

Transition in the Episcopal Church

To everything there is a season, and a time to every purpose under heaven. Ecclesiastes 3:1-8

There comes the time in the life of every parish when one rector leaves and another must be found.

If rectors were simply program managers, this transition might be simple. But of course, they are not. A priest is shepherd to the sheep, consolation to the grieving, beloved parent to a congregation's children, theological instructor to the curious, liturgical leader, and pastor of the tight and holy community that is the parish. Departure of one rector is wrenching; installation of another is rejuvenating; and to go from the depth of one to the height of the other requires a process. In the Episcopal Church, that process is attended by a parish's Vestry, an Interim minister, a Search Committee, and the Diocesan Bishop's Office. This is a basic outline of the process.

Ending

Transition actually begins with the announcement that a rector is departing. The emotional loss of a pastor – the awareness that confidences shared may never be revisited, that energy created may leave with the creator, and that an era of parish history is coming to an end – starts a true soul search, if not an actual rector search. Consciously or not, congregants respond to the departure announcement with reassessment. They consider their role in the parish body and evaluate their investment in the congregation and community. They begin to think about why they are at that particular church and whether their presence was contingent upon the departing rector. Though the official search process begins after the rector is gone, the soul-searching of transition begins as soon as departure is announced. It is cemented by a visit from the Diocesan Transition Officer (In Tennessee, this is the Canon to the Ordinary, or Bishop's Assistant) and the assignment of an Interim Rector.

Creation

Once the rector leaves, the parish prepares to search in earnest. First, the Vestry works with the Diocese to appoint an Interim Rector or Priest-in-Charge. That individual is invited to care for the congregation between rectors. Interims and Priests-in-Charge are special leaders who understand that their task is not only to minister but also to help congregations move forward on their journey. These individuals frequently hold a mirror to congregations, invite them to try new liturgies, and challenge them in areas that need attention.

Soon after the arrival of the Interim, the Vestry establishes a Search Committee. The Committee is guided by the Bishop's Office through the process and begins their work.

The Search Committee has one overall purpose: to help the congregation find the best rector candidates. The Search Committee is charged with its task by the Vestry. The charge may be more or less specific, depending on the Vestry's preference. The Committee may be large or small, depending on congregational needs. The Search Committee should always, however, be representative of the congregation, be spiritually driven, have ample time to perform Search duties, and have effective interpersonal and group dynamics skills. The Search Committee must work together in a challenging environment and must also be the first contact with candidates – those duties require special people.

Alignment

Once the Search Committee has been identified, it must align around its task. In this stage of the process, the Search Committee meets to gain understanding of their role, receive introduction to all the players, calendar their time, and define their process norms.

The Search Committee's task is not simply a practical one. It is also a reverent one. Part of their challenge is to open themselves to the Holy Spirit and to hear God's hope for their congregation. Given that, many Search Committees appoint Chaplains and build prayer into their schedule.

Search Committee members are parish representatives. They are the hands and feet of the congregation, and as such, they must stay closely connected to the body of the parish. One of their earliest tasks is to define how they will communicate with the congregation about their activities and how they will ensure they represent the congregation accurately and adequately. This is part of ongoing alignment.

Self-Exploration/Assessment

After alignment, the Search Committee leads the congregation through a period of self-exploration. Because a new rector represents a new stage in the parish's journey, each congregation must know where it will begin that journey and where it would like to go. Most parishes have some data about their direction. Strategic plans, attendance goals, and community missions frequently exist. Search invites the parish to review those directions and also to open the floor for congregants to have a say in the future. For many parishes, a new rector will only cause a slight change of trajectory. For some, a new rector represents a dramatic shift in intention. For others, a new rector puts action to plans that have been in place for ages. In all cases, the ministry must start with the parish discerning its desired future.

Self-exploration in a Search can take many forms. Search Committees gather all written data, including parish brochures, welcome packets, past Profiles, strategic plans, neighborhood demographics, and the like. In reviewing those materials, they generate topics for exploration. Topics are things critical to the parish, themes that appear consistently in parish history, programs that are core to the parish mission, challenges the parish still needs to address. These topics are then explored with the entire congregation in focus groups, congregational meetings, surveys, or other creative pursuits.

Self-exploration is critical to Search because it is the process through which the parish holds itself accountable for its history and its core characteristics. This stage invites the congregants to be honest with themselves about who they are, what their strengths are, and what improvements they require. It also invites congregants to reflect on who they are not or who they wish they could be. Honesty in this part of the process is crucial because the result of Self-Exploration becomes two documents: the Parish Profile and another document used by the Episcopal Church's national office – The Office of Transition Ministries (OTM) Portfolio.

The Parish Profile, rather than being a marketing glossy, is an authentic assessment of a parish, its history, and its desired future. These days, the document is hosted on the parish website instead of being printed. The Profile is the first documentation that potential candidates see about the parish, and its contents are what inspire a candidate to apply or bow-out. In order for candidates to accurately assess their interest and fit, they need to know what the parish will truly require of them. Because hiring a rector is ultimately about finding the right match – not about filling the seat – everyone suffers when a Profile inaccurately represents its parish.

The Profile is also used by the Search Committee to define the characteristics and competencies required of the new rector. With this information, the Search Committee completes the OTM Portfolio, specifically seeking clergy with the gifts the parish needs. And later, the Search Committee uses Profile contents to craft interview questions that get to the core of what the parish needs in a new leader.

The OTM portfolio is prepared and sent to the Bishop's Office, who uploads it to the database containing parishes looking for clergy and clergy looking for a church.

At the end of Self-Exploration, the Profile and Portfolio are published and sent with appropriate forms to the Diocesan Office. That Office posts the requirements to generate candidates and, after about two months, provides a candidate list to the Search Committee. By the time the Search Committee receives the list, the Canon to the Ordinary has already done a preliminary background check on the candidates and ensured they are still available for consideration.

Discernment

Once it has a candidate list, the Search Committee begins its discernment. It starts by sending letters and the Profile to each candidate, usually asking those who remain interested to respond to a series of questions.

Initial contact is followed by a review of candidate resumes, phone interviews, interviews during visits to the candidates' current parishes, interviews during candidate visits to the Search Committee's parish, and an interview by the Bishop of the Diocese of Washington. At each of these review and interview stages, the Search Committee is allowed, but not required, to eliminate candidates from consideration.

The candidate review process is a confidential one. During it, the Search Committee will communicate its progress to the congregation and Vestry, but it will not communicate candidate names, locations, or qualifications. The Episcopal community is a small one, and the sharing of any details could result in rumors about the candidates. Those rumors can be detrimental to the candidates (e.g. if their parishes do not know they are looking for new employment) and can be detrimental to the Search Committee (e.g. if they are approached with unsolicited feedback and opinion about candidates).

The Search Committee's final act, before being disbanded, is to identify however many candidates the Vestry required. The Search Committee presents the candidates in alphabetical order, unranked, and with packets of information for the Vestry to review. The Search Committee then destroys all its data and is officially finished with its work.

Decision and Call

Under canon law, it is the Vestry who has responsibility for electing a new rector. Thus, the Vestry interviews the candidates presented to it by the Search Committee and discerns its selection. That discernment can take many forms, from the more corporate discussion to a silent prayer session. It is often facilitated, and ideally, it is supported in prayer by the congregation. Vestry members frequently report that the Holy Spirit plays as much a role as they do in the decision-making process.

Once the Vestry makes its selection, it notifies the Bishop and then calls the chosen candidate. If that individual accepts the call, a letter of agreement is sent to the candidate and the Diocese. Then a starting date is determined, and the decision is announced to the congregation.