

NAVIGATING A TRANSITION IN
PASTORAL LEADERSHIP
Handbook and Resource Guide



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*So, whoever is in Christ is a new creation:
the old things have passed away,
behold, new things come.*

2 Corinthians 5:17

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For more copies of this handbook and access to our Transition Toolkit, please visit:

<https://archseattle.org/ministries/outreach-ministries/leadership-transition/>

A Note to the Reader

The goal of this handbook is to invite you to take an active part in the pastoral leader transition process, regardless of your role or formal position. Rather than letting events dictate your experience, we encourage you to recognize what is happening and take positive steps to move through the stages of transition. In this guide, you will find an explanation of the transition process and what to expect from the time of announcement of the pastoral change to one year following the pastoral leader's installation. You can use this guide for best practices and self-care. We invite you to look at this experience as a spiritual opportunity, analogous to the Exodus journey, the empty tomb, the road to Emmaus, the upper room, and as moving into a new Pentecost as the first disciples did.

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A Note of Thanks

The Office of Pastoral Ministries, Archdiocese of Seattle, gratefully acknowledges the Archdiocese of Minneapolis/St. Paul for generously sharing their wisdom and best practices, as well as Archdiocese of Chicago, Loyola University Chicago, and Liturgical Press at Saint John Abbey in Collegeville, Minnesota, for granting their permission to extensively incorporate material from a series of booklets under the title "Navigating Pastoral Transitions." These booklets, "A Priest's Guide," "A Staff Guide," and "A Parish Leader's Guide," are invaluable resources for parishes transitioning from one pastoral leader to a new one.

Preface

In 2019, the Archdiocese of Seattle's Office of Pastoral Ministries posed the question: How can we more effectively support our parishes and pastoral leadership in the transition process? To this end, the Office of Pastoral Ministries designed and implemented surveys of pastoral leaders, parish staff and parish leaders who had recently experienced a change in pastoral leadership. We also invited Seattle chancery colleagues familiar with the historical process to complete the survey. We are grateful to the ordained and lay leaders who so generously contributed their observations and insights. This guide reflects the recommendations they offered.

In our survey work, we asked the following questions:

- What worked well during your recent transition?
- What did not work well?
- What need does the pastoral transition process serve?
- What does the outgoing pastoral leader need?
- What does the incoming pastoral leader need?
- What does the staff need?
- What does parish leadership need?

Using responses to these and other questions, a dialogue with sister dioceses, and insights from subsequent research into materials from other U.S. dioceses of comparable size, this guide aims to help pastoral leaders understand the dynamics of pastoral transition and better prepare them for successful change.

Any quotes used in this guide were selected from responses to our surveys conducted in 2019 and 2020.

PART I

A Spirituality for Times of Change

Introduction

When members of a parish first hear that their pastoral leader will be leaving¹, questions swirl.

“Why does our pastoral leader have to go?”

“Who will be coming?”

“Will the parish be able to have a say, or weigh in?”

“Are things going to change?”

“What are we supposed to do?”

If you find yourself asking these questions, this guide can help.

Every year, parishes in the Seattle Archdiocese learn that their pastoral leaders will be changing. Pastoral leaders normally received new assignments when they have served at parishes for a six-year or twelve-year term. However, in some cases, pastoral leaders may move for other reasons. Some retire, some are reassigned to new opportunities, while other pastoral leaders may move to support an urgent need. These changes not only encourage a pastoral leader’s growth and learning, but they also remind all of us in a tangible and grace-filled way that we are called to be disciples of Jesus Christ, not of a particular pastoral leader.

Transitions affect the life of the parish and can include some discomfort. Fortunately, all members of the parish can influence this change for the better. Those who provide leadership within the parish, that is, the pastoral leader, the staff, and lay leadership on councils, committees, and various teams, can all support one

¹ The person appointed by the bishop to exercise pastoral care of a parish. When a priest is not available to serve in this role, the pastoral leader may be a deacon, religious sister or brother, or a lay woman or man who has a master’s degree in theology or pastoral studies, and at least five years of pastoral experience, among other qualifications. These leaders are also called pastoral coordinators.

another to say goodbye to one pastoral leader and hello to another. Armed with some essential information, a few strategies, and a vision for how this time can go well, these parish leaders will be able to support the community during this time of transition.

If you take nothing else from this handbook, let it be this: your leadership matters. Rather than letting events dictate your experience, we encourage you to recognize what is happening and take positive steps to move through the stages of transition. You might be excited about a new pastoral leader coming. You might be anticipating or grieving the loss of your current pastoral leader. You might be uncertain or uninspired about the new pastoral leader’s ideas and ways of doing things. Regardless, know that there are many things you can do to positively impact this transition time. We invite you to take an active part in the pastoral leader transition process, regardless of your role or formal position.

Stages of Transition

Community transitions rarely play out in orderly or sequential stages. However, William Bridges, writing extensively about organizational and personal transitions, provides the following valuable framework to consider.²

Endings: *The departure phase for saying goodbye, leave-taking, letting go of what was, mourning loss, giving blessing, and giving thanks for what has been, but also clearing away ground so new life can be seeded and take root.*

Neutral Zone: *The in-between phase when individuals experience liminality, that is, the need to leave where one is but not yet being certain about where one is going. It is a middle ground, but much more than a waiting time. Leaders can make this a period of productive creativity, exploration, testing, and preparation. Living and working in the neutral zone can foster innovation, discovery, and learning. Leaders can pilot and test*

² William Bridges, cited in “Navigating Pastoral Transitions: A Priest’s Guide,” p.11

new working arrangements and procedures. Since even failures are explorations, they have lower cost and can be understood as valuable learning.

New Beginnings: *The re-entry phase for focusing on adjusting to new surroundings and making them 'home' while embracing new relationships and new responsibilities. Everyone learns to mesh continuing performance with new practices. Realities of the new beginning become clear. Leaders must assess the new ground and respond to its challenges in positive ways.*

A Scriptural Framework for Addressing Transitions

When you first learn that your pastoral leader will be leaving, seeking a spiritual orientation will offer you the vital support you will need to keep everything in perspective. Our Holy Scriptures offer several stories that can help you put things in perspective, such as the Road to Emmaus, the Gathering in the Upper Room, and the Descent of the Holy Spirit upon the Apostles and Mary. However, the Exodus Story offers the clearest example of how a suffering people were suddenly forced to deal with a life changing experience.

Consider what happened. The Hebrew people were enslaved in Egypt and suffered unending poverty and shame. When Moses suddenly arose as a leader sent by Yahweh to free them and lead them away to a new land of promise, they had to quickly decide whether to stay enslaved in Egypt and endure its hardships or follow this new leader without any preparation for a new life. The Hebrew people placed their trust in Yahweh and ventured into the unknown.

After their miraculous escape from the Egyptian army, these newly freed slaves realized that they were totally unprepared for their new lives. The desert before them did not offer new homes, food, or livelihoods. To their

credit, these Hebrew people did two important things. They turned to Yahweh in great fear and asked for safety and guidance as they accepted their new freedom. They also listened and acted on the instructions that Yahweh provided to them through Moses. This did not mean the transformation would be rapid or without setbacks. But they learned to follow Yahweh's lead, and in time they reached their land of promise.

This Exodus story offers the hope we need to live through the change our parish will experience as we say goodbye to our former pastoral leader and welcome a new one. We may have been comfortable with our old pastoral leader's management of the parish, whether we agreed with all his or her decisions and actions. However, we cannot stay in this experience because it's now necessary for him or her to leave. As we come to grips with this new reality and prepare for the arrival of a new pastoral leader, like the Hebrew people experiencing the Exodus, we should place our trust in God's abiding presence as the parish faces the unknown. This is a "liminal space" for us, that is, a "crossing over" space – a space where you have left something behind, yet you are not yet fully in something else. Living in a liminal space is uncomfortable, but it provides an opportunity to reassess our spiritual lives and the value of our membership in the parish we consider our home. Relying on God for both hope and guidance is key to this transition.

Insights from the Stages of Grieving

A pastoral leader's departure may be a cause for grieving. Whether we had a close relationship with our pastoral leader or not, the announcement that he or she will be moving on can bring sadness and a sense of loss. However, having some insights into the stages of grieving will help us understand what we are experiencing. The late

Elizabeth Kubler-Ross identified five stages in the grieving process. David Kessler, who worked closely with Kubler-Ross, has added a sixth stage. These six stages can be briefly described as follows:

Denial: Initially, we can find ways to deny the reality that our pastoral leader will be leaving. For example, some parishioners can simply act as though nothing is changing and parish life will continue as before. Some parishioners may write letters to the bishop with the expectation that he will change his decision and allow the pastoral leader to stay at the parish. As we see other parishioners, the outgoing pastoral leader, the staff, and parish leaders accepting the reality and making plans for the transition, or the bishop confirms that the pastoral leader will transfer elsewhere, we will reluctantly but eventually move from this initial stage.

Anger: Parishioners may experience a variety of emotions during the transition. Frustration and anger can manifest themselves early in the process. If we have a good relationship with our pastoral leader, the news that he or she is leaving the parish may unleash anger that needs attention. Any number of things could be behind this anger, but the decision to move the pastoral leader opens the floodgate for hot tempers to express themselves. Some parishioners will go through this phase quickly. However, others will hold onto their anger as a source of energy and will be reluctant to see the transition as beneficial.

Bargaining: At some point, parishioners may decide to offer a truce if certain concessions are met. For example, a parish leader may reach a decision to step down from his or her position on a committee to adjust to the new pastoral leader's arrival. A parish staff member may decide to pay less attention to a work requirement rather than continue to support it whole-heartedly. These bargaining ploys, in many ways, offer individuals a path away from the denial and/or anger they relied on until now, but they often turn out to be just short-term actions to delay acceptance.

Depression: At some point, we will realize that bargaining is not working. If we have no other options, we can become resigned and discouraged. This is natural and expected. But take heart – if we have yet to bring our true emotions to Jesus, now is the time. The One who makes all things new will carry the weight.

Acceptance: Ultimately, we should be able to realize that fighting the change is not worth the cost it requires to continue. We may see that other parishioners or parish leaders are functioning again within the parish, and this may prompt us to accept the inevitable and look for ways to live our faith within our parish environment.

Finding Meaning: David Kessler adds that funerals and memorials are important in the grieving process. Something profound happens when others see and hear and acknowledge our grief. When this insight is applied to a pastoral leader's transition, it becomes abundantly clear that we as a parish community need to say goodbye to our departing pastoral leader in a formal gathering or reception. This gives us an opportunity to tell our pastoral leader both personally and as a parish how much he or she has meant to us. It's okay to express these feelings and to display our sadness. Our departing pastoral leader has led us through good times and difficult times, and the need for this friend to depart is painful.³

These six stages of grieving seem straightforward and understandable on paper, but in our lived reality, no one advances through them that way. For example, even though we may reach the acceptance stage, we may still find ourselves at times in denial or experiencing anger. As a parish, some parishioners may have reached the acceptance stage while others are bargaining. As individuals and as a parish, we should give ourselves permission to go through these stages as we can, knowing that eventually we will adjust to a new reality as members of our faith community. Moreover, Jesus does not ask us nor want us to spiritually bypass the reality of our human condition. As we bring our concerns into prayer and increase our participation in the sacraments, we find the inner peace that surpasses all understanding. Nothing is wasted.

³ David Kessler, *Finding Meaning: The Sixth Stage of Grief*, excerpt offered by Legacy.com, October 14, 2019

PART 2

Consultative Leadership in Action

Until recently, a pastoral leader was always a priest. However, this is no longer the case. The Code of Canon Law (CIC, c. 517 §2) allows the Archbishop to assign the pastoral care of a community to others, such as a deacon, a religious, or a qualified lay person. In this document, we use the term 'pastoral leader' to describe the individual appointed by the Archbishop to oversee a specific parish.

The Parish and Transition

In considering the steps to navigating a pastoral transition, we invite you to think first of the parish community. The parish is a living, dynamic organism, focused on our God and relying on God's love for us as we maneuver through life's obstacle course. As a parish, we rely on our pastoral leader, on our parish staff, and on our parish leaders to guide us through the liturgical seasons and the various changes in parish life. When a pastoral leader is reassigned to a new parish or responsibility, his or her current parish must face a new reality. The way we have been functioning as a spiritual community will fade and a new way to function must emerge. At first, the need to go through this transition may seem unnecessary and/or difficult. But, as the Hebrew people ultimately found through their reliance on Yahweh's care and guidance, we too can survive and flourish.

As each parish in our Archdiocese is different, the circumstances that each parish encounters during a pastoral transition will also be different. For example, many parishes include parish schools. These schools are an integral part of their parishes, and they require parish support as they pursue their mission to provide a Catholic education. A pastoral transition will have as marked an impact on a parish school as it will on the parish itself. Since pastoral leaders are often actively involved in the spiritual education of children attending the school,

the pastoral leader's departure will affect the school's administrative staff, the principal and teaching staff, and most definitely, the children in each class.

Many parishes in our Archdiocese now have pastoral leaders from other countries, such as India, Korea, Mexico, Nigeria, and Vietnam. Moreover, many parishes have African American, Filipino, Hispanic, East Indian, Korean, Polish, Samoan, and Vietnamese cultural communities of varied sizes. In several parts of our Archdiocese, Hispanic communities form the largest constituencies within a parish. Some Caucasian priests receive extensive language training in Spanish so they can offer pastoral care to the growing Hispanic populations in our parishes. Each of these demographic communities have special bonds with their current pastoral leaders. When these pastoral leaders are asked to move to new parishes, the demographic communities in the parishes they are leaving may experience unique stresses.

Finally, some parishes within the Archdiocese are aging while others are experiencing growth in the number of youths, young adults, and young families. As we become more and more involved in social media activity, websites and other technology, and remote work requirements, pastoral leaders and parish staff have adjusted how they communicate with parishioners and make parish life relevant. It can be challenging to maintain a balance between seniors who are not adept with the latest apps and software (let alone be comfortable with email and text) and those families, couples, and individuals who find it relatively easy to live within the current technological environment. Some pastoral leaders are sensitive to the needs and frustrations of seniors, while other pastoral leaders are on the cutting edge when it comes to staying up to date on the latest uses of technology within parish environments. Moving pastoral leaders to new parishes

can upset the balance that a current pastoral leader has established at a parish.

There are many more examples of unique circumstances that should be considered when a pastoral leader is asked to transfer to a new parish. Regardless of whether an incoming priest or pastoral leader has the qualities, experience, or training to respond to these unique conditions, the outgoing pastoral leader, parish staff, and parish leaders should actively help the new pastoral leader adjust to new circumstances for everyone's benefit.

When the Archdiocese announces new pastoral leader appointments, its Office of Pastoral Ministries assigns members of its field staff to assist parishes experiencing a transition. These field staff representatives will contact both the outgoing and incoming pastoral leaders to help them identify various tasks that need attention. A field staff representative will also meet with the parish staff and the parish leader transition team that the outgoing pastoral leader will create. In these meetings, the field staff representative will provide available information about the incoming pastoral leader, describe to the parish leadership team and the staff the roles and tasks they should complete, and answer questions about the transition process.

The Pastoral Leader and Transition

Change and transition are similar, yet distinctly different experiences. Some researchers describe change as a shift in an external situation. For example, leaving a role as the pastoral leader at one parish to become the pastoral leader at a new parish would be change, a shift in external situations. In contrast, a transition is the internal reorientation one goes through in response to an external change. Transitions can be challenging because they

require the pastoral leader to face his or her emotions, fears, and even failures. Transitions, however, can also be a time to move on, to allow a commitment to obedience to lead a pastoral leader to a new but less desirable assignment, or to embrace a change where the future may be shrouded for a time.

Pastoral leaders often know that they will soon be asked to move, but the time of waiting for the next appointment to begin can be a stressful period for them.⁴ Both external circumstances and interior disposition can hinder a productive experience of liminality, that time when a pastoral leader is between homes and can only find his or her true home in the hands of God. Those pastoral leaders who experience a longer middle time may benefit significantly. It will be up to the individual pastoral leader to ensure that the intervening months provide opportunities to do the interior work that will enable them to approach the new "land" without the fear that beset the Israelites for so many years.

A pastoral leader must balance the responsibility to continue to lead his or her old parish with the need to prepare spiritually and psychologically to lead a new one. The pastoral leader must take time to reflect on his or her departure, including a need to grieve what he or she will leave behind. Although a pastoral leader could choose to ignore his or her feelings of loss, unresolved feelings are likely to surface in the new setting if he or she does not take seriously the process of grieving. By entering the liminal period as a time to accept an ending and prepare for a new phase in his or her pastoral journey, the pastoral leader can help his or her staff and parish leaders as they too enter a similar liminal period.

⁴ The Seattle Archdiocese normally reassigns pastoral leaders every six years or twelve years.

An outgoing pastoral leader normally asks several parish leaders and a few key members of the staff to be members of a transition team. After consulting with his or her staff, the pastoral leader asks these individuals to help the parish through the upcoming transition. These individuals should be representative of the community and seen as respected leaders. The pastoral leader will initially meet with this new transition team, identify several tasks for them to complete, and describe how the parish staff can assist the transition team.

The Parish Staff and Transition

Pastoral Leaders and the Parish Expect Staff to Handle Transition Professionally

When the parish staff learn that their current pastoral leader will be changing, they can go on high alert. They perceive that they will be under a magnifying glass and be expected to have everything in control. This standard may or may not be a reasonable expectation. However, it is inescapable.

First, as staff members, know that the current pastoral leader will be living in two worlds. The pastoral leader will be resolving how to end his or her duties at the current parish while simultaneously starting to prepare for his or her next assignment. You may see that your current pastoral leader is frequently distracted, disengaged, or less willing to make decisions. You may also find that the current pastoral leader has new energy to complete some tasks, or simply decide that the incoming pastoral leader will make his or her own decisions on certain endeavors. Finally, the current pastoral leader may ask specific staff members to handle certain decisions while he or she is absent making arrangements for the new assignment.

Second, you will know that the parish will be looking to you to provide leadership during this liminal period. For example, although certain parish leaders may step forward or be asked to lead efforts to plan for a going-away celebration for the current pastoral leader, the responsibility to carry out all the detailed planning and preparation will fall on the staff. You also know that the parish will expect you to have everything ready for the new pastoral leader's arrival. You should be anticipating the new pastoral leader's questions and needs and have answers and solutions ready when he or she arrives. Finally, the parish will expect you to be involved in preparing a welcoming celebration for the new pastoral leader.

Third, as parish staff, you will be responsible for maintaining your own well-being during the transition. Pastoral leaders have the responsibility to ensure that their staffs carry out their assigned duties successfully, and when necessary, they are to use their authority to ask specific staff members to improve their performance or to leave parish employment. For your part, you need not worry that your jobs are in danger. However, the decisions that incoming pastoral leaders make may create working climates that are stressful for you as staff and for the parish community itself.

Well-trained and experienced staff may be adept in handling these expectations and situations professionally. Nevertheless, you may find it worthwhile to seek outside support, such as a spiritual advisor or similar staff members in nearby parishes, to work through challenges.

Relating and Ministering to the Parish Staff

Since parishes are religious communities in which numerous liturgies, programs, and activities take place, and various tasks and responsibilities must be fulfilled, pastoral leaders rely on their parish staffs to carry a sizable portion of the burden. For your part as parish staff, you can help the pastoral leader carry out his or her responsibilities. An incoming pastoral leader may find it both prudent and rewarding to meet with the outgoing pastoral leader to learn how well his or her new staff have been performing.

Predictable Concerns

Although parish staff may be experienced in handling last minute changes, difficult parents, or vague instructions, you know that a change in pastoral leaders can also mean a change in your job status. Routine work practices may now include an element of fear. Until such time as a new pastoral leader offers staff assurance that he or she wants them to continue in their roles, you as staff members may worry about your job status, either consciously or unconsciously.

Knowing that these fears exist, incoming pastoral leaders can take several steps to establish a healthy work environment. For example, new pastoral leaders should reassure staff (either while in staff meetings or in one-on-one interviews) that they want to learn how the parish carries out each of its myriad responsibilities and how each staff member functions. During one-on-one meetings, the pastoral leader and you as a staff member can review written job descriptions, decide whether they accurately describe what you are responsible for, and determine whether the new pastoral leader wants you to carry out your duties differently.

Parish Leaders and Transition

An Opportunity to Offer Pastoral Leadership

The pastoral leader and staff may inform parish leaders before others in the parish about the forthcoming transition. Though these leaders may benefit from this early information and be able to begin the transition process before others in the parish, they will need to exercise patience when those around them begin a similar process. This would be an excellent time to recall the stages of grief mentioned before. As a parish leader, you may see a variety of reactions to the news that your pastoral leader will be leaving. This may provide an opportunity to offer a type of leadership seldom needed but invaluable when necessary. Everyone in the parish community will need care in the coming months. This is an opportunity to offer pastoral leadership. How one reacts to various responses matters. It is important to remember that we are all God's people, and everyone deserves to be treated with respect.

Addressing the Ending

When you learn that your pastoral leader will be changing, consider doing several things quickly. Talk to the departing pastoral leader and the parish staff and be sensitive to their feelings and needs. This is an opportunity to help them develop ways to move the parish through the farewell period. This will be a time for everyone, including parish leaders, to reestablish and sustain a sense of personal balance. Honesty and openness as a parish leader can do a lot to calm anxiety.

Use all communication tools available to the parish to offer information about the transition. This will greatly help reduce confusion and anxiety, and it will also make

a big difference in how the parish will receive the new pastoral leader. Poor communication in this early stage will allow imaginations to take over and rumors and gossip to flourish. Take advantage of tools like Facebook, Flocknote, Twitter, bulletin announcements, the parish website, and most importantly, in-person conversations to share information. These measures are invaluable tools to create a sense that everyone is going through this transition together. Transparency, not secrecy, should be the goal.

Ask the pastoral leader and parish staff about arrangements for a celebration of gratitude for the departing pastoral leader. A well-planned celebration serves two purposes: it offers an opportunity to thank the departing pastoral leader for the many gifts that he or she has given to the parish and provides a sense of closure for the pastoral leader's tenure in the parish community.

Finally, but especially important, be clear about what will continue. The outgoing pastoral leader's departure will not end liturgical practices, faith formation programs, youth activities, evangelization initiatives, or the need to maintain facilities and provide financial support for the parish. The parish community and its practices will continue. Parish leaders can continue exercising their leadership role or decide that this is a time to allow others to grow in their leadership gifts.

Adapting to Uncertainty

The time from the announcement of a pastoral leader's departure to the arrival of a new pastoral leader can be an uncomfortable experience for many, if not all, members of a parish. However, this time span can also offer opportunities to provide stability. Find that middle ground during this time, plant your feet firmly to identify the path to take, and help others to do likewise. While the parish is moving into the 'not yet' time, a parish leader can take

specific steps to make this liminal time, this waiting period, fruitful for your parish family.

In this endeavor, please weigh the wisdom of the following suggestions. They are worth the effort. First, go easy. It is not necessary or healthy to rush the waiting process. Second, be realistic about what needs attention and how quickly it should happen. Third, be kind to yourself and others, and allow time to work its healing process. Finally, listen, listen, listen, encourage everyone to support one another, and be aware that making rash decisions can create more harm than good. Allow parish life to continue as fully and routinely as possible, while looking forward with both hope and positive anticipation.

A parish leader, in partnership with the outgoing pastoral leader and the parish staff, can offer four tools to adapt to this time on uncertainty. They will appeal to parishioners who have different mechanisms to cope with change.

First, provide information on the reason for the change in pastoral leaders. The Archdiocesan field service representative can provide this information and offer some preliminary information about the new pastoral leader. When parishioners understand that pastoral leaders normally serve a specific term in a parish, and that both parishes and pastoral leaders benefit from periodic changes, they will accept this change as a healthy requirement. Parish leaders should rely on transparency, clarity, and charity in being straightforward about the upcoming transition. Finally, parish leaders should remind their fellow parishioners that we are called to renew ourselves in acts of loving, teaching, serving, and witnessing. The members of the parish are themselves the constant stewards of the parish mission.

Second, take pains to portray what the parish will look like with the new pastoral leader in place. While individuals

may not be able to talk extensively with the incoming pastoral leader, a parish leader's effort to describe the new pastoral leader's preliminary vision for the parish can greatly help to calm anxious worry about the future. Some parishioners may see the Archdiocese as uncaring and unresponsive to a parish's needs. Offering a realistic description of the Archdiocese's efforts to make the best decision possible given certain restrictions can soften resentment from all but the most recalcitrant members of the parish community. The voice of a parish leader carries a certain importance. Speaking with some energy and conviction about God's wise and loving plan for the parish's future will have a positive effect.

Third, take specific steps to make this time of waiting fruitful. For example, make sure that high-priority parish activities continue. Continue efforts to bring communion to the home-bound, support upcoming youth or young adult events, offer retreats and online spiritual enrichment programs, and arrange for parish cleanup weekends. Create a pastoral transition committee whose goal is to plan a welcoming celebration for the new pastoral leader. This team should create a program that highlights the parish's past, its culture, and its hope for the future.

Fourth, identify opportunities for parishioners to be involved in the transition. Some parishioners may have experience with other transitions and can help with the current one. Specific parishioners may be natural communicators who can share the most current news on the transition. Some parishioners are organizers who will want to create plans for a welcoming celebration. All parishioners can offer prayers for a successful transition.

Opening a New Chapter

The role of a parish leader in the transition process does not end when the new pastoral leader formally arrives at the parish. Although the waiting period for the new pastoral leader has ended, the transition may continue for some time, as well as your role in this change. As the pastoral leader adjusts to the parish and begins to share his or her vision, parishioners will be able to help or hinder the new pastoral leader. You may find yourself weighing your dreams for the parish's future against the realities of what may occur.⁵ The culture of the parish will evolve in the days, weeks, and months ahead. As a parish leader, endeavor to help others to positively influence the new life that is inviting you all forward. Know that beginnings are organic, and transitions are a process that will gradually find completion.

Once the new pastoral leader has arrived, give him or her a grace period to learn about the parish. They may have formed some opinions about the parish before arriving, but the first few weeks after arrival will be a time for meeting members of the parish, talking to parish staff and parish leaders, and gradually coming to terms with what needs to be addressed. William Bridges suggests several rules for parish leaders during these first weeks in the parish.⁶

Be consistent. This is a time to maintain the parish's sense of identity and its sense of purpose. Ensure that life goes on. Continue your support for programs and/or services within your purview and point out achievements and progress taking place. Welcome the new pastoral leader through a celebration, as well as through day-to-

⁵ Culture, in this sense, simply means "how we do things around here."

⁶ William Bridges, as cited in "Navigating Pastoral Transitions: A Parish Leader's Guide," pgs. 26, 27.

day encounters. We Catholics appreciate rituals, and welcoming, when well done, offers a clear sign that we as a parish are adjusting to a new day. In your day-to-day encounters with other parishioners, let them know their efforts to begin a new chapter of parish life are appreciated, and use these conversations and thank you notes to let folks know that the parish is succeeding in making progress in this transition.

Know that all will not be rosy. Each parishioner will be working through a set of emotions and reactions. Some will be at different stages than others. Confusion and resistance will likely continue to show up. Some individuals will use passive aggression to demonstrate their feelings. As a parish leader, you can offer empathy to others as they work through this change in pastoral leadership. Model commitment to the future of the parish by being pastoral and caring. Look for others who are willing to carry the parish in prayer and steadfast presence. The new pastoral leader has the right and a duty to bring new insights and vision to the parish. Fresh dialogue among the new pastoral leader, the parish staff, you as parish leaders and the parish itself will lead to a revitalized parish community.

PART 3

Practical Matters

Pastoral leaders, parish staff, parish leaders, and the parish itself can benefit greatly from helpful lists. Parishes are complex organisms with many interacting parts. Lists can offer methodical steps to successfully progress through a transition. The following lists identify major milestone dos and don'ts that others find valuable, and a list of resources and support at the Archdiocese.

Transition Milestones⁷



Phase 1: Endings

Saying Goodbye to a Pastoral Leader

1. Milestone One:

Observing and Maintaining the Calendar

- Ensure parish routines are stable.
- Put programs and calendars in place so that parish life can continue as normally as possible throughout the transition.
- Decide what must be done now, what needs to be changed, and what may not be necessary at this time.
- Continue rituals and activities that are important to the stability and self-identity of the parish.

2. Milestone Two: Transition Planning

Strategic considerations for the transition

- Create parish leader transition team using members from existing groups councils, commissions, boards, and so forth. Include people from groups such as catechists choir members, youth, and representatives of demographic groups.
- Work with the Archdiocesan field staff individual assigned to your parish to walk with you through this transition. This representative will help set up the transition team and be a consultant to you and the parish from the time of announcement until the transition is complete months later.

- Facilitate parish meetings and conversations.
Provide directives to the parish transition team
- Support the current pastoral leader in establishing a transition team and developing a transition plan.
- Ensure continuous communication within the parish as the transition proceeds.
- Involve as many people as possible in the transition.
Create a parish profile on the history and state of the parish for the new pastoral leader
- Parish mission statement, demographics, financials.
- Major events in the parish memory or self-image.
- Significant information data calendars rituals and traditions.
- Information about significant upcoming financial, maintenance, or other issues.
Plan for completion of any parish project such as fund drives, renovations, or special programs

3. Milestone Three: Saying Goodbye

- Develop a farewell celebration for the departing pastoral leader (for instance parishes have chosen some of the following: a farewell liturgy, a nominal gift, a Sunday breakfast or picnic after the masses, or an evening party with a potluck dinner and music, and others). Be selective and creative, so that celebrations can be personalized while being financially prudent.
- Engage the Parish Transition Team and the Pastoral Council in planning events and/or rituals, asking them to work in collaboration with the staff and departing pastoral leader.
- Work with other groups, such as the school or the faith formation program, to plan personalized farewell events.
- Invite the incoming pastoral leader to parish. Provide gathered information and offer a short tour.

⁷ Ibid, pgs. 39-44



Phase 2: The Neutral Zone

Awaiting a New Pastoral Leader

4. Milestone Four:

Caring for the Parish Community

Focus on timely communication

- Begin with intentional, regular, and frequent communication with parishioners.
- Hold parish information evenings to let people know the process and timeline for transitioning to a new pastoral leader.
- Host townhall meetings to provide parishioners a place to share their thoughts, ideas, concerns, and feelings, while being realistic about the purpose of the gathering.
- Conduct parish surveys to identify parishioners' concerns and particular aspects of the parish culture the people believe are important to maintain.
- Ensure that the community prays for the outgoing and the new leader at all liturgies.

5. Milestone Five: Working with the Diocese

Collaborate with your pastoral leader and Archdiocesan representative

- Participate in any diocesan information/training/transition events available.



Phase 3: New Beginnings

Getting to Know the New Pastoral Leader

6. Milestone Six:

Welcoming the New Pastoral Leader

Anticipate needs in a new pastoral leader

- Develop a parish profile that includes information about the culture of the parish, its heart, and the skills of its parishioners.
- Consult Archdiocesan field staff representative to identify specific needs the new pastoral leader may have, his or her style, and how he or she likes to meet new groups.

Prepare for the new pastoral leader's arrival

- Ensure that the parish offices in rectory are clean, perhaps freshly painted, appropriately furnished, and inviting. For significant renovations and/or redecorating, consult the new pastoral leader first.
- Consider flowers or a cake or other snacks in the office the day of his or her arrival. Little things go a long way to demonstrate hospitality and create an inviting atmosphere.
- Create a parish binder or other visual presentation that can be waiting on his or her arrival.
- Extend an invitation to meet with the parish council and finance council.
- Create a welcome sign.
- Put a welcome announcement in the parish bulletin.

Anticipate possible needs and concerns of the new pastoral leader

- Make necessary information available such as mass schedules, server, and choir schedules, information about parish meetings, etc.

- Extend personal invitations to meetings/events/homes but allow him or her to set their own pace in getting to know people.
- Seek ways and resources to assist the pastoral leader and bridging the gap if there are cultural and/or ethnic differences between him or her and the parish community.
- Provide for parishioner name tags.
- Ask parishioners to wear these name tags at receptions and Masses for several months.
- Provide orientation to parish councils commissions boards and committees. Understand that his or her attendance at this first meeting will functionally serve to further this orientation. (Transition staff ask if pastoral leader has any specific needs or concerns as he or she enters this new space.)
- Help them acclimate to the neighborhood and neighboring churches.

7. Milestone Seven – Moving Forward

During the ensuing year, gradually learn about the parish's priorities, history, and needs

- Create opportunities for parishioners to share their dreams and hopes with each other and with the new pastoral leader.
- As pastoral leader, work with staff, and community to identify assets and opportunities.
- Discover where new energy might be, and whether the parish could go in a new direction.

Prepare for major liturgical seasons

- Notify parishioners if there will be any changes in major celebrations.

Acknowledge change dynamics and adjustment work, which are likely to continue for at least six months or longer

- Most transition dynamics do not subside for a full year after a pastoral leader's arrival. Continue to monitor your parish community. If having friction points develop, identify steps to make improvements.
- Continue to ask for support from the diocese as needed.
- Continue personal prayer and learning.
- Form recommendations that the Archdiocese can use to improve transitions.

Dos and Don'ts for New Pastoral Leaders from Fellow Travelers

Do

- Trust that the Holy Spirit is working in your community and is involved in all your work. Consistently seek opportunities to be renewed and transformed by word and sacrament. Overcommunicate! Most people need 7-17 repetitions to internalize new information. Most of us communicate 1-2 times and assume the message has been heard and understood. During transition, ideas get lost as “noise,” and require an additional 5-10 exposures.
- If you make a mistake, admit it, apologize, and move on.
- If asked about plans for change, respond by saying, “It’s too early to talk about making changes. We are looking forward to collaborating and working together.”
- For incoming pastoral leaders: Schedule one or more parish-wide meetings shortly after you arrive. People are often worried about the transition. It is better to introduce yourself as the new pastoral leader early on, even if you have few answers to offer.
- Listen, ask questions, and pray whenever controversies arise and when things go well. Be relentless in discovering those responsible for successes and thank them.
- Be welcoming.
- Plan your work and work your plan.
- After the transition has passed for 9 to 12 months, consider scheduling a retreat or other activity to renew mind, body, and spirit.

Don't

- Every transition is unique. Do not make assumptions prior to taking the time to listen and collaborate. It underserves everyone. During the first 60 days, don't make changes to personnel, liturgy, or church facilities unless absolutely necessary or otherwise directed by the Archbishop for the overall health of the diocese. Your community is already navigating a significant change – a new pastoral leader. Do not compound the task by introducing more change than necessary in a given amount of time.
- Don't openly critique the previous leader. This behavior builds false intimacy, hinders credibility, and reduces trust. A community can focus on issues that need to be addressed without fostering a spirit of criticism.
- Attitude is critically important during the transition process. Fear-based attitudes and behaviors can hinder transitions. Faith-filled attitudes and behaviors can cultivate interior peace as well as contribute to a successful and fruitful transition.
- Don't make comparisons about gifts and limitations among current and past colleagues. With each change, we often are gifted with new things we may not have known we needed.

Policies

You may access a complete toolkit of Archdiocesan policies and procedures here:

<https://archseattle.org/for-parishes/>

The Archdiocesan policy on consultative leadership may be found in the link below, entitled "Many Gifts, One Spirit." <https://seattlearch.app.box.com/s/erbvjaag005fpjv1hyqkmp8ulvkcw0>

Support and Resources

You will find downloadable content for moving through pastoral leadership transition available through the Archdiocese of Seattle website, including:

Articles

Adapting to Transitions by Father David Songy
How to Implement Change Effectively by Kristen Hamlin

Task Checklists

- For Incoming Pastoral Leaders
- For Outgoing Pastoral Leaders
- For Parish Staff
- For Parish Leaders

Books List

- The Better Pastor by Patrick Lencioni
- How to Lead When You Don't Know Where You Are Going: Leading in a Liminal Season by Susan Beaumont
- Who Moved My Cheese? by Dr. Spencer Johnson
- Our Iceberg is Melting by John Kotter
- New Beginnings: A Pastorate Start Up Workbook by Roy M. Oswald
- Managing Transitions: Making the Most of Change by William Bridges
- Finding Yourself in Transition: Using Life's Changes for Spiritual Awakening by Robert Brumet
- Navigating Pastoral Transitions: A Priest's Guide by Graziano Marcheschi
- Navigating Pastoral Transitions: A Staff Guide by Graziano Marcheschi
- Navigating Pastoral Transitions: A Parish Leader's Guide by Marti R. Jewell

Multimedia

- Video (approx. 30 minutes): Managing Transition - Patrick Lencioni
- Brochure: When A Pastor Leaves: Responding in Charity by Lorene Hanley Duquin
- Podcast: Change is Easy, Transition is Hard: At the Table with Patrick Lencioni

Job Aids and Handouts

- Prayers
- Sample Bulletin Announcements
- Facilitation Guides

Your Archdiocesan Support Contacts

For the most up to date contact information please visit
<https://archseattle.org/office-ministry-finder/>

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