

LEAVING A CONGREGATION WELL GUIDELINES FOR CLERGY

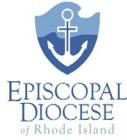
Adapted by the Rev. Canon Dena Cleaver-Bartholomew, Canon to the Ordinary in the Diocese of Rhode Island, from work done by the community of transition ministers.

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 guidelines. 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 is important that the priest is perceived as genuine and authentic throughout the process.
- Remain conscientious about essential work until the end, while realizing you will not be able to do everything.
- Be open to appropriate personal time with others where their feelings can be expressed.
- In getting affairs in order, remember to wrap up your ministry with the congregation, and not the ongoing ministry of the congregation. Develop a plan for both closing your ministry and allowing the ministry of the parish to continue.
- Be aware that you are modeling closure for others.



Checklist *(see explanations below)*

	Pray throughout the transition process
	Communicate your decision to the Bishop and Canon to the Ordinary
	Communicate your decision to the wardens, vestry, congregation
	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 information in your absence
	Plan exit interviews with the Canon and the wardens
	Explain boundaries around clergy departures
	Sign Covenant of Departure

Leave-taking Technical Essentials

- Inform the Bishop and Canon to the Ordinary in writing of your leaving and the date of your last service. Ideally, notify them informally when you begin thinking about leaving so they can work with you and the congregation in the transition process.
- 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 to your resignation. Title III, Canon 9, Sec. 15(a)
- The Canons require the wardens to notify the Bishop in writing that the parish is without a priest and to request the Bishop's assistance. Title III, Canon 9, Sec. 3(a)1
- 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, clarify whether it belongs to the church. If it was personally



bought, or professional funds were used, it likely belongs to the priest. If the priest would like to give items to the parish, or the parish to the priest, please note those in vestry minutes to create a clear record.

- 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. Refer to the *Book of Occasional Services* for suggestions or contact your Canon to the Ordinary 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 thoughtfully.
- 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 will no longer be your role to officiate at their baptisms, weddings, and funerals.
 - You may come back only after some time has passed, at the invitation of your successor; and then you will be present 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 to the Ordinary and the wardens and/or vestry and parish leaders. If needed, schedule a private exit conversation with the Bishop.
- 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, clarifying 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, both publicly and privately. Pray with and for them.
- Make yourself available for members to say goodbye, including visiting the homebound.
- Offer to meet pastorally with individuals with whom there may have been tension or conflict. Invite a warden to accompany you if needed. 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

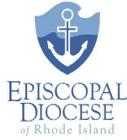
- Review with the wardens and vestry their leadership responsibilities for property, finance, and administration during the transition.
- Identify those in hospitals, nursing homes, assisted living facilities, and homebound, noting who expects to be visited and with what regularity. Be sure there is 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 Canon.
- Note preplanned funeral arrangements and where the information is filed.
- Prepare a calendar for the upcoming year, including episcopal visitations, patronal feasts, sunrise services, graduations, every-member canvas, stewardship, and annual meeting, and other special events.
- 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 offer letters and job descriptions.
- Prepare a file of service leaflets for the past three years. (Electronic files are encouraged.)
- Prepare a file of Eucharistic Minister and Eucharistic Visitor licenses, as well as any other licensed ministries, lists of current altar guild members, ushers, acolytes, and servers with contact information. Electronic files are encouraged. Pray with the lay ministers and thank them for their ministry with you.
- Describe unique parish customs for the conduct of worship, especially baptisms, 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, chrisms, 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 or delegate 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 rifts and disagreements, when possible 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 auto response message indicating your work email account is no longer in use.
- After your last day, do not return to the office, including 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 to worship with another congregation (and your family if applicable). 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.



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"