

The Episcopal Diocese of Massachusetts Mutual Expectations between Priest and Parish when the Priest is leaving

*Letting go, I become free to receive something new;
I may not see it now, but I have faith it will come
-Anonymous*

What a challenge it can be for priest and people to separate after a meaningful shared ministry that spans over years. The bonds of love and common purpose that bind a priest and members of a parish together are important and meaningful. The leave-taking of a priest, whether it be to a new call or retirement brings with it grief as all involved prepare to let go of those close bonds in preparation for what comes next. That grief and the other emotions that arise are a measure of the presence of Christ among us. Despite the grief and the pain of parting, many of us have experienced God's abiding with us in these transition times. And so, we entrust each other to God even as we part from dear companions in Christ.

The Body of Christ in the church is strengthened when we are thoughtful and prayerful about how we part from one another. Our diocesan community has experienced the following expectations as best practices during these times of parish clergy transitions. We commend them to you with faith that the healthy boundaries that flow from them, though sometimes uncomfortable, will help all involved to let go with love and integrity. Here is how we believe they benefit all involved:

- For the priest who is leaving one parish and has begun a new call with another parish, it enables them to focus their full pastoral energies on the considerable importance of getting to know their new parishioners and forging that pastoral relationship, without attempting to balance the old and the new simultaneously.
- For the bridge or interim priest in the parish which has had a change, it creates the emotional space and opportunity for them to be invited fully into the lives and tender moments of their new parishioners, without any awkward dynamics of 'replacing' the former pastor – which of course they will never do.
- For the members of that parish the priest is moving from, it presents a challenge, but it is intended to pave the way for the transition

from one pastor to the next. For the members of the parish the priest is moving to, it allows them the full attention of their newly arrived priest. And so, these expectations are commended to all for the care of all. If you want to request a change for your particular situation please be in contact with your regional canon who will consult with our bishops.

Expectations:

When it is announced that a priest will be leaving a parish:

- The regional canon sends this document to the priest and arranges a time to talk with them about it.
- The regional canon reviews this document with the wardens and the vestry in their initial conversation about the transition.
- The outgoing priest and wardens review the document with members of the parish, either in a forum, through newsletter articles, or by other means in the weeks leading up to the priest's last day. Assistance from the regional canon may be requested if needed.
- The wardens and regional canon work together to have a bridge priest or interim priest in place for the day after the outgoing priest leaves. If this is not possible immediately, supply clergy and/or clergy to provide pastoral care will be available, so that there will be continuity of pastoral presence.
- The regional canon provides the bridge or interim, or other clergy assigned to offer pastoral care, with these expectations as part of their onboarding.
- The bridge or interim, as soon as possible after they are assigned, will reach out to the outgoing priest for conversation about any ongoing pastoral care situations and to reaffirm these expectations and how they will communicate about them.

In the weeks immediately following the priest's last day:

- If a bridge or interim is not yet in place, the regional canon will work with the wardens to provide the best pastoral coverage solutions.
- Though it may be the desire of a parishioner or their family to have the outgoing priest return to attend to pastoral care needs, or to lead a baptism, wedding or funeral, for the reasons stated above it is expected that the bridge or interim will be the one to offer those pastoral care roles.
- The priest that has left the parish is expected to gently redirect any requests from their former parishioners for continuing pastoral care or funerals, baptisms and weddings to the bridge, interim or, if none is yet in place, to the regional canon.

During the interim time, and through the first year after the new rector/PIC's arrival:

- The former priest will continue to refer any requests for pastoral care and

- pastoral services to the bridge or interim and will not attend Sunday morning or other regularly scheduled services, parish programs or gatherings of their former parish.
- The former priest and their family members are welcome to ask the discretion of the bridge/interim/new rector/PIC if they would like to attend weddings or funerals as well as concerts, exhibits and other events open to the public, but which are not primarily parish gatherings. The former priest and their family members agree to abide by the decision of the bridge/interim/new rector/PIC. It is expected that the family of the former priest seek out spiritual community and pastoral care within another congregation.
 - The former priest will intentionally step back from pursuing ongoing friendships with individual members of the parish staff and with parishioners. Conversation with them at social events unrelated to the parish or out and about in the community are of course joyful moments of connection, and all should resist the urge to talk about the current life of the parish and the current clergy.
 - The former priest commits to take great care in this regard, so as not to disrupt the new connections growing between staff members, parishioners and the current clergy.
 - The bridge/interim and later the new rector/PIC shall initiate contact with the former rector as soon as possible to discuss these expectations and ways that they can support each other in abiding by them. They will also make every effort to develop a collegial relationship. All will publicly affirm one another's ministries and not undermine those ministries in any way.
 - It is understood that none of this is ever easy to navigate, and the regional canons stand ready to help if needed. The bishops can be consulted if their pastoral care or intervention is required.

After the first year of the new rector/PIC's tenure:

- The new rector/PIC will have the discretion to invite the former priest to participate in specific services and activities of the parish, or not to do so as they see fit. The former priest is expected to honor all such decisions of the new priest and to continue to honor the spirit of these expectations, understanding that their presence may have unintended negative consequences for the new priest's developing relationship with the parish.