



April 2026

The Episcopal Diocese of Indianapolis

Leave-taking Guide for Clergy and Lay Leaders

Good beginnings, both for priest and congregation, depend upon good endings.

This document provides instructions and recommendations for clergy when they take leave from their congregations. This should be read by both the departing priests and lay leaders in a congregation. While this has been created with rectors/priests-in-charge in mind, many of these best practices can also apply when a long-term associate rector or long-term supply priest is departing a congregation.

About Leave-taking

The final act of pastoral care for a departing priest truly is to leave the congregation well. We understand that the pastoral relationships between clergy and parishioners are often truly holy bonds. Clergy walks alongside parishioners during occasions of profound sorrow and joy, and their lives – and the lives of their families—often have been intertwined for many years. While this is a very normal part of the life of any congregation, we recognize that this can be a tender time.

The period between the announcement and departure of a priest is a significant moment and opportunity. During this time, pastoral relationships between clergy and parishioners deserve to be reconciled when there has been conflict, celebrated where they have been fruitful, and grieved when there is a sense of loss at the departure. When that takes place in a healthy fashion, the congregation will be more ready to move into the next season to which God is calling them, and the departing priest is also better prepared to recognize God's call in their life and embrace their future.

The ability for a congregation to move forward in a healthy way during a time of clergy transition requires that the departing clergy, together with the bishop, diocesan staff, wardens and vestry or bishop's committee, all understand and communicate agreed-upon boundaries with care and consistency. It is our hope that this document helps to provide guidance for the appropriate steps that need to be taken by the leadership in a congregation.

If you have any questions about this document, please don't hesitate to reach out to the Rev. Canon Julianna Cappelletti Gray at gcgray@indydio.org

Best Practices for Clergy Departures

(For Priests and Lay Leaders)

I. Communicate Clearly

Priests:

- When retiring from active ministry, clergy should inform the bishop at least 6 months before the anticipated retirement date, both in person and in writing.
- When moving from one position to another position in another diocese, clergy should keep the bishop informed about all stages of the interview process to both gain the bishop's support and to inform her about potential changes on the horizon that will impact their congregation.
- Clergy should inform wardens of the parish when they gain clarity about whether a resignation is likely or final.
 - When *retiring*, communication should take place within 4 months of anticipated departure, both in person and with a written letter to the vestry.
 - When *discerning a move to a new call*, clergy should inform the senior warden when made a finalist candidate for a new position.
 - When a clergy person *has decided to resign their current position to move to a new call*, clergy should promptly inform the vestry when this has been decided in person, and follow with written, clear correspondence.
- Clergy and lay leaders will want to coordinate their official communications to the congregation to announce their plans for leave-taking. Please do this in consultation with the bishop/ appropriate members of the bishop's staff.
- Plans for a clergy person's departure are news that is best shared with transparency, gratitude, and clarity about the plans that have been made for their departure and the congregation's care during the interim period that will follow.

Vestries/Lay leaders:

- Coordinate communication plan in the congregation with departing clergy and with respect to the diocesan guidance provided for congregations in transition.
- Invite the Canon to the Ordinary for Congregational Development and Leadership to attend a vestry meeting in advance of the departing clergy person's final service.
- Provide opportunities for the congregation to ask questions of the vestry and express their feelings about the changes.

II. End Well and Clearly

Priests:

- Set a clear departure date and final Sunday. Invite a member of the bishop's staff to be present for the final leave-taking service as soon as the final service is scheduled.

- In the months preceding your departure, take time to consider and plan how you would like to say goodbye to individuals in the congregation with whom you have had particularly close pastoral relationships, asking yourself:
 - With whom will you need to schedule a one-on-one conversation?
 - Are there relationships that you would like to work toward reconciliation and/or seek forgiveness?
 - To whom do I wish to offer gratitude in specific ways?
- Plan to conclude the pastoral relationship with the congregation fully and communicate this clearly.
 - Departing clergy and their families are expected to fully depart a congregation.
 - Promises to celebrate funerals or weddings in the future should not be made.
 - After a minimum of two years, it may be permissible for a clergy person who has previously served in a congregation to return for a visit with the following conditions:
 - Please ensure that you give at least a month's advance notice if planning a visit.
 - The current clergy in charge may invite a former priest to visit, in consultation with the bishop.
 - The former priest may request an opportunity to visit, in consultation with the bishop.

Lay Leaders:

- Acknowledge that a clergy person's departure will mark a change in the life of the congregation.
- Allow yourself time to reflect on what this clergy person's leadership and presence have meant to you. Plan to say 'goodbye' in a healthy and authentic way.
- Work with the departing priest to plan their final service and goodbye celebration, if appropriate and desired.
- Make plans for how the congregation's needs will be met after the priest departs (scheduling supply clergy for Sunday worship as needed, working with appropriate staff to seek an interim rector if this is suggested by the bishop, making plans for pastoral care needs to be met)

For All:

- Assure that you are on the same page about how the 'good goodbye' will take place
- Be clear about the boundaries that will be respected once the clergy person departs
- Help those who are resistant to this change understand that boundaries may be challenging, but are an important sign of respect for all parties (the departing clergy person, the congregation, and the future priest who will be called to serve the congregation)

III. Prepare the Parish

Priests:

- Ensure the parish register and service book are up-to-date and in order.
- Ensure that audits, particularly of your discretionary fund, have been done recently.
- Hand off ongoing work clearly to the senior warden (or assisting clergy, if applicable), such as regarding future weddings, ongoing pastor care concerns, or memorial services that have been planned. Be sure to include pertinent contact information if applicable.
- To set up your successor for success, consider creating a written record of any customs of the church that are assumed by her members but are specific to the community (such as favorite traditions during holidays, customs around worship unique to the congregation, unstated expectations they may have for their clergy).

Lay Leaders:

- Plan to take responsibility for records, property, governance, and the spiritual care of the congregation during the interim period.
- In *advance* of the priest's final Sunday, take time to fully understand the daily and occasional responsibilities they cover in the congregation and work with the vestry to find coverage for these duties.
- Schedule supply clergy and lay people to lead morning prayer (if applicable) for the first three months after your priest's last service.
- Work closely with the diocesan staff responsible for transition work. Know that you are invited to reach out for support.

IV. Maintaining Healthy Boundaries after a Leave-taking

Priests:

- Honor the congregation you are leaving and the new clergy who will soon be in place to serve by giving them space to form their own relationships with one another.
- Do not continue providing pastoral care or leading worship once you have retired or departed for a new call.
- Avoid ongoing involvement or influence (both formal and informal)
- If applicable, support your immediate family members who have been active in the congregation. They will also need to step away from the congregation and will need to be given time to grieve and space to create new opportunities for themselves to belong to a new faith community.

Lay Leaders:

- Honor the clergy person who is departing by being careful *not* to invite them to continue pastoral roles.
- *Do* reach out for support to members of the bishop's staff and clergy on the official supply list of the diocese. We are here to help!
- Support your new clergy leadership, regardless of whether they are supply clergy or interim clergy.

- When new permanent clergy begin serving in your parish, help form relationships with members of the parish. Some things you can do to help this transition:
 - Assure that the parish contact lists are up to date.
 - Consider making a photo book if a parish directory does not exist.
 - Host a welcome gathering for the priest (and their family if applicable) after their first service.
 - Work with the new clergy to schedule some meals with key members of the parish over the first few months of their tenure.

V. Embrace the Transition and New Beginning

Priests:

- It often takes many seasons to adjust to significant life transitions, and departing a congregation where you have served for some time is significant!
- It is normal to feel many emotions, from sadness and grief to excitement and joy.
- Remain connected to a spiritual director and other resources that help you in caring for yourself.
- Reach out for support! Stay connected to your Bishop and the community of clergy of the diocese. Know that our Missioner for Pastoral Care and Chaplain to the Retired are both resources here for you.
- If you have retired and are seeking a new community where you can worship regularly, get to know the Rector/Clergy-in-Charge in that parish to form a collegial relationship with them and ensure that they are comfortable with your beginning to worship in the congregation.

Lay Leaders:

- It often takes many seasons to adjust to significant life transitions, and saying ‘goodbye’ to a pastor you have known for some time is significant!
- It is normal to feel many emotions, from sadness and grief, while also feeling excitement and joy when you consider new beginnings.
- Engage the interim period as a time for reflection and discernment for you and your congregation.
- Work with diocesan leadership in the search for new clergy, as they will offer you support as you engage in congregational self-study and navigate the changes to come.

Guiding Principle

For All:

- Adopt a wide view: God has been faithful in the past through many changes and challenges. The same God will be with us in the future.
- Honor the wider Church’s leadership and process.
- We are people of resurrection hope! Trust that faithful transitions lead to new life.

