

ON THE EMMAUS ROAD

A Guide for Transitions in Ordained Leadership

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INTRODUCTION

The Structure of This Book

From Constancy and Peace . . .

It is a fact of life that those who live as part of a faith community see it as a constant in their lives. They know where it is, when it meets, what will happen there, and how the rhythm of the liturgy, the calendar, and the usual practices of the community shape the common life of the parish. It is, to many, a place of comfort and stability.

So what happens when the community is thrust out of that stability into a state of transition? What happens when the priest¹ departs?

. . . To Transition and Change

This book will walk you through the process of that time of transition step-by-step, with attention to the various roles of those who will be helping the parish find new leadership. It also recognizes that each parish is unique, and that one process doesn't fit all. Our intent is to help parishes seek God's will as they begin the next chapter of their story.

This work should be done efficiently, but not at the expense of time to hear the Holy Spirit's guidance. It is work that should be done in a way that recognizes that every voice in the parish matters and should be heard, but not every need can be met. It is work that names that parishes need clergy with different gifts at different times in their existence, and sometimes it is work that names uncomfortable truths with no easy answer.

1. The clergy leader may be titled rector, vicar, priest-in-charge, or some other title as designated by the bishop.

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Transition is holy work. It is our prayer that this process will be spiritually transformative, not only for those who do the identified tasks of transition, but for the entire parish, as they are reminded of God's providence and God's habit of surprising us.

How to Read This Book

You will see sections addressed "For the Vestry," "For the Discernment Committee," and "For the Departing Priest." You are welcome to read any or all of it—vestry members are not forbidden from reading discernment committee chapters and vice versa!—but please understand that certain tasks are assigned to particular groups for a good reason.

There are variations in practices in each and every diocese in the Episcopal Church, because contexts differ and context matters. Your bishop, your canon to the ordinary, your transition ministry officer² are your best guides as to what are the practices and limitations and freedoms that are operative in your diocese. Trust them, follow their guidelines, and ask questions! This process, based on several years of doctoral research and several years of lived experience, has been a flexible and effective approach. Use it in partnership with your diocesan team and may it bring you the same excellent results we have experienced.

2. Note that with the exception of the bishop, titles for those who will assist you in your transition process vary based upon size of diocesan staff and specificity of roles. In some dioceses, there is a transition ministry officer with a title that mirrors that specific role. In other dioceses, the canon to the ordinary is your contact for all matters relating to transition processes. In a few dioceses, the bishop diocesan is also the transition officer. Check with your bishop's office to identify the key persons who will be assisting you.



A GENERAL OUTLINE OF THE TRANSITION PROCESS

In general, the normative process for transition is . . .

1. For the transition ministry office to have a conversation with the vestry, as soon as the priest's retirement/departure is announced, to discuss the road ahead, especially the vestry's role in the process and choices to be made.
2. For the church and priest to have a "good goodbye."
3. For the vestry to determine which model of transition process they will use, with the recommendation of the bishop and the diocesan staff who support transitions.
4. For the appropriate committee to be formed to carry out the next steps of transition.
5. For the vestry to vote on the finalist and, if affirmed, for the vestry to extend a call.
6. If the call is accepted, for the vestry and the candidate to negotiate the terms of call, set out in a letter of agreement.
7. For the candidate, the senior warden, and the bishop to sign the letter of agreement.
8. For a mutual ministry review to be conducted after the new priest has served for a year.

Rector Calls:

In the outline above, when you get to step 4, this is how the process proceeds:

- For a discernment committee to be constituted and commissioned.
- For the discernment committee to do the work of self-study¹ with the input of the congregation.
- For the discernment committee to publish a vestry- and bishop-approved community ministry portfolio, which provides an overview of the church and its vision.
- For the church to improve its website to include relevant and up-to-date information on the church and the search process, for the benefit of both potential candidates and potential parishioners.
- For the discernment committee to receive names and select a finalist after the Office of Transition Ministry vets the candidates.

Then the process goes forward as described in steps 5 through 9.

Priest-in-Charge Calls:

In some situations, it may be more appropriate for the parish to call a priest-in-charge rather than a rector. The only difference between the two calls is this: the priest-in-charge is appointed by the bishop for a time-limited term. In some cases, if the vestry requests it and the bishop concurs that this is a wise decision, the call can be changed to be an open-ended one, with no specific end date. In other words, this becomes a call to be rector.

From a practical standpoint, both priest-in-charge and rector have the same level of authority and responsibility as per the canons of the church. In our diocese, we recommend this process when the tenure of the departing priest has been relatively short and when the parish is generally healthy. We do *not* use it for parishes where the departing priest has had a

1. **Search Tools:** Tools that are used to complete this work, particularly in the self-study period, vary widely. Each vestry and each discernment committee are encouraged to work with the diocesan transition team in constructing a plan of action for their search process, either with or without an outside consultant. Much of this discovery results from self-study based on three questions: who have we been; who are we now; who is God calling us to be?

very long tenure, or when the departure has been occasioned by conflict or misconduct.

This model has an abbreviated self-study process, after which the bishop and the diocesan transition team assemble several pre-vetted and qualified candidates for the vestry's consideration. The vestry interviews and selects a candidate to request from the bishop. The most positive argument for calling a priest-in-charge is that it provides a long period of mutual discernment between parish and priest before making a more permanent call.

In this process, the parish cedes much control to the diocese to select potential candidates. The negative side to the priest-in-charge model is that priests may be reluctant to consider such a call, particularly if it involves moving, because there is no guarantee of continued employment beyond the term limit of the letter of agreement. The positive side is that it is a shorter process, does not require that the parish wait for the appointment of an available interim rector (usually the parish's liturgical and spiritual needs are attended to by a long-term supply priest), and that the parish does not have to adjust to a new priest in the form of an interim and then another new priest as their settled rector.

In the outline of the process above, here's what happens in step 4: The vestry decides if they want to create a mini-discernment team, an ad hoc group to do a small self-study² that helps shape a list of gifts/skills/qualities that would serve the parish well in their next chapter, or if the vestry wants to do that task themselves. If the parish is small, this is a manageable task for the vestry. If it is not, the vestry will appreciate delegating that task. This team—and use of a term like “team” emphasizes the distinction between what had always been called the search committee and something much briefer and more focused—does the brief self-study to develop that list, gives it to the diocesan transition team to seek candidates, and interviews the small group of candidates that the diocesan transition team gives them. Thereafter, the process continues from step 5 above.

2. An earlier version of this process did not include the mini-self-study. We have found, though, that it is wise to invite parishioners to voice their opinions about what is needed, not only to give them a voice in the process, but to see if there are any issues that were not known to the lay leadership that might require different gifts or some preliminary work with the congregation before continuing.

Alternative Processes

If a vestry wishes to consider an alternative process, such as beginning a search prior to the incumbent's departure, this would generally require the approval of the bishop. This is not a process that should be presented by the departing priest. The vestry must present its plan and reasoning behind that plan to the bishop via the transition ministry officer.

- There should not be a nonstandard process if the departure of the incumbent is due to misconduct or serious conflict or if the incumbent's tenure has ended due to death or to a serious physical or emotional disability.
- The calling of a new priest after an incumbent completes a particularly long tenure usually requires a standard process, but in rare cases an exception may be made. Again, it is the *vestry's* responsibility to make the case and it is the bishop's prerogative, in conversation with the vestry, to define the nature of the process.

Remember that this is not a hiring process, it is a process of discernment about a covenantal relationship. As we approach this, it is wise to remember the words of the priest and theologian Henri Nouwen, who describes discernment thus:

Christian discernment is not the same as decision making. Reaching a decision can be straightforward: we consider our goals and options; maybe we list the pros and cons of each possible choice; and then we choose the action that meets our goal most effectively. Discernment, on the other hand, is about listening and responding to that place within us where our deepest desires align with God's desire. As discerning people, we sift through our impulses, motives, and options to discover which ones lead us closer to divine love and compassion for ourselves and other people and which ones lead us further away.

Discernment reveals new priorities, directions, and gifts from God. We come to realize that what previously seemed so important for our lives loses its power over us. Our desire to be successful, well liked and influential becomes increasingly less important as we move closer to God's heart.

To our surprise, we even may experience a strange inner freedom to follow a new call or direction as previous concerns move into the background of our consciousness. We begin to see the beauty of the small and hidden life that Jesus lived in Nazareth. Most rewarding of all is the discovery that as we pray more each day, God's will—that is, God's concrete ways of loving us and our world—gradually is made known to us.³

3. Henri Nouwen, *Discernment: Reading the Signs of Daily Life* (New York: HarperOne, 2013), 17.