



*Diocese of Missouri*  
THE EPISCOPAL CHURCH

## Guidelines for leave-taking from a position of ministry in the Episcopal Diocese of Missouri

When a pastoral minister—rector, curate, associate, deacon—leaves a position of ministry, for any reason, the various parties may have conflicting expectations. The departing cleric may intend to maintain ties of friendship within the congregation. Sometimes a priest expects to be available for pastoral ministrations to people of the parish, particularly for the sake of friends or others who might ask. Some people in the community might expect to call a previous incumbent to preside at a family wedding, or at a funeral. The new minister in the community, meanwhile, should be working to build pastoral relationships of his or her own, work which a predecessor, intentionally or not, could undermine.

In the face of this reality, here are some facts and principles for those involved in ministry transitions.

- Before the actual departure, and for those parts of meeting agendas which include any aspect of the search for a new incumbent, the departing minister is not to be present during meetings of vestry, bishop's committee, or search committee.
- After the departure, the continuing presence of one who has left a position of ministry may impede the people of the parish from establishing healthy and solid relationships with a new incumbent. Physical presence, phone calls, social gatherings, email, and Facebook are examples of connections which might prove disruptive. Such connections should be the exception and not the rule. When in doubt, avoid them.
- The burden of maintaining a healthy separation from a previous ministry, and educating the congregation for it, lies with the departing minister, not on the people, and not on the new incumbent.
- The minister, as part of healthy leave-taking, needs to communicate to the people that the previous relationship has ended, and that henceforth he or she will not be available for sacramental or pastoral ministrations. The communication needs to be careful and pastoral—but clear.
- The minister should in every event expect to maintain the highest degree of separation possible from the prior venue of ministry, for at least two years. This period may be extended at the Bishop's discretion. The minister should not attend worship or parish activities during this time. Contact with former parishioners is to be curtailed, and in no event may conversation with them concern matters of the parish.
- After this period the minister may return to the parish or for ministry of word or sacrament *only at the initiative and invitation of the rector.*
- Usually the minister's family will follow these guidelines, but under extraordinary circumstances, they may continue to worship and participate in the congregation with the assent of the Bishop.
- In every case, clergy have a duty to serve the best interests of the parish and to follow the pastoral direction of the Bishop.