



# From the Bishop

Dear Colleagues in Ministry

A number of times during my first year among you, Canon Ambler and I have been asked about the rules concerning departing priests and former priests. I'm discovering that everyone sort of knows the gist, but people have very different ideas about the specifics. The church's practices are nowhere codified in written policy, so I thought it would be useful to share with you my expectations.\*

## Departing Priests

One of the things I have quickly learned about the Diocese of Maine is how closely priests identify with and care for their congregations. That's a grace-filled thing and something I celebrate.

When a priest decides it's time to depart, a gap opens between priest and congregation. That can be painful, but it is necessary: it's a first step towards the coming goodbye. The priest needs to do their own discernment about what's next: retirement, a new call, a different sort of ministry. They don't have to do this discernment alone; they have the support of their Bishop and Canon, of spiritual directors, friends, and colleagues. Likewise the congregation has to do its discernment about what sort of life, work and ministry it is called to after the priest leaves. It doesn't do this work alone either: the congregation also has the support of Bishop and Canon, of supply clergy, of neighboring congregations, interim clergy in some cases, and more.

• This letter only concerns priests, not deacons (or bishops). Some of the considerations are likely to be the same, but until the question arises, I won't try to answer it.



Just as the congregation does not have any role in determining the priest's life after the priest's last Sunday, so the departing priest has no part in decisions or discernment about the congregation's life after that day. In specific terms, that means that departing priests:

- Seek support from the bishop, diocesan staff, and other appropriate sources outside of the parish for ongoing processing and spiritual and mental health (i.e., spiritual director, therapist, peer clergy, etc.).
- Are absent from all discussions related to selecting their successor(s).
- Have no role in deciding the membership or guiding the work of any search or discernment committee.
- Refer vestry members to Canon Ambler who is available to consult with and support vestries as they enter into that work.
- Refrain from suggesting clergy persons, or clergy styles to succeed them.
- Use discretion about planning events or obligations which will commit the parish after the priest is gone. It is helpful to leave routine matters planned and organized some little way into the future--it would be unkind, for instance, not to schedule worship leaders and do other normal business according to the normal patterns in the congregation. There may be some projects that the priest and congregation undertake together that will extend beyond the priest's farewell; such projects should have substantial congregational involvement and support. But the priest should avoid making special commitments that the congregation will have to carry out, and which might limit the congregation's ability to think new thoughts and do new things.



- Plan with lay leaders a liturgy to mark closure of relationships and the priest's departure. Consider inviting the bishop or the canon to the ordinary to participate in such a service using a service found in the Book of Occasional Services.
- Avoid being named rector, priest, or associate emeritus. The canons do not provide for such honorary titles, and this practice, besides being intrinsically confusing, does not promote a healthy separation
- Leave instructions on passwords, location of documents, rationale for procedures, and any other materials necessary for ongoing parish administration, including the parish's discretionary fund
- Notify local ecumenical groups or clergy associations of their leaving
- Resign from positions held in community organizations when the position is held by virtue of serving as priest of the parish.

The purpose here is to recognize truth and to grant freedom. Recognize the truth that the priest and the congregation are parting ways, and must begin to travel separately. And grant each the freedom to see, separate from the relationship that is coming to a close, what God has in mind next.

### **Former Priests**

It is becoming more and more common for clergy to leave a congregation but continue to reside in the neighborhood. That happens often when priests retire: the priest owns a house in town, and there is no good reason to leave. Priests also often stay put because of their own non-church employment, or because of the needs of family.



Former rectors or priests in charge (for simplicity, let me just call them “former priests,” even though they are still priests!) can be a blessing to a congregation. In time, they can choose to offer supply, support their successor, and contribute in a number of ways. Not all choose to, of course; some priests go on to other sorts of ministry, or prefer to worship in congregations that they didn’t formerly lead.

But before any sort of new relationship can develop, there has to be time for the old one to really end. Congregations have to be allowed to say goodbye to their former priest and take new paths; and priests need to be allowed to say goodbye to their congregations and not get pulled back by a sense of obligation or guilt. After departure former priests:

- Nurture their worship and devotional life by attending other parishes
- Do not attend official parish functions, including worship
- Refrain from attending social functions that are attended mostly by former parishioners
- Refer any requests for pastoral or sacramental care from parishioners to the current priest or bishop
- Disengage from all parish-based social media platforms
- Disengage from all social media interactions with those affiliated with the parish
- Avoid discussions of concerns about the parish with parishioners, and refer these to the current priest
- Inform the current parish priest of conversations with former parishioners who seek pastoral care



- If retired, continue to attend clergy meetings and retreats, and participate in diocesan ministries, to the extent they choose
- Do not return to the parish unless invited by the current parish priest in consultation with the bishop's office. An invitation may be made after the new priest has been in place for a full year, and not before.
  - This should be a conversation based in hospitality and prudence, not rights. The former priest has no right to return. But I hope clergy will be hospitable to their predecessors, and view them with holy hope as a source of support rather than of trouble.
  - I expect the former priest to honor any such hospitality by offering support and not trouble. The former priest should behave like a welcome guest: invited to participate, and exercising care to not be a problem for their successor. If these things are not possible, it's up to the former priest to withdraw quietly and graciously.
  - Former priests can certainly be invited occasionally to supply and otherwise serve in priestly roles, though it is probably wise in most cases for that only to happen gradually. What makes sense after five years might be premature after just one.

### **Families of former priests**

The families of former priests are not obligated to leave the congregation. However, they must take care that their continued presence may be difficult both for them and the congregation. Part of what every congregation does after a priest leaves is to decide what they want to carry forward from the previous time, and what to leave behind. That can be a difficult conversation for the former priest's family to witness.



Furthermore, a new priest may find the presence of their predecessor's family to be inhibiting. For that reason, I encourage (but cannot require) families of former priests to give the congregation some space during the transition.



## A Concluding Word

Friends, what I've outlined matches the general practice of the church as I understand it, and reflects my expectations. In a community such as the Diocese of Maine, where our relationships are held with such high regard, I recognize that policies and guidelines about leave-taking will likely require local interpretation and application. Canon Ambler, particularly, but all of us at Loring House, are ready to help. If there are things here that trouble you or you wish not to live by, please schedule a conversation with me; I'd welcome you.

We all serve the same Lord, and we all want the best for the church. I hope having common understanding of these rules of the road will help us navigate the on ramps and off ramps, avoid accidents, and move together towards the heavenly city to which God calls us.

*Almighty and everlasting God, from whom comes every good and perfect gift: Send down upon our clergy and upon the congregations committed to their charge, the healthful Spirit of your grace; and that we may truly please you, pour upon us the continued dew of your blessing. Grant this, O Lord, for the honor of our Advocate and Mediator, Jesus Christ. Amen.*

Faithfully in Christ,

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading "Thomas J. Brown", followed by a long horizontal flourish.

The Right Reverend Thomas J. Brown, Bishop of Maine



# The Episcopal Diocese of Maine

143 State Street, Portland, ME, 04101

Phone: (207) 772-1953 | [info@episcopalmaine.org](mailto:info@episcopalmaine.org)