

Leaving Well

A Discernment and Transition Guide for Clergy

Leaving Well

Introduction

In the fall of 2010, I was about to celebrate my 5th year as the rector of St. John's Episcopal Church in LaPorte, Texas. St. John's was filled with people that I deeply loved and the relationships we fostered and grew were precious to my family and to me. Halfway through my tenure there, Hurricane Ike made landfall just a few miles from the church and most of the people who called St. John's home were *catastrophically* affected by the storm. It took almost 2-years and a large team of people from the church, the community, and the Episcopal Church to rebuild homes and lives. It was an experience that even further cemented our relationships there. Less than 2-months after Ike made landfall, Ellen and I adopted our 18-month-old son and the church turned it into the biggest celebration one can imagine.

The people of St. John's had become our family in every sense of the word.

On that fall day in 2010 when we were remembering the 2-year anniversary of Ike's landfall, on the day when we once again recalled that awful experience and the ways in which God moved among us in the aftermath of a horrific storm, I preached to a full congregation and expressed my love for them along with my deep appreciation for the way in which they had helped in the recovery even while they rebuilt their own homes and lives. As I preached that Sunday, I looked out into the congregation that included 4-members of a search committee from St. Catherine's Episcopal Church in Missouri City, Texas.

The anxiety in my heart that day was palpable. A few months later, I began my ministry in a new place.

St. John's was given no warning about my pending departure until the day I announced it to them. When I did, the response was what I expected. Some were happy for me. Others were angry. Others wondered out loud about "what they had done wrong" or "why I had become so disenfranchised with the church." A few questioned my love for the church, and they sent emails to let me know that they "always knew I was looking to advance in my career". According to some, I had used their beloved church as a stepping stone to a bigger, more prestigious church. Even when I informed them that the new call was to a smaller church with unbelievable financial issues, it didn't matter. Those "stepping stone" accusations hurt the most because they implied that my endless expressions of love over my 5-years there were not authentic. If I could fully express the hurt in my heart during the 4-week goodbye I would certainly do so. But I cannot.

My last Sunday was a joyous celebration and the sendoff was extraordinary. The majority of the people at St. John's understood that it had less to do with them and more to do with following God's call. However, I could not shake the feeling that I had done something very wrong; that I had done something *to* them.

Although I was as firm in my new call as I could possibly be, I also knew/know what can happen when a church loses its rector, most especially when the pastoral relationship is a good one. I'd been careful over the years to never promise that I'd be there for a certain amount of time even though it was tempting at times to say, "I'll never leave St. John's". In the end, I knew I was leaving a congregation in limbo, anxious about its future, uncertain about the transition, and worrying about what would come next.

Mine is just one story in the long list of clergy who've moved from one congregation to another call in ministry. Saying goodbye and leaving well is essential not only for the congregation, but also for the clergy who serve them. While there is no fool-proof process that guarantees smooth transitions, there are some best practices that can help lower the anxiety as much as possible. Leaving well is an integral part of your ministry that can have lasting effects on you and your congregation.

The search process in the Diocese of West Texas is very detailed and can take a year or more to complete from start to finish. Search committees are well-trained in the process and the transition office works closely with them to ensure that the process is going well. However, clergy who enter search processes are not trained and they have no instructions or best practices available to help inform them (unless they seek them out on their own). The following pages are meant to serve as a guide for clergy who are discerning new calls and entering search processes. Whether called to a new ministry or not, clergy serving in one congregation while interviewing in another congregation can experience anxiety, uncertainty, and grief of their own. It is my hope that this will help you navigate this important season of your ministry and that it will give you an overview of how the search process works in the DWTX and what you might expect if you enter a process here. This resource comes to you in FAQ form. The questions are a compilation of those that we have received from our clergy who've entered into search processes in the DWTX and beyond.

It is my sincere hope that you will find this a valuable resource should you ever need it.

Yours in Christ…

The Ven. Mike Besson
Archdeacon, Diocese of West Texas

THE SEARCH PROCESS

In general, how do search processes work in the Diocese of West Texas?

You have received a phone call from a church or Diocesan transition officer asking you to pray and to think about entering a search process. You've read over the parish profile, looked at the website and Facebook page, and prayed about the possibility. If married, you've talked it over with your spouse/family and for some reason, you get that feeling you can't quite explain. You are interested. You want to know more. You think, "what could it hurt to have a first conversation?" So, you call the search committee chair and you tell her that you would like to enter their process.

It is important to know that having a conversation with a search committee *does not commit you to anything.* Search committees understand that you are doing the same thing that they are doing, you are prayerfully discerning. Some candidates will move to the next phase of the process and others will not. The decision to not move forward can be made by the search committee, by the candidates, or both. It is not uncommon for clergy entering into search processes to realize that the process has served to confirm their call to stay where they are. That too is discernment.

It is also important to know that search committees in the DWTX are trained to keep candidates' names confidential. They fully understand the consequences for their search and for their candidates if confidentiality is ever breached. The only people who will ever know that you were involved in a search are your Bishop, the Archdeacon, the search committee, and you. Even if you do not receive the call to the new church, the search committee will never reveal the names of the candidates they interviewed to anyone.

Most search processes in the DWTX involve 1-2 initial interviews either in person or by Zoom. When the search committee has completed the initial interviews with all their candidates, they will invite their list of "finalists" to their church for an on-site interview that typically involves a meal with the search committee, conversations, a tour of the facilities (after hours) and a tour of the community. They might also ask you to lead a full service just for them. Once all finalists have been interviewed, the search committee will give you a timeframe as to when you might expect to hear from them. They will then gather to select the candidate they intend to recommend to the vestry, as it is the vestry's responsibility to extend the call based solely on the recommendation of the search committee. This meeting between the search committee and vestry should happen no more than 7-days after the conclusion of the last interview with the last candidate.

At that meeting with the vestry, the search committee is tasked with answering the question, "Why do we believe that Reverend _____ should be called as our next rector?" Once the search committee has answered that question to the best of its ability, the vestry votes on the recommendation. If they concur, the senior warden and search committee chair contact the

candidate to extend the call. Often, the phone call will come immediately following the meeting.

What happens if a call is extended to me? Do I answer right away? Do I have time to think about it?

The short answer is yes to both.

After several rounds of interviews, tours of the church and community, and after much prayer and conversation, clergy often know ahead of time that if the call comes they will accept right away. Others might not be ready in the moment; this can happen for several reasons. Some may not have believed that they would get the call and are caught off guard. Others want a chance to talk more with their family. Others don't feel comfortable answering right away for a variety of reasons. Search committees are fully aware that they may not get a "yes" or "no" right away. They are advised to give no more than 3-days for an answer.

What happens if a call is extended, and I say "no"?

While a "no" will come as a disappointment to the search committee (maybe even a surprise), you should not feel pressured to accept a call for fear of disappointing the church that has extended a call to you. Having said that, it is also important to pay attention to serious doubts and concerns that you may have in the interview process. If at any time during the process you do not feel as though you should continue the process, please let the search committee chair know right away. To remain in the process for any reason other than to continue your discernment will unnecessarily lengthen the process for them.

What happens if a call is extended, and I say "yes"?

To begin, the search committee and vestry will be ELATED!

The senior warden and treasurer will set up a meeting to go over a compensation package with you. They will also have a letter of agreement for you to review and sign. The letter of agreement is the standard used in the DWTX and should include everything pertinent to your compensation, time off, sabbatical policy, etc. Your new church will also pay for your move. Once you have come to an agreement and the letter is signed (the letter includes your start date), the senior warden will remain in conversation with you regarding when they can announce the new call to their church. *Your new congregation will not announce the news of your call until you have authorized them to do so, typically a week after you have announced your resignation to your current congregation.*

At what point do we discuss compensation? At the beginning of the interview process? The end?

Long before the church received the names of its candidates, the vestry was required to meet with Canon Caroline Mowen to discuss the financial health of the church, the budget, stewardship, and a range of compensation that will be offered to the next rector. Search committees are encouraged *not* to discuss compensation at any time during the search process, as this is a conversation that is best left to the senior warden and treasurer. Since the vestry has already completed the work of discerning future compensation, the "negotiating" of compensation goes quickly and successfully. The DWTX makes standard/average compensation amounts available to clergy and vestries. You may contact Canon Mowen for a copy if you do not have one.

What is an OTM profile and why is it important?

The Office of Transition Ministry (OTM) offers a way to post an online resume that is made available to every transition officer in the Episcopal Church. The OTM profile includes contact information, work history, references, range of compensation you are seeking, as well as links to sermons, blogs, and other online resources that you want to include. The profile also asks 11-narrative style questions for clergy to answer such as, "describe your liturgical style and preference", "how are you preparing for the church of the future?", and "what is your experience of conflict involving the church and what is your experience in addressing it?" When search committees are given candidates' names, those names are accompanied by the OTM profile. This means that their first point of contact with you will be your profile. Your answers to the narrative questions are carefully read and discussed by search committees as they begin thinking about who they want to call for interviews. It is important for you to keep your profile updated and current even if you are not in a search process or do not currently intend to be in one. Some transition officers (to include your own) look for recently updated profiles and actively recruit clergy from other Dioceses.

If you do not have an OTM profile and would like to know more, please contact Mike Besson at 281-787-6311.

Do I need to call my Bishop if I am in a search?

Full disclosure is always a good thing. If you are going to enter a search process in another Diocese, please contact Bishop Read to let him know. You can be assured that your desire to enter a process outside of the DWTX will not be "held against you". Discernment is discernment no matter where it takes place. For searches in the DWTX, the Archdeacon has already reviewed the list of candidates with Bishop Read, so he is aware that you are in a search process. You will not be placed on a search list in the DWTX without having first spoken with the Archdeacon, as congregations are not allowed to contact and/or interview candidates who have not been approved by Bishop Read.

What if an opening comes up in the Diocese and I am interested, who do I call?

Most churches in transition appear on the Diocesan website. The transition page will also tell you where each church is in the process (pre-search, active search, search closed). If you have an interest in learning more about a church entering a search process, please contact the Archdeacon for more information and conversation. You *should never* contact the church on your own to inquire about their search process.

Can assisting clergy/curates become rector/vicar of the congregations they are serving if an opening occurs?

Whenever a rector announces his/her resignation and a curate or assisting clergy is already on staff the question will be asked, "can our curate or assistant become our new rector?" There are many layers to the answer.

When rectors/vicars resign and move on to other places, it offers congregations an opportunity to take a deep breath, to take a step back, and to think about who they are, where they've been, and where God might be leading them in the future. Congregations tend to focus most of their energy thinking about the future. What challenges do we face and how might we address them? Are there some things we might think about doing differently? What gifts and qualities are we looking for in our next rector? The transition in clergy often finds congregations thinking out of the box and seeing things from a different perspective; it is this aspect of transitions that can energize the people in the church. Of course, part of that process involves interviewing clergy who have expressed interest in learning more and beginning a conversation. The candidates are also energized about "what might be". It is common to have candidates from the DWTX as well as candidates from all over the country, even in other parts of the world. It is a gift to churches in transition to have several well qualified candidates to visit with. It is also a gift to the candidates to have the opportunity to enter conversations with amazing churches who have so much to offer! To sum it up, the process enables real, authentic discernment to take place for the candidates and the congregation.

Can curates and assistants step in and lead the congregations they serve? In some instances, yes. When they do, it is likely that much of what appears in the paragraph above cannot take place. Clergy already in place are often seen as "extensions of the rector" and there can be an expectation that things will move along in the same way they always have. This may not always be a bad thing, but it makes authentic discernment difficult at best. In other situations, congregations have trouble moving from "Father Mike as assistant" to "Father Mike as rector". This might not seem like much of a challenge on the surface because Father Mike already knows everyone. Father Mike already understands the culture of the church and Father Mike already has relationships with the congregation. What may not be so obvious is that the "buck did not stop at Father Mike's desk" while the previous rector was in place. Now it does. This greatly changes the dynamic between Father Mike and the leaders, the staff, and others in the congregation. Some may find they have a hard time going to Father Mike with certain things because that's just not the way its been in the past. Along with that, the possibility exists that

people will be more critical of Father Mike and less forgiving since "he should already know what he's doing". The learning curve will not be the same. This also holds true for the priest, who quickly discovers the difference in the relationship dynamics once they are in charge.

Can curates or assisting clergy be placed in the search process? Yes and no. That might seem like a simple answer, but it is not. When a beloved priest already serving a congregation is placed in a search process along with other candidates from other congregations, it can place the search committee and vestry in an incredibly awkward position as they are left with a very real possibility; what if we choose to call someone other than the beloved priest already in place? What effect will it have on the priest? What effect will it have on the congregation? Can the search committee see all candidates as equals and can they give everyone a fair shot when a beloved assistant is among the candidates? Despite their best intentions and efforts, the answer could be no, which effectively hijacks the search process and prohibits real discernment.

Can the assisting clergy see a "no" as anything other than rejection? Can they continue in their ministry as before knowing that the leaders of the church chose someone else? What about the congregation? If they learn that the beloved assistant was in the process and was not called, will they be angry? Could it cause them to reject the new rector's leadership, or to have negative feelings towards them because it's not who they wanted, which places the new rector at a disadvantage due to circumstances beyond their control?

It is impossible to answer these questions with any sense of accuracy until the search is complete. Given the brevity of these questions, serious thought must be given to them and a conversation between the Bishop, the vestry, and the priest must take place before it can be considered.

LEAVING WELL

When should I tell someone from my church that I am leaving? Who should I tell?

Your senior warden should be the first to know. Your senior warden must also understand the confidential nature of your news. All others in the congregation should hear the news of your departure from only one person…you. Once you have discussed your pending resignation with your senior warden, a meeting of your vestry should be planned ASAP even if it is not on the normal meeting day. Your senior warden will need to know that it is standard procedure for them to remain in place until the transition is completed, and a new rector is called.

Once you announce your resignation to your vestry, you will want to plan to:

1. Announce your resignation to your staff the following day, with your letter of resignation to the congregation going out the same day.
2. Announce your resignation in person to your congregation the following Sunday.

Should the letter go out first, or is it best to announce my resignation in church and then send the letter for those who could not attend?

There are many schools of thought on this; send a letter and then announce, or announce then follow with a letter? Our guidance would be to send your letter first (both email and snail mail) and then announce/discuss in person the next Sunday. You will also want to make sure you include the date of your last Sunday in your letter and announcement, as your parishioners will make every effort to be there.

Why is this our guidance?

Imagine that you are a lay member of a church. Your rector has a good pastoral relationship with the church. You love him/her, and they love you right back. You look forward to church on Sundays because you enjoy the relationships and connections you've made, you long for the Eucharist, and you look forward to hearing what your rector will say from the pulpit. You arrive for church, you visit with friends over coffee, shake hands with the rector, and sit in the pews just like you do every Sunday. When it comes time for the message, you hear these words:

"I want to begin this morning by saying to you that I love you, that I have enjoyed our time together, and that I have made the very difficult decision to leave St. _____ because I have accepted a call to another church."

You can't believe what you are hearing. What did she say? Leaving? What??? What began as a normal day in church turned out to be anything but normal. In fact, you may have great difficulty focusing on anything else that day because of this shocking announcement.
This is not to say that your people won't still be surprised by your email/letter announcing your resignation. However, your congregation will have read it, will have had some time to digest it, and then will come to church knowing ahead of time that you will be talking about your departure. If you make the choice to send your letter ahead of time, it is important to think about what can become the "elephant in the room" that next Sunday. In other words, consider making your news the focus of your words to the congregation that day. This is not to suggest leaving the scriptures behind. It is to suggest that since your resignation will be at the forefront of everyone's mind and heart, you will want to consider using your time to express your love and appreciation for them, to use your news to talk about what it means to follow God's call (especially when it is hard), and that all will be well despite the news.

Why are resignations announced with no warning? Isn't there a better way?

This is the most commonly question asked by both clergy and the people of the congregations they serve. "Why can't anyone know that you are interviewing with another church, or why weren't we told that this might be coming?" If you have entered a search process while serving in another congregation, you may know the wide spectrum of feelings and emotions you can experience. It can be a difficult balance to remain fully engaged in your present congregation while at the same time thinking about future possibilities with another. The nature of the

pastoral relationship between clergy and congregation is already a complex one. The relationship could become even more complex if the congregation becomes aware that you are looking elsewhere. For the remainder of your time there, no matter how long that might be, your congregation will be waiting for news of your departure. It will be very difficult to convince them otherwise. They might believe that you are no longer fully committed and that it is only a matter of time before you move on. Long-term planning can become difficult since they already know that you might leave at any time, even if you have no intention of doing so. Conversations around your discernment elsewhere, no matter how pastoral and compassionate they might be, will likely have negative impacts on stewardship, visioning, as well as overall commitment by the laity. In other words, informing your congregation that you are interviewing in another place can move them to see you as more of an interim than anything else.

What should I do in the weeks following my announcement? How long should I stay?

The best way to answer the first question is to let you know what the Diocese will suggest to your vestry once you have announced your resignation. Before your final Sunday, your Bishop and the Archdeacon will schedule a meeting with your vestry to talk about the next steps and to assure them that we will be with the church every step of the way. They will also answer questions and address concerns. At that meeting, they will suggest that rather than focusing so much on the next steps, to focus more on celebrating with you and spending time with you. They will be encouraged to share stories, to thank God for the time together, and to plan a going away celebration that not only celebrates your time with them, but also celebrates who they are as a congregation. Your church will be encouraged to make it the best sendoff possible.

You are encouraged to do the same. Spend time with the people in your church. Give them the space to visit with you and to share their grief, their joys, and their appreciation while you do the same with them. Be as present as you can possibly be, even though you are at the same time looking forward to what your next call will bring.

Once you have announced your resignation, it is standard practice to remain in place for 4-5 weeks. Along with the things mentioned above, you may also want to think about:

1. Are there administrative tasks/responsibilities that you currently do that need to be handed off to someone else? How would you answer the question; “once I leave, someone will need to be responsible for_____.” One example; many clergy are the first to arrive on Sundays to unlock, turn the lights on, make the coffee, and ensure that the buildings are ready. Who will need to do that once you depart?
2. Are there any projects/ministries that you are leading that need to be wrapped up or handed over to someone else?
3. Who will be responsible for pastoral care emergencies if an interim does not arrive right away?

4. Is there anything you need to do to equip/encourage the vestry for what's next? Are there concerns that are not confidential? Would those concerns catch your leadership off-guard?

How involved can I be once I leave?

You have no doubt developed close relationships and friendships in your time as rector of your congregation. Once you leave, you may be asked to return to do weddings, funerals and to provide pastoral care most especially in the weeks and months immediately following your last Sunday. This will serve as yet one more example of the impact you have made and the meaningful nature of your relationship.

If and when the calls come from your former church to be involved in some way, you will feel the tug in your heart to say yes, while at the same time wondering if it's the right or appropriate thing to do. What's best for you? What's best for them? It is not a best practice to accept an invitation directly from a former parishioner to be involved in the life of your former church. Rather, those invitations should come from the clergy in place. You may want to consider letting your congregation know this before your departure. It is also not a best practice to promise to do future funerals, weddings, etc. before you leave. While the intention is honorable and the desire heartfelt, it is best to leave those decisions to the discretion of the interim or the new rector. Remember that part of the relationship building that will happen with the next rector will come by way of their own pastoral care of the congregation. This will also be true for you in your new call. You may very well receive a call from the clergy in place from your former congregation to participate or to be involved sacramentally, etc.

It is up to you to decide whether you will do so.

Is it appropriate for me to speak with the former rector before I begin the new call?

Is it appropriate? Yes. Is it always necessary? No. The decision is entirely yours.

What if former parishioners contact me about church business?

This happens more often than you might think, most especially when you have close relationships with the people in your congregation. You may receive phone calls about "the terrible decision the new rector made" or about something that came up in a vestry meeting that you "would never have allowed". In the interim/transition, you may receive emails and phone calls about how the attendance is dropping, about how the budget is worsening, or that people are "leaving the church". Your closest friends may call you to simply vent about everything.

Once you leave, there may be some business and administrative questions that will inevitably come up. When the leaders are unsure about what standard operating procedure might be, or about something you may have simply forgotten to delegate, they will want to contact you for

clarification. This is totally appropriate. However, all questions should come from the interim priest or from the new rector, as what might seem like questions for clarification might actually be a way to triangulate you into something else without the interim or rector's knowledge. "We talked to Father Mike on Tuesday, and he said that we've always done it this way…" is not the kind of thing a new rector wants to be confronted with at a vestry meeting, and it is probably not what you said in the first place.

Will the Diocese require anything of me before I serve my last Sunday?

Although not required, the Archdeacon will contact you and ask for you to participate in an exit interview. The questions allow you to reflect on your time at the church and your ministry with the people of your congregation, and to have a conversation about whatever it is you are moved to talk about. The information you share will remain confidential.

CONCLUSION

The information presented here is meant to serve as a guide and a resource for you; its purpose is to provide an overview of the search process in the DWTX. It is also meant to serve as a guide if you find yourself in a season of discernment. The guidance offered does not address every situation or answer every question. Rather, the attempt has been to answer the "frequently asked questions" that arise when clergy enter into discernment, enter search processes, and then accept a call to another place. While the information provided has been gleaned from our work with numerous congregations and clergy along with personal experience, it does not address every situation and every context. What might be a best practice in one congregation may not be a best practice in another.

Bishop Read, Archdeacon Mike Besson, and Canon Caroline Mowen are always available for you if you have any questions or concerns in the search process/transition. Part of our ministry to our clergy and congregations is to make the transition period as smooth as possible, and to be available to answer questions, address concerns, or to just listen if need be. We consider this a high priority.

Your ministry in the DWTX cannot be appreciated enough.