

Rector Transition at Ascension

Early in my time as an editor of a religious publication, I became aware of how much jargon is used by those of us, both clergy and laity, whose lives are immersed in the church. Using such jargon may leave newcomers and even some longtime members feeling on the outside or out of the loop. Even so, the 'jargon' often does have a purpose and seems to be inevitable.

With this awareness I thought it would be helpful to share with you the following glossary of terms, some or all of which we will all be hearing in the coming months. If you have questions about the words we're using in conjunction with the transition, please reach out, in an email, phone call, or in person after Mass. In this realm there are no 'bad' questions. Yours may actually be of help to others. - Mother Meghan Murphy-Gill+

A Glossary of Terms

(Those with asterisks are taken from the [Episcopal Dictionary of the Church](#) found on the website of the national church.)

DIOCESE *

The territorial jurisdiction of a diocesan bishop. The term also refers to the congregations and church members of the diocese. Before the church adopted the word it had a long secular usage. It was originally used in the Roman Empire for an administrative subdivision. A diocese was a division of a prefecture of the Roman Empire. In the reorganization of Diocletian and Constantine, the Roman Empire was divided into twelve dioceses. As the church expanded out from the cities, it adopted the use of the word "diocese," and ecclesiastical dioceses tended to correspond to civil units. For example, at first the Diocese of Georgia corresponded with the State of Georgia. Later, many statewide dioceses were divided into smaller dioceses for pastoral and practical reasons. For example, the State of New York includes six dioceses. In more recent years, some dioceses have been formed from portions of more than one state. The Diocese of the Rio Grande includes all of New Mexico and part of west Texas, and the Diocese of the Central Gulf Coast includes portions of southern Alabama and western Florida. In England, the diocese is the territory of the bishop and the parish is a subdivision of it. Every diocese in the Episcopal Church has a Standing Committee. When there is a bishop in charge of the diocese, the Standing Committee is the bishop's council of advice. When there is no bishop, bishop coadjutor or suffragan bishop, the Standing Committee is the ecclesiastical authority of the diocese. A diocese usually meets annually in a diocesan convention. Each diocese is entitled to representation in the House of Deputies by not more than four ordained persons, presbyters or deacons, canonically resident in the diocese, and not more than four lay persons, who are confirmed adult communicants of the Episcopal Church and in good standing in the diocese. Dioceses also elect clerical and lay deputies to the Provincial Synod. The Constitution and Canons of the Episcopal Church provide guidelines for the division of a diocese. Some persons insist that the diocese is the primary unit in the Episcopal Church.

DIRECTOR OF MINISTRIES

In our diocese, this role is currently filled by Andrea Mysen, who is currently also serving as the Acting Head of Staff for the Bishop's Staff. Mother Mysen serves as our diocesan contact person who will assist the parish as represented by the Vestry in the search for an interim rector as well as in the training of a search committee and the facilitation of the congregational assessment of identity and mission.

INTERIM RECTOR

The priest who serves in the role of a rector during an interim period after the resignation or retirement of a rector and before a new rector is called. The interim rector has four tasks during this period: 1. To facilitate a sense of closure among the parish following the departure of a rector. 2. Assist the parish with discernment of congregational identity and mission. 3. Strengthen ties with the bishop, bishop's staff, and diocese. 4. Provide an intentional welcome and orientation for the new rector.

RECTOR *

The priest in charge of a self-supporting parish. The rector is the ecclesiastical authority of the parish. The term is derived from the Latin for “rule.” The rector has authority and responsibility for worship and the spiritual jurisdiction of the parish, subject to the rubrics of the Book of Common Prayer, the constitution and canons of the church, and the pastoral direction of the bishop. The rector is responsible for selection of all assistant clergy, and they serve at the discretion of the rector. The church and parish buildings and furnishings are under the rector's control. The rector or a member of the vestry designated by the rector presides at all vestry meetings.

SEARCH COMMITTEE *

A group appointed by the Vestry and charged to identify candidates for the position of bishop, rector, or other ministry in the life of the church. It may be the responsibility of the search committee to clarify the job description and identify the qualifications that are needed for the job. It is often the responsibility of the search committee to advertise the position or otherwise seek applications and nominations; to review applications, supporting documents, and references; to interview applicants; and to recommend one or more “finalists” to the body or group charged with final responsibility for the selection or appointment.

VESTRY *

In England the annual election of churchwardens took place in Easter week. The parishioners gathered at the church to hear the outgoing wardens render their accounts and elect their successors. The parishioners assembled in the vestry, the room off the chancel where the clergy vested. The assembled parishioners came to be known as the vestry. These were open vestries in that all adult male parishioners could participate. It was like a modern annual congregational meeting. In Virginia the parishes were very large and it was difficult to get all the male parishioners together. So they would meet only once and elect twelve of their number to serve for life. This was known as a closed vestry. The transition to a closed vestry was completed by 1633 or 1634, when a Vestry Act was passed. It provided that “there be a vestrie held in each parish.” The current vestry evolved from this colonial pattern.

The vestry is the legal representative of the parish with regard to all matters pertaining to its corporate property. The number of vestry members and the term of office varies from parish to parish. Vestry members are usually elected at the annual parish meeting. The presiding officer of the vestry is the rector. There are usually two wardens. The senior warden leads the parish between rectors and is a support person for the rector. The junior warden often has responsibility for church property and buildings. A treasurer and a secretary or clerk may be chosen. These officers may or may not be vestry members. The basic responsibilities of the vestry are to help define and articulate the mission of the congregation; to support the church's mission by word and deed, to select the rector, to ensure effective organization and planning, and to manage resources and finances.

WARDENS OF A PARISH *

Officers of a parish. Two wardens are typically selected to serve with members of the vestry. The wardens are generally ranked “senior” and “junior.” The mode of selection and duties of the wardens are determined by state law, diocesan canon, or parish by-laws. The senior warden is usually the primary elected lay leader of the congregation, and serves as a principal liaison between the parish and the rector. The junior warden is often given responsibility for the upkeep of the parish buildings and grounds. The senior warden typically presides at vestry meetings in the absence of the rector, and the junior warden presides at vestry meetings if both the rector and the senior warden are absent. In case of clerical vacancy, the senior warden may be the ecclesiastical authority of the parish for certain purposes. In the BCP service for the Celebration of a New Ministry (p. 559), the wardens begin the institution at the beginning of the service by addressing the bishop. They express the congregation's intent to welcome the new minister and state that the new minister has been selected in a prayerful and lawful manner. If the new minister is the rector or vicar of the congregation, a warden may present the keys of the church to the new minister during the induction ceremony. In some parishes, the senior warden is known as the “priest's warden,” and the junior warden is known as the “people's warden.” Historically, in the Church of England, one warden was named by the priest and the other chosen by the congregation.