the congregation. In the midst of dealing with the emotional impact of such news, wardens and vestries have particular responsibilities to which they must attend during this period of transition. Here are some things you'll need to know as well as some tasks that are yours to accomplish.

Upon receiving the news:

- Pray. Pray for yourselves, the priest and her/his family, and your congregation.
- Have a conversation with the priest about the reasons leading up to the decision to leave, if you haven't already. It's important that these reasons be clearly understood and communicated so that rumors or misunderstandings don't develop. Consider what, if anything, about these reasons needs to be addressed within the vestry or the wider congregation and how that might be accomplished.
- Treat the news as confidential until the congregation has been informed. It is important that the priest be allowed to share this news with the congregation her/himself. You can immediately begin communication with the Bishop's Office and staff, however.
- When it is time to inform the congregation, send two letters:
 - a) One from the priest, expressing gratitude for your mutual ministry and the priest's intent to end the ministerial relationship with the parish. It is helpful to share information about future plans.
 - b) One from the wardens, setting forth the vestry's plan for leave-taking and the parish's future, expressing affirmation and hope.
 - c) Typically these letters are mailed on the same day or the day after an announcement is made to the congregation in the context of a principal worship service.
- Be prepared for a variety of reactions from the congregation. Some may be unpleasant. This is an important time to be sensitive to people who may be upset or in pain, gleeful and gloating, or numb to this news. Modeling good boundaries and

witnessing to your respect for the priest's ministry is important to helping the congregation understand how to respond with grace and goodwill. Resist getting pulled into conversations that either tear down the departing priest or speculate about the next one. Stay present in the transition and focus on helping the priest and congregation have a healthy and hope-filled separation.

- The priest may have some forms that require collaboration from staff and/or vestry related to Church Pension Fund or other details; make yourself available to assist as needed.
- Be prepared to receive records of a sensitive pastoral nature that need to remain in your care during the transition and perhaps afterward. The priest will prepare a summary of basic information about shut-ins and other pastoral concerns that will need shepherding during transition. These can be passed on to a pastoral care committee or interim priest as applicable.
- Understand that while you will remain friends, after the priest's departure you will **no longer do pastoral or priestly things with her/him** (even in the interim period), such as having her/him lead a service or preach at a wedding, baptism or funeral. The priest will come back for a parish event rarely if at all, **only** at the new priest's invitation, and **then** in the capacity as a former priest of the congregation.
- Review Church Pension Fund records and ensure payments are up-to-date as soon as possible following the priest's departure.
- Prepare a thank-you and/or farewell piece for the parish newsletter.
- Begin to make arrangements for clergy leadership following the priest's departure. One of the wardens should contact the Canon to the Ordinary to schedule a meeting with the vestry as soon as possible after the vestry has been informed.
- Shortly before the priest's last day, decide how staff supervision will be carried out. There will likely be a period - it may be short, or it may go on a while - when there is no rector/priest-in-charge. Having staff report to the entire vestry in a vague way is incredibly difficult for staff and not effective. Choose a point person to be the staff's go-to for any questions or guidance they might normally go to the priest for. This person doesn't have to make all decisions on the spot or alone, but should be able and willing to discern between making day-to-day decisions on their own versus asking staff to wait until the full vestry can be consulted. During this period, vestry will need to be able to be responsive to these kinds of consultations relatively quickly; some things ought not wait until the monthly meeting.
- Additionally, if it seems this period will last a while, consider appointing a chaplain to the staff. Their needs and concerns are often overlooked during transitions, and **many** things will go smoother if your staff feel supported. The chaplain doesn't have to be a clergy person, but should be someone who has good listening skills, good boundaries, and good understanding of appropriate roles. The chaplain should not be a member of the vestry or staff, but must be able to be available to spend time with staff as needed.
- Have a party, in whatever style is most comfortable for the congregation!
- Some congregations have a practice of collecting for a farewell gift to the priest and her/his family. This may be cash or some other gesture of thanksgiving for the ministry of the priest. Consider pension assessment and IRS tax implications if you

choose to do this. It is perfectly fine to ask the priest what her/his preference might be; this doesn't have to be a surprise gift.

Know that the Bishop and staff are ready to assist during the transition however they can. Many questions will likely come up along the way; please feel free to reach out if you're unsure or need some ideas about how you might proceed.

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