

## **EXITING A CONGREGATION WELL GUIDELINES FOR CLERGY**

*Adapted by the Rev. Carrie Schofield-Broadbent from work done by numerous Transition Ministers, particularly the Rev. Canon Thomas R. Orso and the Rev. Thad Bennett.*

A good beginning depends on a good ending. Your church's ability to call your successor depends on how well you leave and on your ability to let go. Your character and integrity are demonstrated in how you leave a position.

These are not commandments, rubrics or rules. They are collected wisdom and good practices about an important moment in the life of every ordained person, a moment of celebration, ending, beginning, death and resurrection.

### **Mindset**

- Be intentional about your remaining time.
- Maintain a non-anxious presence.
- It's important that the priest is perceived as genuine/authentic throughout the process.
- Remain conscientious about assignments until the end (but don't try to do everything!).
- Be open to personal time with others where their feelings can be expressed.
- In getting affairs in order, remember to wrap up your own ministry and not the congregation's. Develop a plan for closing out your ministry as well as allowing the ministry of the parish to continue.
- Realize you are modeling closure for others.

## Checklist (see explanations below)

	Communicate your decision with the Bishop and dean
	Communicate your decision with the wardens, vestry, parish
	Clean your office
	Allow space and time for goodbyes
	Say 'thank you'
	Clarify what is church property and what is personal
	Organize paperwork for your successor
	Support wardens and vestry as they prepare for transition
	Leave passwords, keys, ways to access info in your absence
	Pray!
	Plan exit interviews if needed
	Explain boundaries around clergy departures
	Sign Covenant of Departure

### Leave-taking Technical Essentials

- Inform the Bishop in writing of your leaving and the date of your last service. Also, inform your district dean. (Please give us a heads-up when you begin thinking about leaving.)
- Notify the wardens in person, and with the wardens notify the vestry of your decision to leave.
- 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.
- Pray and spend some time with whatever spiritual practice keeps you centered and focused upon God and the fact that Jesus is walking this journey with you.
- 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.
- With the vestry also clarify what is church property and what is the property of the priest (computer, books, curriculum, furnishings, vestments, etc.). If church funds were used to pay for an item, it belongs to the church. If it was personally bought, it belongs to the priest. If the priest would like to gift items to the parish, or the parish to the priest, please note those in vestry minutes.

- Notify the Church Pension Fund, securing the proper forms, if you are retiring. The Bishop's signed approval is required for retirement. The Church Pension Fund needs at least three months' notice to get retirement paperwork in order.
- Plan a ritual ending of your pastoral relationship within the context of worship. There is a suggested liturgy in this packet. Refer to the *Book of Occasional Services* for suggestions or contact your Canon for Transition for other examples. Plan an ending with parish organizations and staff.
- You are not entitled to unused sabbatical time/funds.

## **Communicating Your Decision**

- Be clear and straightforward about your reasons for leaving.
  - People often carry a lot of sadness, confusion, and sometimes guilt about a priest's departure; make sure you clarify your own real reasons.
- Assist the wardens with writing a letter to the congregation that outlines your plan for leaving, expresses your gratitude for your mutual ministry and assures them that they will have support and guidance from the diocesan staff through the transition.
- Develop an agreement with the vestry and 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;
  - It no longer will be your role to officiate at their baptisms, weddings, and funerals; and
  - You will come back only after some time has passed, at the invitation of your successor; and then you will attend as their former pastor. (See Covenant of Departure)
  - Notify local ecumenical groups or clergy associations that you are leaving and resign from positions you hold in community organizations.

## **Preparing to Go**

- Schedule an exit interview with the Canon for Transition and the wardens and/or vestry and parish leaders. If needed, schedule private exit conversations with the Bishop and/or Canon for Transition.
- List all your current responsibilities, assigning a hand-off date, and designating a specific person to take up that task.
- With the wardens, review all leadership positions, clarify roles and responsibilities.
- Make sure you and the wardens/vestry are clear about all financial commitments to each other and how to handle whatever vacation time remains.

- Update job descriptions for paid staff. Thank the staff publically and privately. Pray with and for them.
- Make yourself available for members to say goodbye, including visiting the homebound.
- Meet privately with individuals with whom there may have been tension or conflict. Pray with them.
- Be clear about any commitments (baptisms, weddings, funerals) that are scheduled to occur after your leave-taking date for which alternate arrangements must be made.
- Sign the Covenant of Departure. Make sure the vestry, staff, and parish leaders have copies.

## **Organizing for Your Successor**

- Review with the wardens and vestry their leadership responsibilities for property, finance, and administration during the transition.
- Identify those in hospitals, nursing homes, assisted living facilities, and home-bound, noting who expects to be visited and with what regularity. Be sure there is a list of the names, addresses and contact information for all of these. Make sure to note any specifics the new pastor might need. (Use the side door, call first, etc.)
- Note significant pastoral concerns such as premarital counseling, pregnancies, divorces in process, terminally ill, and the bereaved, remembering to maintain confidentiality of matters that are pastorally sensitive. (Including any Safe Church concerns) This information should be left in writing for the interim priest and may be delivered by the senior warden or by the appropriate canon.
- Note preplanned funeral arrangements and where the information is filed.
- Prepare a calendar for the upcoming year, including episcopal visitations, homecoming, patronal feasts, sunrise services, graduations, every-member canvas, stewardship, and annual meeting.
- Leave clear instructions about your congregation's participation in community or ecumenical services, as well as their expectations about preaching and hosting future events.
- Leave a signed copy of the Covenant of Departure.
- Make sure all parish lists and registers are up to date and complete.
- Balance the discretionary fund and turn it over to the wardens.
- Make a list of any special funds, their purpose, use and signatories, including scholarships and other financial commitments.
- Prepare a file of audits, parochial reports, annual reports, copies of budgets for three years, and by laws. Electronic files are encouraged.
- Identify the location of the safe and who knows the combination.
- Identify the location of the bank deposit box and who has keys.

- Preserve historic documents.
- Clean out personal files. Keep what you need and carefully dispose of the rest.
- Arrange personnel files. Make sure to include copies of job descriptions and letters of agreement.
- Prepare a file of service leaflets for the past three years. (Electronic files are encouraged.)
- Prepare a file of Eucharistic minister and visitor certificates, lists of current altar guild members, ushers, acolytes, and servers with contact information. Electronic files are encouraged. Pray with them and thank them for their ministry with you.
- Describe unique parish customs for the conduct of worship especially weddings and funerals.
- Prepare a file of current agreements and contact information for all groups that use the buildings.
- Note the location of home communion set, chrism, last year's palms, the nativity set, etc.
- Take out the trash. Dispose of clutter that has accumulated and is no longer in use.
- Make a list of web addresses and passwords that pertain to the church.
- If another person will use your email address, clear out the account.
- As a kindness to your successors (whether interim or settled) leave a notebook. Not a "how to" but a "where to:" Where to get good take-out food, get a good haircut, find a dentist, get ice cream; take a stress-reducing walk or jog, etc.
- Create a contact list of parish leaders including roles and email addresses. Pray over the list. Give thanks for your ministry together.
- Turn in all your church keys, clearly tagged.
- Establish a date certain for moving out of church-provided housing.
- Encourage and emphasize hospitality for welcoming new clergy and their loved ones.
- Let people say good-bye, thank you and give you their blessing. Accept them!
- Assist wardens in making arrangements for temporary emergency pastoral coverage for the time immediately following your departure.
- Don't leave anything for the next priest. If it needs to be done, do it! Too many arriving clergy are sunk by things left undone.

### **Personal Tasks:**

- Say "Thank you" as often as you can.
- Be straightforward within significant relationships in the parish about deeper feelings, disappointments, frustrations, hopes, joys.
- Let go of old grudges, not by irresponsible "dumping," but through a lived commitment to resolve and reconcile. At the same time, be open to the rejection of your overtures.
- Review your total relationship with the congregation.

- Idea: publish a schedule of when you'll be in the office packing up so that people can drop in for goodbyes.

## **Relating After You Leave**

- Arrange for change of address and mail forwarding. Notify those outside the parish of your new email address. If appropriate, leave a permanent "away message" indicating your work email account is no longer in use.
- After your last day, do not return to the office to check mail, email, or phone messages.
- In all cases, the responsibility belongs to clergy leaving to make clear that the pastoral relationship has ended. Know your diocesan guidelines about this and convey them to the vestry and congregation verbally and in writing.
- It is expected that clergy will not communicate with former parishioners about matters involving the church and will not meet with any members of the church for any reason during the interim period until new clergy leadership is fully integrated into the life of the church, and then only at the invitation of the new rector. (See the Covenant of Departure)
- Never be involved with the search process including giving names or offering opinions about candidates.
- Avoid getting triangulated with members of the congregation and your successor.
- Make plans for you (and your family) to worship with another congregation. Pray and/or seek spiritual counsel about this, especially if you are retiring.
- In the absence of a rector or interim priest, the wardens are canonically responsible for the worship, finances, property and administration of the parish.
- Remember, you have no official or canonical role in the parish you leave and your priestly, pastoral, and administrative functions end on the effective date of your resignation or retirement. However, you may hold your former congregation and its people in your prayers.

## FAITHFUL FAREWELL<sup>1</sup> The ending of a pastoral relationship

*This can be inserted after the Prayers of the People on a Sunday*

### Collect Prayer

Lord, you have apportioned to your people the manifold gifts of the Spirit: Grant amid the changes of the world that your Church may abide, and be strengthened in ministry through continuous outpouring of your gifts; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. **Amen.**

### Prayer of Confession<sup>2</sup>

*Optional (Leader is the departing clergy)*

*Leader*        Holy God, Maker of all  
*All*             **have mercy on us.**

*Leader*        Jesus Christ, Servant of the poor  
*All*             **have mercy on us.**

*Leader*        Holy Spirit, Breath of life  
*All*             **have mercy on us.**

*Leader*        Let us in silence confess our faults and admit our frailty.

*Leader*        Before God, with the people of God, I confess to my brokenness; to the ways I wound my life, the lives of others, and the life of the world.

*All*             **May God the Creator forgive you, God the Christ renew you, and God the Spirit enable you to grow in love.**

*Leader*        Amen.

*All*             **Before God, with the people of God, we confess to our brokenness; to the way we wound our lives, the lives of others and the life of the world.**

*Leader*        May God the Creator forgive you, God the Christ renew you, and God the Spirit enable you to grow in love.

*All*             **Amen.**

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<sup>1</sup> Adapted from the *Book of Occasional Services*, "Ending of a Pastoral Relationship" p. 242-250

<sup>2</sup> Confession -- Source unknown

## The Exchange of Peace

### The Ending of a Pastoral Relationship

*Departing Clergy:*

On the \_\_\_\_ day of \_\_\_\_\_, \_\_\_\_\_, I was inducted by Bishop \_\_\_\_\_ as rector of \_\_\_\_\_, \_\_\_\_\_. 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 to me that I should leave this charge, and I publicly state that my tenure as rector of \_\_\_\_\_ ends this day.

*The Departing Clergy may briefly state his/her/their plans for the future.*

*The Deacon or a representative of the Bishop says:*

Do you, the people of \_\_\_\_\_, recognize and accept the conclusion of this pastoral relationship?

*People*            **We do.**

*The congregation and departing clergy are invited to share expressions of gratitude.*

*The Bishop's representative or other leader may indicate what provision has been made for the continuation of the ministries of the parish.*

*The departing clergy and the congregation then say together the following prayer*

**O God, you have bound us together for a time as priest and people to work for the advancement of your kingdom in this place: We give you humble and hearty thanks for the ministry which we have shared in these years now past.**

**Now, we pray, be with those who leave and with us who stay; and grant that all of us, by 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.**

### Offertory Sentence

*After the Post-Communion prayer:*

### Prayers of gratitude

*Deacon or Bishop's representative:*

I invite you to name either silently or aloud your thanksgivings for the past \_\_\_\_\_ years at \_\_\_\_\_.



*Prayers offered silently or aloud*

*The Congregation may be seated.*

Hear the words addressed to the Philippians:

*Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice. Let your gentleness be known to everyone. The Lord is near. Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayers and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus. Finally, beloved, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things. Keep on doing the things that you have learned and received and heard and seen in me, and the God of peace will be received and heard and seen in me, and the God of peace will be with you. I rejoice in the Lord greatly that now at least you have revived your concern for me; indeed, you were concerned for me, but had no opportunity to show it.*

*(Philippians 4:4-10)*

*Signs of the Office are returned to the Congregation.*

*(From Rite of Farewell and Godspeed for Pastors)*<sup>3</sup>

*The departing clergy joins the Bishop's representative in front of the congregation.*

*Departing clergy:*

Dear friends, through your call I have shared the responsibilities of ordained ministry in your midst. When I was installed, you presented me with symbols expressing my role among you. It is time to relinquish these symbols.

*The Bishop's representative escorts the departing clergy to the baptismal font.*

*Departing clergy:*

I have been among you to baptize, teach, and to pronounce the forgiveness of sins. I now relinquish the sign of this office.

*The ewer of water (or shell) is given to a representative of the parish.*

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<sup>3</sup> Adapted from "Healthy Transitions" Packet ELCA Upstate NY Synod.

<https://static1.squarespace.com/static/5973c70be45a7cc661a8af66/t/59a4ae688dd041cc6f6d4577/1503964776907/HEALTHY-TRANSITIONS-PACKET-1.pdf>

*Congregation* **There is one Body and one Spirit, there is one hope in God's call to us.**

*The Bishop's representative escorts the departing clergy to the pulpit.*

*Departing clergy:*

I have been among you to proclaim the Good News. I now relinquish the sign of this office.

*A Bible is given to a representative of the parish.*

*Congregation* **The Word of the Lord is our sustaining strength.**

*The Bishop's representative escorts the departing clergy to the altar.*

*Departing clergy:*

I have been among you to lead worship, and preside at the Eucharist. I now relinquish the sign of this office.

*The chalice is given to a representative of the parish.*

*Congregation* **Taste and see that the Lord is good;  
happy are they who trust in God.**

*The congregation and departing clergy may return/exchange other symbolic items such as keys to the parish, the parish register, or other symbols fitting to the occasion*

*The Congregation is invited to stand.*

*Departing clergy:*

It is time for me to go forth having restored to you the signs of office which you presented to me. I ask that you send me forth in your love.

*Congregation* **May God's blessings be with you as you go forth from us.**

*Deacon or Bishop's representative:*

For what we have shared together and for what we have shared with others:

*All* **We thank you, Living God.**

*Deacon or Bishop's Representative:*

For the path that lies before us now, and our future in your hands:

*All* **We thank you, Living God.**

*Departing Clergy:*

O Christ, you are within each of us. It is not just the interior of the boundaries we have created or the church buildings we have erected, it is our own inner being

you have renewed. We are your temple not made with hands. We are your body. If every wall should crumble, and every church decay, we are your habitation. Nearer are you than breathing, closer than hands and feet. Ours are the eyes with which you, on the mystery, look out with compassion on the world. Yet we bless you for our church, and for our time in relationship with one another. We thank you for your directing of us. Take us outside, O Christ, outside holiness, out to where soldiers curse and nations clash at the crossroads of the world. So shall then this diocese continue to be justified. We ask it for your own name's sake.  
**Amen.**

### **Parting blessing**

*Deacon or Bishop's representative:*

Let us offer blessings to one another.

*Congregation to departing clergy:*

**God's blessing with you [and your family]—on your road, on your journey, guiding you, cherishing you.**

*Departing clergy to congregation:*

The Son's blessing be yours—wine and water, bread and stories, feeding you, challenging you.

*Congregation to departing clergy:*

**The Spirit's blessing be yours—wind and fire, joy and wisdom, comforting you, disturbing you.**

*Departing clergy to congregation:*

The Angel's blessing be yours— in your homes, in your living, guiding you, encouraging you.

*Departing clergy adds a final blessing.*

## INSPIRATION

My Lord God, I have no idea where I am going.  
I do not see the road ahead of me .  
I cannot know for certain where it will end.  
Nor do I really know myself,  
and the fact that I think I am following your will  
does not mean that I am actually doing so.

But I believe that the desire to please you does in fact please you.  
And I hope I have that desire in all that I am doing.  
I hope I never do anything apart from that desire.  
And I know that if I do this,  
you will lead me by the right road,  
though I may know nothing about it.

Therefore, I will trust you always,  
though I may seem to be lost and in the shadow of death.  
I will not fear, for you are ever with me,  
and you will never leave me to face my perils alone.

Thomas Merton, from "Thoughts in Solitude"

## INSPIRATION

The particular mind of the ocean  
Filling the coastline's longing  
With such brief harvest  
Of elegant, vanishing waves  
Is like the mind of time  
Opening the shapes of days.

As this year draws to its end,  
We give thanks for the gifts it brought  
And how they became inlaid within  
Where neither time nor tide can touch them.

The days when the veil lifted  
And the Soul could see delight;  
When a quiver caressed the heart  
In the sheer exuberance of being here.

Surprises that came awake  
In forgotten corners of old fields  
Where expectation seemed to have quenched.

The slow, brooding times  
When all was awkward  
And the wave in the mind  
Pierced every sore with salt.

The darkened days that stopped  
The confidence of the dawn.

Days when beloved faces shone brighter  
With light from beyond themselves;  
And from the granite of some secret sorrow  
A stream of buried tears loosened.

We bless this year for all we learned,  
For all we loved and lost  
And for the quite way it brought us  
Nearer to our invisible destination.

*At the end of the year* by John O'Donohue