

Guidelines for Clergy Departures

A good goodbye sets a congregation and clergyperson up for a good beginning to whatever is next. A priest or deacon's ability to step aside well, and a congregation's ability to let their clergy move on have an impact on the next call, and leaving well is an important part of a successful ministry.

What follows are a series of guidelines, requirements, and best practices for clergy departures. If you have questions, contact the Diocese of New Jersey Transition Officer or the bishop.

FIRST STEPS

Inform the bishop in writing of your departure, including the date of your last service and the reason for your transition, including if it is for a new call, retirement, or vocational transition.

Notify the wardens (in person or via zoom). With the wardens, decide when and how to notify the vestry and (after vestry), the congregation.

The canons require the vestry to give formal consent of your resignation.

The canons require the wardens to notify the bishop in writing that the parish is without a priest.

With the wardens, send a letter to the congregation telling them that you are ending your pastoral relationship with the parish and expressing your gratitude for your mutual ministry.

With the vestry, clarify the terms of unused leave or vacation time, plans for continuing contributions into the Church Pension Fund and arrangements for insurance coverage.

Notify the Church Pension Fund, and if you are retiring, complete the required forms. The bishop's signed approval is required for retirement.

Plan for a liturgical acknowledgment of the ending of your pastoral relationship. The *Book of Occasional Services* is a good resource.

Schedule endings (celebrations, conversations) with parish organizations, individuals, and staff.

COMMUNICATIONS

With the wardens, write a letter (or separate letters) to the congregation, outlining your plan for leaving and assuring members of diocesan staff support during the transition.

It is important to let the congregation know, in writing, that:

- you value their friendship,
- after you leave, you will no longer be able to function as their pastor or priest;
- you will no longer be able to officiate at their baptisms, weddings and funerals;
- you will be withdrawing from social interaction and other parts of the “life of the congregation,” including social media, so the congregation can move forward; and
- you will be absent from the life of the congregation during the transition and for a minimum of 12 months after the arrival of your successor, after which any return visits will be at the invitation of your successors.

Notify the clericus and other clergy/ecumenical groups, civic organizations, and nonprofits that you have worked with that you are stepping away and relinquish any appointments related to your position.

MOVING TOWARDS DEPARTURE

Schedule an exit interview with the bishop, canon to the ordinary, or transition officer and a final review and closing conversation with the vestry and parish leaders.

List all your current responsibilities, assigning a hand off date and designating a specific person to take up each task.

With the wardens, review all leadership positions and clarify roles and responsibilities. Determine when and where future leadership transition is necessary.

Update position descriptions for staff and volunteers

Work to resolve conflict and leave ‘on a good note’, including meeting with individuals with whom there have been previous difficulties.

Be clear about any commitments (baptisms, weddings, funerals) scheduled for future dates. In general, commitments should be relinquished when possible, with supply or other clergy arranged in consultation with wardens.

DOCUMENTS and PREPARATION

Prepare a confidential file including essential pastoral information for future clergy.

Ensure that the service register, membership lists, and other essential records are up to date and accurate.

Provide guidance for wardens and vestry regarding their duties during transition.

Identify those in need of pastoral/communion visits and provide a list, including information about needs, frequency of communion/pastoral care, and date of final visit.

Prepare a pastorally sensitive list of concerns in the congregation for incoming clergy, maintaining appropriate confidentiality.

It is helpful if you can leave a list of annual tasks and timing (stewardship, episcopal visitation, annual meeting, practices related to formation, graduation, and similar), as well as information about any ecumenical services or congregational events, including hosting, preaching, and other responsibilities.

Balance the discretionary fund and turn it over to the wardens. Do not spend the full fund, but leave the balance in place for future clergy use. If applicable, ensure that your signature is removed from accounts.

Ensure that the wardens and finance team are clear about special funds, including scholarships, and their use and signatories.

Ensure that audits, parochial reports, annual reports, copies of budgets for three years and by-laws are easily accessible for incoming clergy.

Review your files. Preserve historic documents, delete or dispose of personal and outdated/unnecessary files, and keep what is necessary. For assistance, contact the diocesan archivist.

List current members of worship ministries (altar guild members, ushers, acolytes and servers), as well as those licensed for liturgical ministries and the expiration dates of licenses. If appropriate, work with the bishop's office to renew licenses.

Ensure that the files include information on current agreements and contact information for all groups that use the buildings.

Transition is a good opportunity for the outgoing clergy and vestry to clear out the building. Remove items in long-term storage that are no longer needed, review closets and spaces, and in general clean up.

Create a contact list of parish leadership, including roles and email addresses.

Wardens should arrange for pastoral coverage for emergencies following the clergy person's departure.

THE LAST FEW DAYS

Establish clear dates for moving out of the office and (if applicable) church-provided housing. Be clear on expectations related to repair needs, cleanliness, etc. Return keys.

Participate in gatherings that permit members to say thank you and goodbye. If applicable, include your family in these gatherings as appropriate.

Set phone and email auto-responses and do not check or respond after your last day. Leave a forwarding address and contact information for wardens and staff but do not contact them.

If in a rectory, arrange for changes of address and mail forwarding.

Step away fully following the last day. Do not return to the office

HELP YOUR CONGREGATION HAVE A STRONG RELATIONSHIP WITH THE NEXT PRIEST

In all cases, it is the responsibility of the clergy to make it clear to the congregation that they are no longer their pastor.

Do not involve yourself with the search process, including giving names or opinions about candidates. Do not offer suggestions about what the congregation needs next.

Always do what you can to support your successor. Avoid discussing the congregation with members and certainly avoid criticism or complaints about your successor. In all matters, avoid gossip and do not discuss any parish business after you leave.

Worship with another congregation.

Be clear that your immediate family will also be leaving and no longer involved in the life of the congregation.

Remove yourself from all pastoral conversations with your former parishioners via social media: Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn, etc. Avoid significant social media interactions related to your former congregation.

When it comes to parishioners and members of the church staff, every relationship you have is pastoral. It is your responsibility to know where the appropriate boundary is and to maintain it.

Be cordial with parishioners and church staff should you see them around town. Also be clear that you must distance yourself from parishioners so they might bond with their new priest.

The best practice is to stop all social engagements with parishioners and church staff.

When you are aware that a boundary is unclear, contact the bishop or canon for advice.