

The Discernment Process in the Diocese of New Jersey

It is important to know at the outset that no present staff, your interim rector/vicar, or your transition consultant may become a candidate for rector or vicar in your congregation.

Congregations experience transitions in pastoral leadership when their pastor retires, resigns, or dies. This is usually a time of some uncertainty and anxiety for the members of the congregation. "How do we get another rector or vicar?" is the question uppermost on people's minds.

If your pastor is completing a long period of service to your congregation, there will undoubtedly be some strong emotional feelings about his/her departure, and uncertainty about what to do next.

We have a caring Bishop and staff who help congregations with their transitions on a regular basis. We will meet with you to give you assurance, and outline the process that will lead to the beginning of your next pastorate. This booklet is being provided for your leaders and members to provide a brief overview of the transition process.

Your Rector or Vicar is Leaving

Before the self-study and discernment processes begin, the termination process must be completed. When the priest notifies the vestry of his or her resignation, the senior warden calls to inform the Bishop that the resignation has been received and accepted. The vestry then plans and carries out appropriate events to celebrate the departing priest's ministry.

Your senior warden sets up a meeting between the vestry, bishop, and transition ministry staff to discuss the interim and discernment processes

An Interim Rector/Vicar is What You Need

Your wardens will be given the names of several interim clergy to interview for this important transition phase in the life of your church. All interims are trained to provide ongoing pastoral care and to guide you through the developmental processes of the interim period:

Evaluating our history

Discovering our new identity

Instituting leadership changes

Renewing denominational linkages

Committing to new ministries

In addition, your interim will work with you to ensure that: congregational records are up-to-date; the church is in compliance with *The Manual of Business Methods in Church Affairs*. A financial audit is completed, adequate bonding and insurances are established, and a property audit is performed. These tasks must be completed before any names are given to the search committee. The interim will not be involved in the self-study or discernment processes.

Praying Through Your Transition

Bathe your self-study and discernment processes in prayer, praying during worship services for God's guidance. Members should also pray daily for all those involved in the process. The following prayer may be used at vestry, self-study, and discernment committee meetings, as well as at all worship services:

Almighty God, giver of every good gift: Look graciously on your Church, and so guide the minds of those who shall choose a rector (vicar) for this parish (congregation), that we may receive a faithful pastor, who will care for your people and equip us for our ministries; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

(Book of Common Prayer, p. 818)

A Transition Consultant

The Diocese of New Jersey has a number of trained Transition Consultants to guide you through your self-study and discernment processes. Your consultant will meet with you regularly and is an invaluable part of the process.

It is important to understand that a "typical" discernment process takes from 12 to 18 months. Responsibility for it lies with your elected vestry and wardens. The process formally begins when the interim rector/vicar and your diocesan office give approval for the vestry to appoint a self-study and a discernment committee, and our Diocesan Anti-Racism Committee will then schedule training. Above all, each committee member should be a person of prayer. The vestry defines the committees' tasks, then develops a budget and guidelines for the work to be completed. At this point the Transition Consultant is called. In general the discernment process consists of three phases:

Self-Study

In this phase the self-study committee gathers information in order to create a "snapshot" of your congregation. The gathering of this information will be through surveys and focus groups. The type of information generated will include: current mission, goals for the future, congregational and diocesan history, programs, worship style, housing arrangements, financial information, and demographics. The Transition Consultant has many resources to aid in this process. This information is then used to create two documents:

1) The parish profile

This document can take many forms: a) CD or DVD b) website, or c) a booklet describing your congregation at this point in your life and ministry. The purpose of the profile is to introduce a potential candidate to your congregation. The end result needs to be true to who you see yourselves to be as a worshipping and ministering congregation, as well as who you are striving to be in the future.

2) The Office of Transition Ministry Portfolio

This document is prepared from the parish profile and all other information gathered. It is put into computer form and run through The Episcopal Church's computerized clergy database to assist in finding qualified candidates.

Support from the Bishop's Office

Discernment

During this second phase, the Bishop will forward to the Discernment Committee a list of potential candidates. The names on that list will come from a variety of sources including the computer search from The Episcopal Church, and from members of your congregation. The committee will receive a list of qualified candidates without discrimination.

Once your discernment committee has received names they will send profiles to each candidate, requesting answers to specific questions. Candidates are then often interviewed over the telephone. At this point, those candidates who are discerned as a good fit for your church are moved forward. These clergy are visited by a visiting team of the discernment committee who hears them preach. Further discernment takes place and the final candidates visit your church, along with their spouse or partner. The discernment committee then recommends a pre-specified number of candidates to the vestry. You should contact the Transition Ministry office to have background checks done.

The Call

In the third phase, these final candidates are invited to visit your congregation for several days to see the church and housing, and to get a feel for your community. After meeting all candidates, the vestry votes and proposes to elect your new rector or vicar. At this time the final candidate meets with the Bishop. Upon receiving permission from our bishop, the vestry elects the rector or vicar and extends the call. The call is considered in force when the warden, rector or vicar nominee, the Canon of the Ordinary, and the Bishop have all signed the Letter of Agreement and the Oxford Background check is complete.

Welcoming Your New Pastor

After the vestry has completed the calling of your new priest, your senior warden will oversee the process of transition. This will include: helping relocate the priest and his or her family, coordinating with the Bishop's office for The Celebration of New Ministry, setting up a process to review the expectations of the vestry and rector or vicar, along with periodic evaluations of the total ministry of the parish and the priest's role in that ministry, through a Mutual Ministry Review.

We're In This Together

At our Diocesan House, we pray regularly for each of our churches in a discernment process for a new priest. In addition to prayer support, we offer assistance at critical junctures along the way. We are here to serve you! Please call or email us whenever we can be of help.

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