

The Episcopal Church of the Good Shepherd

Diocese of Lexington

Policy on Rector Leave-taking

Rationale:

When a priest (rector, interim rector, assistant or associate) leaves a parish, tensions can arise between, on the one hand, the clergy person's desire to stay in touch with friends whom she or he has known for years, and, on the other hand, the need of the parish to make a transition in leadership unhampered by the continuing influence of the former rector, interim, or assistant. The departed clergy can, even inadvertently, exert a powerful influence that may keep the laity of the parish from establishing the appropriate relationship with the new rector. This can be particularly true if the former rector or clergy person remains in the community, or close by. While the Bishop is sensitive to the pastoral issues which can arise for a clergy person who leaves a parish, and for his or her family, clergy have a duty to serve the best interests of the parish and to follow the pastoral direction of their Bishop.

Guidelines for the Retirement or Resignation of a Rector:

1. The Rector's priestly, pastoral and administrative duties are terminated as of the effective date of his/ her resignation. This applies also to the interim period, the time before the next rector is called. The congregation needs some time and space between rectors to discover who they are now, where they want to go in the future and with what new leadership.
2. During the Interim Period, the former Rector is not to officiate or assist at baptisms, weddings or funerals in the congregation, but may attend as a worshipper on such occasions. This will prevent divided loyalties in the congregation and pressures on either the former or future Rector or the Interim Rector.
3. Priests leaving a parish are not to attend regular worship or communicate with parishioners *regarding parish matters* for the interim period and a period of up to a year after the new rector has arrived. If the priest wishes to attend his or her former parish at the end of that period, the priest should contact the Bishop. The Bishop will meet with the priest and the new Rector to discuss the appropriate course of action for the benefit of the parish. The Bishop may permit the priest to attend services at that time, or may require the priest to stay away for up to one or two years from the time the new rector arrives. It is best if the clergy spouse or partner also abides by these guidelines.
4. The former Rector is not to be involved in the day-to-day administrative affairs of the congregation during the Interim or after the new Rector has arrived.
5. The Rector's Discretionary Fund is a fund of the congregation. It is to be transferred back to the congregation to be held for the Interim Rector and the new Rector.

6. Priests leaving a parish are responsible for making clear to the parish that the pastoral relationship has ended and that it will not be appropriate for parishioners to discuss pastoral matters with the priest or to ask the priest to function sacramentally (regardless of the location of the service) during this period. Some priests publish a short letter in the newsletter specifying his or her understanding of this policy, and supporting it for the good of the parish. This practice provides a policy-based statement to which everyone can refer as needed. (See addenda for sample.) When the specified period is over, priests may return to the parish or function sacramentally in the parish only at the invitation of the new rector.

Statement on Ethics and the Former Rector:

This policy on the ethics of transition regards the sensitive matter that arises when clergy are requested to perform liturgical, pastoral acts by people who are their former parishioners. For practical purposes, the term “Rector” may be applied to Vicars and Assisting Clergy, including Deacons. Similarly, the term “new Rector” applies to Interim Clergy and Priests in Charge.

We start with the acknowledgment that there is no painless way out of an awkward situation. A good pastoral relationship is also a personal relationship. Therefore, it is not uncommon for people facing a wedding, funeral, baptism, etc. to desire the presence of clergy who have been important in their lives. One can expect that those times come when one would want the liturgical/pastoral presence of a former rector or assistant in the time of special occasions,

When a rector leaves a congregation he or she is no longer in a pastoral relationship with members of that congregation. While friendships are often formed between clergy and parishioners during the clergy’s tenure, the implications are clear. It is often (though not always) appropriate to do what other friends do – attend a wedding or funeral, or instance – but the pastoral act of presiding in these moments belong to the current rector of the congregation.

At times, the Interim Rector or the new Rector may call on the former Rector to participate in a liturgical, pastoral function. In all cases, the responsibility belongs to those clergy who have left to make clear that the pastoral relationship has ended.

Naturally, clergy want to do what they are trained to do, especially when people value our doing it; but as clergy who are accountable, it is of paramount importance that we do all we can to support the pastoral relationship that is in place.

Some helpful, specific responses that may be of assistance:

Former Rectors: Respond, for example, by saying “It’s simply not appropriate for me to do that. I’m not your rector anymore, but I’m glad you consider me a friend. I’d love to come if invited, as your other friends do.”

It is Not HELPFUL TO SAY: “You’ll have to talk to the Interim or new Rector about that.” That is often said, thinking that such a response respects the rector’s role. It does not. It puts the new Rector or the Interim in the no-win situation of acceding to the parishioner’s request and

relinquishing the Rector's role to the former Rector. For the new Rector to say "No" can result in him or her being perceived as cold, jealous, unfeeling, unresponsive and uncaring. Simply say that it's not your role anymore.

Current (and Interim) Rectors: Speak as affirmatively as possible of the relationship the predecessor has had with parishioners, but don't relinquish your pastoral role. When a current Rector assesses it to be appropriate and healthy, he or she may invite the previous Rector to participate in a secondary way-but the pastoral role belongs to the current Rector.

Parishioners: DON'T EVEN ASK. It is important that the entire congregation realize that no one of them is the exception to this rule, which is truly understood church wide-not simply in this Diocese or this parish.

A parishioner who makes a special request of a former Rector immediately puts both the former Rector and the current Rector in very awkward positions. *A parishioner affirms his/her former Rector best by inviting him/her to attend a function while showing high regard for the pastoral office he/she held by seeking out the new Rector to be the pastor. This is true even if a former Rector lives down the block and the current one is someone the parishioner hardly knows-yet.*

While some may feel this policy sounds cold and legalistic, especially when one is going through a significant life event, it is not meant to be. It is meant to be pastoral in the best sense of the word. While everyone encounters situations they regard as "exceptions," there are, in fact, few situations that prove to be exceptional.

This principle should also be applied to what might be called "gray areas" –contact with the former rector over personal life struggles, complaints about parish life, etc.

Clergy are well-advised that friends, former congregations and the Church are best served when all truly respect the pastoral boundaries by which we order our lives. Most clergy are very clear about these matters most of the time, but both clergy and the laity they serve are all human enough that an occasional reminder is good for all.

Exit Interview: Clergy who are leaving a parish must schedule an exit interview with the Bishop. The Bishop strongly encourages spouses or partners to be present and participate in the exits interview.

Addenda:

Sample Statement: 31 August 2010 will be my last official day as Rector Of Good Shepherd Episcopal Church, and the occasion of the last worship service at which I will preside and preach as Rector. It has been an important part of my journey, and that of my family. To say we will miss you all, and the life we have known together here, is truly an understatement.

Since we will be living in the area, I am sure our paths will cross again in informal settings, where I will look forward to seeing you and hearing how you are.

I want to make clear that as your **former rector**; I will not speak with you or listen to conversations regarding church matters. I will not be available to serve at special services- as those are the privileges and responsibilities of the **Current Rector**. I know that you and I share a love of this parish, and want what is best for it—and that I can count on your support in maintaining these clear boundaries as each of us move forward to God's continuing call to us.

IN Witness Whereof, this Policy on Priest Leave-taking is agreed upon and signed on the 17th day of August 2010.

The Church of the Good Shepherd, Inc.

By: Kathy Gross (Senior Warden)

The Rev. Robert L. Sessum

Robert L. Sessum Retiring Rector