

Discerning God's will for parish and priest:

A time of transformation

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Second in a series concerning the process of discerning new leadership for a parish in the Diocese of Lexington and the Episcopal Church. This article includes a check list for the call process which all parishes should retain for reference.



The second stage of ending a pastoral relationship and beginning a new pastoral relationship is a spiritual process which has its own vocabulary and procedures.

In the Episcopal Church, a congregation opens itself to God's will for their parish, and to the process of discerning the ordained person who will be called to lead the parish into the next stages of its mission and ministry. At the same time, there will be ordained men and women who are open to the possibility of a "call" to a new stage of ministry. Many of them will be listed with updated profiles with the national Church Deployment Office. Others will recognize their readiness when asked by someone if they are willing to be nominated for a specific position.

Corporations "search" and "hire"; churches "discern" and "call." It is an important distinction that Nominating Committees, Vestries and congregations must recognize. Experiences from secular "search" or "hiring" processes may in fact sabotage the transformational work in which a congregation is engaged during the process of discernment and call.

Individuals who have come from other denominations may not be familiar with the Episcopal process for calling a new rector. For instance, in the Methodist Church, the Bishop appoints pastors to serve congregations, with the expectation that there will be a change of pastors as frequently as every four years. In the Roman Catholic Church, the Bishop appoints the Pastor, without input from the congregation.

In the Presbyterian Church, a nominating committee acts in secrecy until a final candidate is presented to the congregation for a vote, which is monitored by the Presbytery.

In Congregationalist churches, everyone in an individual congregation casts a vote to elect a pastor.

In the Episcopal Church, famous for its "middle way", the process combines aspects of the input of the congregation with the authority of the Bishop.

The process that we know today had its beginnings in 1969 at the Seattle General Convention when the Joint Commission on Clergy Deployment was charged with developing a new system which would be more organized and more open, rather than the informal and often secretive manner in which clergy had previously been called. The advent of computer technology as a primary screening tool eliminated the majority of

geographic, racial, ethnic and gender constraints. In 1970, an electronic "Clergy Data Bank" was established, with a goal of ensuring that parishes have a better opportunity for a "right" match.

The "steps" that are listed in the check list for congregations to ensure that they are following the process as prescribed by both canons and diocesan policy are available to every congregation, whether parish or mission. In the case of mission congregations, the nominating committee submits a name to the Bishop's Committee who forward that recommendation to the Bishop, who alone can appoint a Vicar for a Mission congregation.

According to Charles and Diane Crane, authors of the Cowley book *THE CLERGY SEARCH DILEMMA*, (1991) each year, 700 of the some 7,800 Episcopal parishes and missions are in the process of seeking a new rector or vicar.

The Cranes, who interviewed some 200 priests and calling committees regarding their experience of the process quote one rector as saying: "This process should be more like getting married than like getting a job, and we will live together more like a married couple than employers and employee. Either you and I are going to fall in love, or I'm not the person for you."

Conclude the Cranes: That's the way the process ought to work, and that's what we mean when we talk about the involvement of the Holy Spirit.

Steps to begin the process:

The first step in each phase of the process could well read "check with the Diocesan office." When in doubt, Wardens and Nominating Committee Chairs should always err on the side of clearing the next step with the Bishop or the Deployment officer. Better safe than sorry. Congregations have been known to make major mistakes which could have been prevented had they

first checked with the Bishop's office. A parish typically goes through this process once in a decade; the Bishop's office typically shepherds 5-7 parishes through the nomination and calling process each year, and is thus familiar with updates to the deployment process and resources available.

A Diocesan Bishop heard from a third party that a cardinal parish in his Diocese had issued a call to a priest without clearing their final choice with his office. A call was placed to the Senior warden, who, obviously attempting to placate the Bishop, said, "Well, you know, sometimes you just don't tell the CEO everything!"

Canonically, this real-life scenario could not and should not happen.

In case you have not noticed," the Bishop responded to the Senior Warden, "I am not a CEO. I am a Bishop—and if you have not figured out the difference, you should not be serving as Senior warden of an Episcopal parish!"

The process of calling a rector in the Episcopal Church is about relationships, responsibility and authority—and the circumventing of the process can jeopardize a congregation, as well as the clergy involved. While there are those who do not understand the historic Episcopate or lines of authority in the Episcopal Church, whose very name means "Bishop", the following of the process has nothing to do with a particular bishop seeking to exercise power, and everything to do with getting a new relationship of clergy, parish and diocese off on the right foot.

In a long and complicated process, a check list and the experienced staff at the diocesan office can be the best friends a vestry, nominating committee and interim rector can have—enabling the tasks of the interim period to take place as new relationships unfold, and the journey toward a new opportunity in ministry continues.

CHECK LIST FOR THE INTERIM PERIOD IN THE DIOCESE OF LEXINGTON

Note: The following check-list is a guide for congregations who are involved in calling a new rector. It suggests steps, stages and procedures for a "normal" interim period, which will enable parish leadership and nomination committee to know what is coming next. How each task is accomplished will be unique to each congregation.

I. TERMINATION (Vestry)

Date Yes/No

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| ___ | ___ | A. | Bishop formally notified in writing by the Senior Warden that the Rector has resigned or will retire. |
| ___ | ___ | B. | Bishop and Deployment Officer meet with Wardens and Vestry to discuss and assess need for an interim or how Parish is to be served |
| ___ | ___ | C. | With assistance of Deployment Officer, make short-term |
| ___ | ___ | D. | Make plans to say "Good bye" to the Rector. |
| ___ | ___ | E. | Appoint persons/committees to keep parish programs operating as needed. |
| ___ | ___ | F. | Bishop, in consultation with the interim, wardens and Vestry determines when search process is to begin |
| ___ | ___ | G. | Bishop, again in consultation, assigns a consultant for the process |
| ___ | ___ | H. | Clarify final date for salary and benefits, including pension, insurance, unused vacation, etc. |

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