

Welcoming a New Rector

Some things to be done, and some to be left undone...

Earlier this year I was invited to lead the Adult Forum at All Saints' Church in Worcester. I was asked to speak about welcoming a new rector into their midst - which they anticipate doing in the next few months. I decided to crowd-source the question, asking a half dozen or so clergy who have recently accepted new calls in our diocese to help me compile this list. This is what they said; I just organized and edited their responses. I am very grateful for their help and wisdom. Perhaps this can be helpful to others, and if you have responses to add, or other thoughts, I'd love to hear from you. Email me at rsimpson@diocesewma.org

Entering a new system:

- It's great to invite the new rector (and their family) over to your house for dinner, but try to coordinate it so not everyone is doing it at once. Even better, try to do some events that include smaller groups of 6-8.
- If there is a staff, let the new rector know when everyone eats lunch and what's expected: together, separate, going out regularly, etc. The etiquette of eating lunch together is sometimes hard to understand. More generally: *convey expectations and be flexible*; unspoken expectations are impossible to meet.
- Put together some kind of orientation binder or list that includes tips of lots of local things to do, pictures with names of active members or at least the Vestry members, and some gift certificates to local restaurants, names of people who plow, plumbers, auto shop, dentist, doctor, RMV information, etc.
- Remember that you have called a rector, but often there is a family in tow that is also trying to find their way in a new community. If the new rector has school-aged children, help them with schools ahead of time. If the new rector has a spouse and that person is looking for work, see what resources are available in the congregation to help with this.
- One person noted: "...it was very helpful for me that the Executive Committee committed to staying in their roles for my full first year. Having competent generous people around me has made my transition very smooth."
- Give the new clergy time to become accustomed to this new parish. Have four or five different people take the new person on a tour of the city, go out to lunch, and tell them about their experiences and perceptions of the place. Having members of the Search Committee and other members regularly check in lets the priest know that s/he is not alone, and is much appreciated.
- Remember that being kind to the new rector is not a betrayal of the former rector.

Living and work spaces:

- Make sure the rectory is ready to move into – as if you were about to sell it or rent it on the market. Avoid uncomfortable conversations about what does or does not need to still happen at the rectory. One priest commented: “when we moved into the rectory it was completely ready. Everything that needed fixing was fixed. It was clean (so clean our in-laws could have visited). There was a basket of local goodies to greet our family. Children's books in the room they knew we'd use as a playroom. It was a great gift.”
- Offer to paint the office.
- Don't give plants. Not everyone likes plants. Again, more generally: check your assumptions!

Dealing with disappointment and conflict (or, what not to do when you discover that your new rector isn't the second coming of Christ):

- If you are unhappy with some aspect of the new leadership, *do not leave anonymous notes* in the collection plate, under the rector's door, or anywhere else. Do not leave anonymous notes. Not ever.
- Avoid triangulation: if you have an issue, take it to the clergy directly. Don't gossip and don't ask someone else to be “the bearer of bad news.” Refuse to be a party to anyone who wants to use you to say at a vestry meeting or elsewhere, “people are saying.” *Own your own concerns.*
- Do not say over and over again, “Well, now that you're here, things can get back to normal.” While it's true that new clergy may bring stability that has been lacking in the interim time, we do not move closer to the Kingdom of God by going backward or by trying to find some mythical state of homeostasis.
- Do not assume because something is different that it means the rector is implementing a new policy. Sometimes it just means that no one told him or her what the tradition is.
- Do not judge your new priest's spouse or expect a specific kind of relationship with her/him. The parish/clergy spouse relationship is challenging enough; please don't add pressures or expectations. You don't get “two for the price of one!” You have hired a priest, and their marriage is their business – and the spouse's participation (or lack thereof) is their business.

The work God has given us to do (together):

- Verbally offer (and then make plans to follow through) to support new clergy by designating a “transitional team” for the new clergy. One priest noted: “Meeting fairly regularly with parishioners who help me learn about what has gone before so that I can learn about the community has been very helpful.”

- Find a way to convey some of the biggest and most pressing pastoral needs early on – perhaps a notebook or verbally, through the interim or wardens. Include names and brief bios of those who are homebound, in nursing homes, or chronically ill.
- Emphasize that the ministry ahead will be a partnership: you are not going to leave it all up to your new clergy person. Ministry requires the gifts of all of God’s people and all hands on deck; it is not something you’ve “hired” the priest to do.
- It is exciting to be among people who have a willingness to be part of something new. The Church is changing, and the culture around us is changing at warp speed. One of the greatest gifts to a new priest is a willingness from the entire parish to be part of this new thing God is doing, rather than longing for the leeks and melons of the past.: Being willing to go somewhere new together, instead of expecting to do things the way they always have been done is an inspiring way to begin our work together. This is a time to shake things up and explore new opportunities together.
- Be realistic and generous with your expectations: that long-standing issue that you've all been avoiding for years will not be painlessly fixed in six months.
- *Pray for your rector.* Daily. Even when they disappoint you, and especially then. One priest noted: “What has taken my breath away are the couple of members of the community who regularly call or email me to tell me they are praying for me and that they love me. WOW!!”
- Honor and encourage a day of rest as a way of helping your priest know that you care about their well-being, and they need to put on their own oxygen mask before they can be of any help to others.

This resource was developed by Rich Simpson canon to the ordinary in the Episcopal Diocese of Western Massachusetts. It was originally published February 4, 2015 on Rich’s blog, [Rich’s Ruminations](#). It is reposted with permission.