

LEAVE TAKING IN YOUR CONGREGATION

THE EPISCOPAL DIOCESE OF NEWARK



Guidelines to assist clergy, wardens and vestries in discerning the first steps in the transition process following the announcement of the clergy's intention to end the ministry relationship with the congregation. While saying "good-bye" is difficult for both clergy and congregation, steps can be taken to insure that the next chapter in the lives of both will be healthy, caring and respectful.

FOR CLERGY

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Our Priest Is Leaving

❖ Notify the Bishops' Office

It is important that the Bishop's Office be a part of the process from the very beginning. The transition process begins when the departing priest meets with the Bishop and they determine together when the announcement to the Vestry and congregation will be made. Generally between 60 – 90 days notice should be given. In the case of a retirement, 4- 6 months may be appropriate. As a first step, clergy should speak with a representative of the Church Pension Group regardless of the nature of the departure. As soon as the priest announces to the wardens his or her intention to leave a parish, the Wardens will make an appointment with the Bishop's Office to discuss the state of the parish as well as their roles and options in the upcoming transition period.

At this meeting, the wardens report generally on the congregation and are briefed in turn on what typically lies ahead for a parish in transition. **The wardens and vestry are the formal and canonical leadership of the congregation during the interim period;** as such, they hold the responsibility of choosing a course of action best suited to their particular parish and situation. With the help of the Bishops' Office, the Wardens must make arrangements for the conduct of worship and pastoral care until an interim priest is appointed. When there is a gap in official ministries, the wardens can secure names of supply clergy to fill in for the short term, on Sundays and when needed.

Shortly after the clergy's leaving has been announced, the wardens will meet with the clergy to negotiate a separation agreement which must be approved by the Bishop. **(See, "A Letter of Understanding Concerning the Ending of the Pastoral Relationship" included in this packet)**

After the initial meeting of the wardens with the Bishop's Office, the Canon to the Ordinary will visit the parish as soon as possible following the departure of the priest. The visit usually takes the form of a meeting with the Vestry.

❖ Saying Good-bye

The vestry, parish, and clergy together should plan and carry out the farewell and celebration of the priest's ministry, generally before any formal work on the search begins (e.g., before commissioning a search committee). Whether the priest is leaving because of retirement, a call to another parish, or even because of differences with the parish, the elements of the separation process remain the same. Much of the energy of the parish during this time should be devoted to saying "good-bye". Until the clergy leaves, the primary tasks are to arrange an exit interview, plan the current priest's departure and provide opportunities for people to say good-bye in a celebratory manner.

For Clergy: Steps to take before....

- Begin planning your departure early. Sufficient notice to the Bishop is considered to be 6–8 weeks when accepting another call, and 4 - 6 months, if retiring so that there is sufficient time for everyone to process feelings, to put parish business in good order, and to prepare the wardens and vestry for their role in the transition. Timing of the announcement(s) is critical.
- Inform the bishop of your decision and then the wardens, in person. With the wardens, notify the vestry.
- With the wardens, send two letters to the congregation:
 - One from you, expressing gratitude for your mutual ministry and your intent to end the ministerial relationship with the parish. It is helpful to include information about what your future plans are.
 - One from the wardens, setting forth the vestry's plan for leave-taking and the parish's future, expressing affirmation and hope.
- Notify in writing the Bishop's Office (including the date of your last service), community personnel, and the Church Pension Fund (especially on retirement).
- Schedule and plan an exit interview with the Bishop's Office and one with the vestry and parish leaders.
- Plan for a liturgical ending with the parish in the context of worship (see **“Liturgy for the Ending of a Pastoral Relationship”**).
- Plan to say a formal goodbye to shut-ins, staff, and parish groups.
- Plan final visits with individuals with whom there may have been some tension or conflict.
- Issue an invitation to anyone who has “unfinished business” with you to come and talk.
- Plan ways of saying goodbye to those who have been particularly supportive.
- Change in a timely manner the mailing addresses on all periodicals and correspondence addressed to you.
- Make sure to clean out your office by the time of the official “last Sunday,” but do so gradually.
- Clean out personal files, including computer files. You may wish to leave files that would be helpful to the interim.

- Let the congregation know—in writing—that, while you will remain friends, after your departure you will no longer do pastoral or priestly things with them (even in the interim period), such as leading a service or preaching at a wedding, baptism or funeral. You will come back for a parish event only at the new rector’s invitation, and then in the capacity as the former rector.
- Discuss with the vestry and execute a separation agreement (Letter of Understanding Concerning the Ending of the Pastoral Relationship)
- Prepare a thank-you and/or farewell piece for the parish newsletter.
- To facilitate the transition in pastoral care, summarize in writing any pertinent information about the sick, shut-ins or others needing pastoral care.
- Within the context of preaching the gospel, name your feelings and issues of closure in sermons. Do so in ways that allow you to share the experience of change and loss with the congregation, but don’t lure the congregation into taking care of your feelings of sadness or ambivalence.
- If there is a gap between your departure and the arrival of the next clergy person to serve the parish during the transition, be sure the vestry has made arrangements through the Bishop’s Office for emergency pastoral coverage. Be sure that lay leaders know about these arrangements.
- Have a party, in whatever style is most comfortable for the congregation!
- Turn in all keys!

A Letter of Understanding Concerning the Ending of the Pastoral Relationship

Purpose: To set forth the understandings between the Clergy, the Rev. _____ (“Clergy”) and vestry of _____ Episcopal Church _____, New Jersey (“the Church”), regarding the ending of the pastoral relationship between the Clergy and the congregation.

Date of Departure: The Clergy’s tenure and responsibilities will end on _____.

Date to Vacate the Rectory: The Clergy and his/her family will vacate the rectory located at _____ no later than _____.
Prior to the Clergy’s departure, there will be a on-site inspection of the premises conducted by representatives of the Vestry accompanied by the Clergy to assess the condition of the Rectory.

Responsibilities of the Church.

- To pay the Clergy’s full compensation and benefits as set forth in the Clergy’s letter of agreement, the final payment to be made no later than _____.
- To continue the Clergy’s family health insurance coverage through _____.
- To pay in full the Clergy’s pension as billed by the Church Pension Fund through the period of his/her tenure, recognized as _____.
- To provide to the Clergy and his/her family, without charge, the use of the Rectory through _____ and to provide all utilities, maintenance and repairs required through said date.
- To pay for any accrued but unpaid vacation, sick, or personal days in accordance with the terms and conditions of the Clergy’s letter of agreement.
- To pay all housing equity that has accrued in accordance with the terms and conditions of the Clergy’s letter of agreement.
- To pay all accrued sabbatical leave in accordance with the terms and conditions of the Clergy’s letter of agreement.
- To reimburse the Clergy for all business-related expenses and mileage in accordance with the terms and conditions of the Clergy’s letter of agreement.

Responsibilities of the Clergy

- To continue to fully and faithfully execute the duties and responsibilities required by the canons of the Episcopal Church and the Diocese of Newark, the laws of the State of New Jersey, and the bylaws of the Church through _____.
- To surrender to the wardens of the Church, all files and computer records held by him/her which in any manner pertain to the financial, spiritual, and temporal affairs of the Church on or before _____.
- To remove from the Church and Parish Offices any books, files, records, vestments, or other accoutrements which are his/her personal possessions

before _____. It is understood that any personal property left on the Church's premises after that date, will become the property of the Church.

- To remove from the Rectory all goods and possessions belonging to the Clergy and his/her family before _____. It is understood that any personal property left in the Rectory after that date, will become the property of the Church.
- To turn over to the wardens all keys relating to the Rectory by_____.
- To turn over to the wardens all keys and passwords relating to the property or management of the Church by_____.

Notice of this Agreement:

This agreement will be approved by a resolution of the Vestry of the Church, and duly executed by the wardens on behalf of the Church, and by the Clergy as evidenced below. A duly executed copy of this agreement and accompanying resolution shall be sent to the Bishop of the Diocese of Newark.

Approved by the Vestry of _____ Church on _____ as attested to by the signature of the Clerk of the Vestry.

Clerk of the Vestry

Wardens _____

Clergy _____

Date _____

Approved _____
Bishop, Diocese of Newark

The Diocese's interest in this matter is to insure that both sides reach a fair, full and clear understanding of one another's obligations so that the ministry transition proceeds as smoothly as possible. The Diocese also seeks assurance that the parish is in a financial position to meet its obligations under the separation agreement. Hence, all separation agreements are to be reviewed by the Bishop's Office and must be approved by the Bishop. In this regard, the parish's annual budget, the most recent financial statement and a brief explanation of how the financial obligations of the agreement are to be met must accompany the proposed agreement.

On the Ethics of Clergy Transitions and Boundaries

For the purposes of this procedure, the term "Rector or Priest" may be applied to vicars, assisting clergy and deacons. The purpose of this paper is to address the sensitive issue that can arise when clergy are invited into a pastoral role by persons who are no longer under their care.

As clergy, bound together by our common mission, and accountable to each other, as well as to the whole church, to foster healthy ministry in all our congregations, we seek a professional ethic that understands and respects the ending of pastoral relationships. That is, when a priest leaves a congregation the pastoral relationships end.

It is understood as a starting point that nearly everything surrounding relationships and transition is sensitive in nature. Inherent in every professional pastoral relationship is a personal relationship. This mix of relationships goes to the very being of who we see and experience ourselves to be as priests in God's church. Without both, none of us could function effectively as pastors to those who have called us into their lives in this role.

It is our experience that boundary issues grow out of healthy pastoral relationships. Said another way, when a good healthy pastoral relationship has been formed, is also when it is most natural for people to seek the presence of the pastor that is known to them, even when that relationship has ended. Weddings, baptisms and funerals are the most common points of a person's life where they might instinctively reach out to a former pastor. In fact we can almost expect that these times will often bring requests to participate.

From the clergy perspective it is both flattering and alluring to be asked to enter people's lives in the ways we have been trained to do. To be asked to be at the bedside of a family member who is dying is to be asked to be who we are. This circumstance, as well as others, are not situations to which we easily say no.

It is understood that, because of the nature of pastoral relationships, on occasion, personal friendships might also develop in the context of the pastoral. Such situations are only natural. However, they should not be taken lightly by the former rector. On a professional level self-examination should take place that asks first and foremost, how much of me is looking to my professional life, that is my pastoral relationships, for my personal friendships? At the same time other questions should be addressed. How do such friendships come to be? How many such friendships do I seem to develop in the context of pastoral relationships? Am I willing and or able to continue these friendships after I leave the pastoral role? What emotional toll will be involved to continue these relationships or, not continue them? What affect could my continuing these friendships have on others with whom I had a pastoral relationship but, choose not to continue with a friendship? There are no certain or clear answers to these questions. However, such issues should be openly and honestly addressed with one's bishop and or spiritual advisor.

It is understood that the most important relationship in dealing with the ethics of clergy transition and boundaries is the one between the former pastor and the new pastor. It is our belief that when this relationship is open, honest and healthy, boundary issues will rarely be a problem. One of the single biggest assets in a new priest beginning his or her ministry is the support and collegial friendship of the previous rector.

It is also understood that it is the responsibility of the former rector to enforce boundary issues. It is not the responsibility of the new rector to have to react to awkward situations that come unexpectedly. It is critical in maintaining appropriate boundaries that the former rector be firm and clear in his/her commitment to appropriate boundaries. It is only under limited circumstances that contact with a former parishioner be initiated by the former rector.

Assuming this, then the situation most commonly addressed is the former parish member contacting a former rector to act again in the pastoral role. In such circumstances it is the responsibility of the former rector to respond appropriately. Such response should be automatic, "I'm really sorry, but it is simply not appropriate for me to do that. You must understand that I care about you, but I am not your pastor anymore." You might even consider giving the new rector a "plug" such as "I know your new rector will do a wonderful job for you at this time." After such a contact it is important that you call the new rector and let him/her know that the contact was made and how you responded. Most critical, when a former parishioner contacts you, is to not fall into the trap of saying something like, "You'll have to talk to the new rector about that, I really can't do it without his/her permission." Often such a response is thought to be out of respect to the new rector. However, the opposite is true. Such a response puts the new rector in a difficult situation. It leaves the new rector in the unenviable position of either relinquishing the pastoral role or saying no and being judged as unresponsive at best and, at worst, uncaring to the pastoral need.

It should also be noted that should a former rector decide to attend a program or worship service at the former parish, they should notify the current rector prior to the event. Consequently, the former rector should treat his/her presence among the community in a discreet manner so as not to distract from the pastoral role of the new rector.

It has been our experience that most clergy are very clear about these matters most of the time. We do need to remember that our former congregations are best served when we respect the boundaries by which we have ordered our lives and ministries.

The Rt. Rev. Mark M. Beckwith
Bishop of Newark - March 2008

Liturgy for the Ending of a Pastoral Relationship

Departing Minister:

On the ____ day of _____, ____, I was inducted as rector of _____, _____, Massachusetts. I have with God's help and to the best of my abilities, exercised this trust, accepting its privileges and responsibilities.

After prayer and careful consideration, it now seems that I should leave this charge, and I publicly state that my tenure as rector of this parish ends this day. Mindful that the call to serve God is a call which comes in prayer, I now pray.

O Lord my God, I am not worthy to have you come under my roof; yet you called me to stand in your house and serve at this altar. To you and your service I have devoted myself, body, soul and spirit. In this ministry, you have filled my memory with the record of your mighty works; enlightened my understanding with the Holy Spirit; asking that I center my heart and will on what you would have me do, even as you have entrusted these people to my care.

As I leave this place, be always with me in carrying out the duties of my ministry. In prayer, quicken my devotion; in praises, heighten my love and gratitude; in preaching, give me readiness of thought and expression; that together we might fulfill the duties of a ministry of service, to you, to each other and to the whole creation of which we are stewards. All this I ask through the power of your most gracious Spirit.

Diocesan Representative::

N. (Departing Minister) the work of ministry is rooted in the gifts of ministry. The people of this parish and the town have been generous in their gifts to you. I invite you to share expression of some of these gifts with them.

Departing Minister:

N. (Wardens,) receive these keys and let the doors of this parish continue to be open to all people.

People: Amen

Departing Minister:

N.(A Deacon or Lector) receive this Gospel Book that the Word of God may be heard by these people of God.

People: Amen

Departing Minister:

N. (Outreach Committee Chair) receive this (symbol of parish outreach project) that you may continue to (whatever the outreach project is)

People: Amen

Departing Minister:

Receive this (other symbols of the ministries of the church as may be appropriate)

People: Amen

Diocesan Representative:

Having witnessed the exchange of gifts between (Departing Minister) and those with whom he/she has shared the honor of ministry, do you, the people of _____ Church, recognize and accept the conclusion of this pastoral relationship?

People: We do.

Departing Minister and Congregation:

O God, you have bound us together for a time as priest and people to work for the advancement of your reign on earth in this place: We give you humble and hearty thanks for the ministry which we have shared.

Silence

We thank you for your patience with us despite our blindness and slowness of heart. We thank you for your forgiveness and mercy.

Silence

Especially we thank you for your never-failing presence with us through these years, and for the deeper knowledge of you, each other and the world we serve.

Silence

We thank you for those who have been joined to this part of Christ's family through baptism, confirmation and marriage. We thank you for opening the hearts and minds of children and young people, that together with them, we might be fed by your sacraments.

Silence

And we pray for those whom we have loved whose lives we have celebrated and whose spirits live with you in eternity.

Silence

Now, we pray, be with those who leave and with us who stay; and grant that all of us, drawing ever nearer to you, may always be close to each other in the communion of your saints. All this we ask for the sake of Jesus Christ, your Son our Lord, Amen

Clergy Exit Interview

To completed and brought by clergy to final interview with Bishop and Canon

1. Name of Parish_____

2. Period of Employment : From_____to_____

3. Main responsibilities of your ministry

4. Proudest accomplishment(s)

5. Things I wish I could have done

6. Congregation's greatest gifts and assets

7. Congregation's growing edges

8. The one thing I would like the incoming clergy to know is...

9. Additional comments