



EPISCOPAL DIOCESE of Rhode Island

LEAVETAKING

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, good practices and occasional humor about an important moment in the life of every ordained person, a moment of celebration, of ending, of beginning, of death, and of resurrection.

Leavetaking Essentials

- Inform the Bishop in writing of your leaving and the date of your last service.
- Notify the wardens (in person) and with the wardens notify the vestry of your decision to leave.
- 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 announcing that you are ending your pastoral relationship 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 by filling out a new assignment form. Make sure you fill in the proper salary amount—read the directions (about half of the time it is done incorrectly; they are looking for the *annual* amount, not the rest of this year's pay) If you are retiring, get the proper forms for that. The Bishop's signed approval is required for retirement.
- Plan a ritual ending of your pastoral relationship within the context of worship. Refer to the *Book of Occasional Services* for suggestions.
- Plan an ending with parish organizations and staff.

Communicating Your Decision

- Assist the wardens with writing a letter to the congregation that outlines your plan for leaving 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;
 - You will come back only at the invitation of your successor (generally only after a couple of years have passed); and then you will attend as their former pastor. Appropriate reasons to return are anniversaries, blessing a new building or major renovation, celebrating the ministry of a former clergy person who is retiring, been elected bishop or received some major honor, etc.
- 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 to the Ordinary and a mutual review of ministry with the vestry and parish leaders.
- 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.
- Update job descriptions for paid staff.
- Meet privately with individuals with whom there may have been tension or conflict.
- Be clear about any commitments (baptisms, weddings, funerals) you have scheduled for immediately after your leavetaking date so the wardens or interim priest can make sure that a priest is available to fulfill those commitments.
- If you are taking anything with you that you purchased from the church (e.g., your laptop that the church provided and for which you paid them a fair value) or if you put personal items into the office or rectory that they might think was theirs (e.g., the sofa you own that you put into your office 10 years ago), put together an agreement on what goes and what stays, the money you paid or received for personal items you sold to the church and sign that along with the Sr. Warden and Treasurer. This protects you in case someone later says you either took church property or left your property behind. Give a copy to them and keep a copy.

Organizing For Your Successor

- Review with the wardens and vestry their leadership responsibilities for property, finance, and administration during the transition.
- Identify those in nursing homes, assisted living facilities, and home bound, noting who expects to be visited and with what regularity.
- 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. This information should be left in writing for the interim priest and may be delivered by the Senior Warden or by the bishop's office.

- 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.
- Balance the discretionary fund and turn it over to the wardens; remove your name as a signatory (the Sr. Warden, Treasurer or Almoner designated by the Vestry/Bishop's Committee should be a signatory all of the time so add him/her if necessary).
- 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 of the parish and any affiliated organization/group.
- Identify the location of the safe and who knows the combination.
- Identify the location of the bank deposit box and who has keys.
- Make sure parish lists and service registers are up to date.
- Preserve historic documents.
- Clean out personal files (paper and computer). Keep what you need and carefully dispose of the rest.
- Give the Sr. Warden all passwords you have for email, logins for your computer and any computer programs you use. Uninstall any programs that are your personal program (you paid for them yourself). Give the parish administrator the serial number, purchase info, etc. for any church computer programs you installed on your computer and remind them to change the name on the account if it is in your name.
- Change your email address; if it is generic (rector@...) and you are forwarding it to your personal account, undo that; if it is personal, change it and do not share your new email address with parishioners.
- Prepare a file of service leaflets for the past three years.
- Prepare a file of Eucharistic Ministers and Visitor certificates, lists of current altar guild members, ushers, acolytes, and servers with contact information (phone numbers and e-mail addresses).
- 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! Throw away clutter in your office that has accumulated and is no longer in use.
- 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, etc.

- Create a contact list of parish leaders including roles and email addresses.
- Turn in your 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.
- 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.

Relating After You Leave

- Arrange for change of address and mail forwarding. Notify those outside the parish of your new email address.
- After your last day, do not return to the office to check for mail, email, or phone messages.
- In all cases, the responsibility belongs to clergy leaving to make clear that the pastoral relationship has ended.
- 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 ordained leadership is fully integrated into the life of the church (generally a couple of years)
- Never be involved with the search process including giving names or offering opinions about candidates. If you have something urgent or important to communicate, talk with the Canon to the Ordinary.
- Avoid getting triangulated with members of the congregation and your successor.
- Make plans to worship with another congregation if you are retiring or not going to your next parish immediately.
- 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.

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We are grateful to the Diocese of New York and their Canon for Deployment, the Rev. Canon Thomas R. Orso, who created this helpful document. It is a compendium gleaned from the wisdom of many deployment officers and diocesan staff members – especially of New York and Pennsylvania. Contributions have also come from the Rt. Rev. James, Adams, the Rev. Michael Durning, the Rev. Canon Thad Bennett, Keith Reeve's article "*While You're Saying Goodbye: A Checklist of Items for a Pastor's Consideration on Leaving a Congregation*," and the checklists in CHOOSING TO SERVE written by the Venerable Richard L. Ullman and published by the Church Deployment Board of the Episcopal Church. Compiled by Canon Betsy Fornal.