

clergy

Episcopal Diocese of Eastern Michigan

TRANSITION MINISTRY: GUIDELINES FOR CONTACT AFTER LEAVE-TAKING

After taking leave of a congregation, whether as rector, priest-in-charge, or another role having a pastoral relationship, the diocese's expectation is that the clergy generally does not have further contact with members of the congregation. This practice is important for both the cleric and the congregation to be able to begin to build new relationships, and it is vitally important for the new clergy in the congregation not to be supplanted either actively or passively by contact with prior clergy.

General points

Leaving a congregation understandably generates feelings of loss and grief. It is best to anticipate this before leaving and take stock of support systems. Other clergy may be a useful resource and an empathetic ear, as well as a spiritual director and therapist.

Continued contact between the cleric and congregation confuses boundaries. It's hard for the new cleric to build relationships within the congregation when the former cleric is still present in their lives, physically, emotionally, or otherwise.

Rule of thumb: don't initiate contact. Respond politely, avoiding conversation about the congregation, church, new clergy, interim leadership, etc. In social media, do not enter into private/direct message conversations with former parishioners or clergy.

Clergy should not agree to officiate funerals, weddings, baptisms, etc. in advance of departure, or afterward. Don't promise that you will be able to attend as a guest, preach, or participate otherwise. It is the prerogative of new clergy to invite you to participate (or not) as they see fit.

Friendships: while it's normal for friendly relationships to develop between cleric and congregants, it's critical to remember that clergy status means

that the pastoral relationship is primary. Clergy should be intentional about developing friendships with people who are not members of your congregation, so that when you leave you will have other systems of support and friendship to sustain you.

For how long? Indefinitely.

Special circumstances

Emerita/us arrangements: Occasionally it may be acceptable for a leaving cleric to remain part of the congregation in an "emerita/us" status. It usually is approved only if the cleric is retiring from all obligations of ordained ministry and intends simply to worship and take a low-profile role in the life of the congregation. This may only occur upon prior consent of the bishop. The bishop will need to be convinced of the likelihood that the congregation, emerita/us clergy, and new clergy will practice good boundaries.

Emergencies: Occasionally former clergy will receive a request to function in a clerical capacity for an emergency. It is critical that the receiving cleric determine if there is indeed an emergency and that the appropriate cleric is unquestionably unreachable. "We can't find someone to supply this Sunday" is not an emergency. "Mrs. Jones is in the last stages of actively dying and her husband has asked for a hospital visit. She has not been visited in some time" may actually be an emergency. Even then, it might be best to redirect the request to another cleric in the area. If you do decide a response may be necessary, try to reach the bishop first. If prior consent from the bishop isn't possible, leave a message and follow up with the bishop and clergy as soon as possible. During your interaction, make sure you emphasize that follow up care will be provided by appropriate clergy.