

Clergy and Lay Transition

May 2018

Good Transitions

Hope Eakins

Israeli anthropologist Yuval Noah Harari proposes that our success as a species arose from our ability to create and respond to change. Neanderthals didn't adapt very well, and they were left behind as the world changed.

Change is often threatening. The church appoints committees and commissions to propose new liturgies. Many of us have seen a new Prayer Book, a new Hymnal and new Bible translations in our lifetimes, yet we often cling anxiously to the old familiar hymns and words. A deacon friend of mine cautions that the seven last words of the church are, "We have always done it that way."

So transitions can be fraught with anxiety and the fear of losing what we love and expect, of what makes us comfortable and lifts our souls to God. But a system that cannot or will not embrace change, like the Neanderthals, is dead or dying. A system that sees possibility and opportunity in times of change is open to new life and new hope.

I think especially of the transitions that occur when parish clergy leave. Both the congregation losing its priest and the priest who is moving on are often fearful of letting go. I have seen this in the parishes where I have served as the interim rector, and I offer the following suggestions for the times when clergy leadership changes.

Five ways a congregation in transition can prepare for the future

1. Trust that God is on the journey with you and that God has something new in store for you. Don't forget to say your prayers and to listen to God and to each other. Continuing to pray purposely and intentionally during an interim period embodies the conviction that you are living out God's word and that you are a part of God's mission.

2. Be adventurous. Try something new and remember that it is only a trial. Have a plan to assess the outcome and be swift to revert to form if the new effort fails. At one parish, as the prayer list grew longer and longer, no one was able to make the hard decision to stop reading through all the names at every service. The interim clergy leader tried variations to make the intercessions briefer and less tedious and also led discussions on intercessory prayer. While one family left because their soldier son's name was not read each week, the endeavor got people thinking and talking about the purpose of prayer. They began listening to the weekly intercessions rather than tuning out when the long list of names began.

3. Be generous-hearted to the former clergy leader. Praise the good and ignore the bad. Be diligent in following diocesan recommendations about your relationship with the former priest and let him or her go. Both priest and parish need to focus their time and energy on the future and not on the past.

4. Use the interim period to make needed changes in personnel and staff structure so the new rector will not be burdened with staff difficulties. Replace personnel who are not fulfilling job expectations, and eliminate positions that have become redundant. You might consider inviting parishioners to fill in temporarily and serve as trainers. It can extend and invigorate their involvement in the parish.

5. Be there. It's your church, and if you don't support it, who will?

Five ways interim clergy can support a congregation's faith and future

1. Love the congregation with all your heart. Listen to them and pray for them. They are staying; you are not.

2. Be there. The congregation is likely feeling somewhat deserted, so be at as many events as you can. Be a faithful pastor to them.

3. Changes in the worship space are upsetting to folks who have always sat in the same pew. Move the furniture very slowly, and only if it is necessary. Before you make a change, explain what you are doing and why. In one church, a new priest tossed out the stained and frayed cushion that held the altar book, only to learn that it had been made from the vestments of the beloved founding rector. While he was repentant, the damage was done.

4. Be a cheerleader and supporter. Identify and praise the strengths of the parish.

5. You are not there to strengthen a foundation upon which something worthwhile will happen *someday*. You are there to lead the congregation in mission *now*. The parish is living and growing. One of the most attractive things to priests seeking a new cure is a new project begun during the interim. Such an endeavor shows that the parish claims and supports its mission and is open to new opportunities. Small projects can have large impacts. A parish that focused mostly on social justice outside its walls developed an art show to celebrate the talents

of the congregation. The fellowship and appreciation that evolved strengthened the parish considerably.

Transitions can be important times of joy and camaraderie, of remembrance and gratitude, and of spiritual growth. Have fun. God is with you.

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Resources:

- [Finding Strengths](#) by Richelle Thompson, ECF Vital Practices Blogs, July 17, 2014
- [A Guide for Congregations in Transition](#) by the Episcopal Diocese of Long Island, October 2017
- [Ways to Stay Focused on Jesus](#) by Pat McCaughy, Vestry Papers, November 2007

Would You Hire a Job Candidate with an Unconventional Background?

Nathan Kirkpatrick

[*This was first published in Faith & Leadership.*](#)

Imagine reading an applicant's cover letter for a senior-level position (maybe bishop, dean, senior pastor, or executive director) that begins this way: “I am an unlikely candidate for this position. I do not have years of experience with a predictable professional background or a conventional skill set for this job. I ask, though, that you see what I could bring to the job -- possibilities beyond predictability, capacities beyond conventions.”

What would you do with this letter? With this candidate? Would her candor annoy, disarm, inspire, or intrigue you? Would you set her aside? Would you take a chance—maybe offer an interview to see whether she might be right for the work despite the gaps in her background?

Before you decide what to do with this hypothetical candidate, consider the research of Gautam Mukunda of Harvard Business School in his book [“Indispensable: When Leaders Really Matter.”](#)

By Mukunda's reckoning, 19 of the first 43 presidents of the United States could have submitted a version of this cover letter to the American people in their pursuit of the White House. These 19 ascended to the nation's highest office having spent fewer than eight years in predictable pre-presidential offices (governor, senator, cabinet secretary, military officer), and they had not developed what we think of as conventional skill sets necessary for navigating the

sociopolitical structures that define not only Washington, D.C., but the entire country. They were, as Mukunda names them, “unfiltered” presidents; they were not evaluated, qualified, or trained for the office.

Mukunda counts Grover Cleveland, who served as the 22nd and 24th president, only once, and he excludes William Henry Harrison and James Garfield because of their brief tenures in office.

That leaves 21 presidents with more conventional backgrounds. Prior to their election to the White House, each of these 21 enjoyed eight or more years in predictable offices and learned to navigate complicated political systems in generally palatable ways. Even if they were disliked personally, no one was surprised when they assumed the presidency. Mukunda classifies these presidents as “filtered” -- evaluated, qualified and formed for the office.

What makes Mukunda’s research intriguing is the relationship he sees between the presidents’ backgrounds and their impact, assessed by consolidating historians’ rankings.

Mukunda finds that the “filtered” presidents tend to fall in the middle of the rankings.

They led sustainable innovations within systems, while largely preserving the systems themselves. They seldom addressed deep systemic problems in their tenures; after all, they were formed to see the system’s problems as normal. Included in this roster are James Monroe, Ronald Reagan and Bill Clinton.

Unfiltered presidents, on the other hand, tend to fall at either extreme of historians’ rankings (the greatest or the worst).

Because of their backgrounds, they were less invested in systems and institutions as they inherited them, so they were willing to instigate significant systemic change. They upended “the system” through their lack of awareness or lack of care for how the system actually worked. Even within government, they were innovators and entrepreneurs. But Mukunda is clear that while they were transformative leaders, being “unfiltered” did not guarantee that they would lead positive transformation. For every Lincoln or Washington (who count among the greatest) there was also a Grant or a Harding (who count among the worst).

For any who might be worried that Mukunda’s research is too narrowly limited by the presidency and its incumbents, he has applied the same categories to the British parliamentary system as well as leaders in other industries. He observes the same patterns: filtered leaders provide important, institution-sustaining leadership, but unfiltered leaders, unpredictable and unconventional as they are, are the innovators who change systems and have the deepest impact.

Within religious organizations and congregations, there is much conversation about the kinds of leaders that we desire and need for the future. In these discussions, words like *courageous*, *impactful*, *innovative*, and *transformative* appear regularly. What is described as needed are

leaders who are dissatisfied with the status quo and its systems, who want to change them and perfect them. The needs we describe are more often addressed by unfiltered leaders.

Yet a challenge for most religious organizations and congregations is that the processes we have in place for filling leadership roles still privilege the filtered. Systems reward those who have been formed in them, who understand them intuitively and can bear their many demands. We have fewer ways of identifying and empowering the many promising unfiltered leaders among us. Even when we do identify them, many organizations have an innate low risk tolerance, and we put limits on their leadership—and their potential.

So we return to our hypothetical candidate.

What would you do? You may have an unfiltered leader who is ready to serve and transform. You may have an unfiltered leader who is ready to demolish and remake.

Either way, it may be worth a phone call.

Nathan Kirkpatrick is the managing director of Alban at Duke Divinity School in Durham, N.C. In this role, he designs educational programs, facilitates leadership development opportunities for clergy, denominational and institutional leaders, works with publisher Rowman & Littlefield to publish Alban books, and consults with senior church leaders around the United States and abroad. He was ordained to the Sacred Order of Priests in the Episcopal Church on Dec. 20, 2015, and serves as assistant to the rector at Church of the Advocate in Chapel Hill.

Resources:

- [Indispensable—When Leaders Really Matter](#) by Gautam Mukunda
- [Let's Hear It From the Other Side](#) by Jay Nord, Vestry Papers, January 2009
- [What We Need Today](#) by Alan Bentrup, ECF Vital Practices Blog, December, 7 2017

Firing an Employee the Right Way

Donald Romanik

The Church is a labor-intensive enterprise. At the parish level, in addition to priests, we commonly hire administrative assistants, organists and choir directors, musicians, sextons, youth ministers, communications officers, and a variety of other professional, administrative and technical staff, both on a full and part-time basis. Most of the time, these individuals are great employees who perform their jobs with competence, passion, and dedication to the church. Without them, we would be unable to live into our mission and ministry as local faith communities, let alone run the day-to-day operations of our congregations.

There are times, however, when a parish employee is unwilling or unable to do the basic functions of the job on an ongoing basis. And in this context I'm not talking about serious misconduct involving finances, violence, or abuse. Those are clear violations that warrant immediate and swift action and often involve the police and other civil authorities. What I'm talking about here is manifested by incomplete or sloppy work, missed deadlines, attendance problems, bad attitude, and/or general poor work performance. Eventually, despite efforts to improve the situation, we need to let the person go.

It's never easy

Terminating an employee is one of the most difficult things we do in the church, and it is often done poorly. For one thing, the work of the church is to nurture and support people, and employee termination seems inconsistent with this basic premise. Another complicating factor is that under the polity of the Episcopal Church, the rector or priest-in-charge is usually responsible for hiring and firing decisions. And let's face it, most priests avoid conflict whenever they can and view firing an employee as contrary to their vocation and calling. The reality is, however, that personnel matters are at the heart of who we are and what we do as a church, and like buildings, property, and money, they are an important part of how we live into our stewardship.

Prior to becoming President of the Episcopal Church Foundation (ECF), I served as a labor and employment attorney for over twenty years, advising and representing employers in personnel matters including employee terminations. My job was to ensure that when my clients needed to fire somebody, they did so in a fair, equitable, and legal way. Over the years as a practicing lawyer, and even in my current role, I have come to realize that the way an organization terminates an employee reflects its underlying purpose, mission, vision, and even its core values. This also applies to the church.

A common church scenario

Here is a common scenario for a congregation confronted with a problem employee who is not performing and may need to be terminated:

1. The rector never evaluates the employee, doesn't talk with him about his shortcomings, and fails to put anything in writing.
2. Because the faith community is 'just too small', there is no employee handbook, manual, or any other formal procedures.
3. The rector doesn't involve the wardens or other key lay leaders in personnel matters.
4. The rector doesn't consult the diocese about the situation. Federal, state, and local laws around discrimination, wage and hour, and other employment regulations are disregarded in the belief that they don't apply to "us."
5. In the end, the rector calls the employee into his office, tells him he's fired, and instructs him not to tell anybody. If anyone asks about the situation, nothing is said as it's a personnel matter.

While there may be a bit of hyperbole in this, it's not far from reality. The situation described above could not only expose the church to legal liability in certain circumstances, it could also be a public relations nightmare. More importantly, botched terminations, especially in smaller congregations, usually have a negative impact on the entire community. Members feel betrayed, lay leaders feel ignored, the terminated employee feels dishonored, and the rector feels isolated. In short, the relationships among and between the entire parish community are breached, sometimes irreparably. I know of several situations where improperly executed terminations have led to irreconcilable conflict that resulted in the involuntary departure of the rector. Clearly, the stakes are high for everyone.

A better way

For the sake of the kingdom we can and must do this better. How can we let someone go with compassion and avoid creating unnecessary conflict?

Here are three things to consider.

1. Congregations of all sizes and shapes should have processes and procedures in place that include regular evaluations, ongoing performance feedback loops, and mutual expectations and accountability between the rector and each employee.
2. Human resource management ought to be a regular part of vestry training as well as orientation and continuing education for clergy. Congregations need the ability and capacity to make tough employment decisions in a thoughtful, strategic, legal, and pastoral way.
3. When faced with the decision to terminate an employee, the rector should consult the wardens and other lay leaders—even the diocese, when needed—to reach a decision that all stakeholders understand and accept.

We live in a complex and changing world and church. With diminishing resources, changing demographics, and new models of local ministry, congregations will need a nimble, flexible, innovative, and probably smaller work force. That means developing and implementing sound practices around the recruitment, hiring, retention and, when necessary, termination of church employees.

Donald Romanik has been President of ECF since 2005. Formerly, he has served as an attorney in both government and private practice and has been active in civic, charitable, and religious organizations. At ECF, Donald has stabilized its infrastructure, led a comprehensive strategic planning process, and developed partnerships and collaborations throughout the Church. He is a proponent of lay leadership and the ministry of all the baptized. His book, Beyond the Baptismal Covenant: Transformational Lay Leadership for the Episcopal Church in the 21st Century, advocates for a new type of entrepreneurial priest and effective clergy+lay partnerships.

Resources

- [Well done, Good and Faithful Servant](#) by Lisa Meeder Turnbull, ECF Vital Practices Blog, November 24, 2011
- [Caring for Clergy and Congregations](#) and ECF webinar presented by Donald Romanik, February 12, 2015
- [Wisdom Gathered, Lessons Learned](#) by Loren Mead, Vestry Papers, January 2004

Wellness

Eric Law

[In this video \(https://bit.ly/2jok7YY\)](https://bit.ly/2jok7YY), Eric Law, founder and executive director of [Kaleidoscope Institute](#), talks to us about wellness as explained in his book, [Holy Currencies](#). He says the currency of wellness—fostering wellness in ourselves, our church community, neighborhood, nation, and the earth—is what all of our ministry is about. He explains that Sabbath is the key to wellness and describes two ways to look at it.

First, Sabbath time is the rhythm of work, rest, and play. Second, every so often, we need to press the reset button. According to the Bible, every seven years, we have to start over again. It is important to stop, rest, and gain new perspective.

In terms of lay ministry, Law says we often hear that the same eight people do all the work. Then they complain they are burned out and nobody else is willing to do it. He further encourages every layperson to consider taking Sabbath time.

Law suggests a job description for every volunteer that considers wellness and continuity in the ministry. It might include the following:

- For every year a lay volunteer serves in a position, they must take a month off.
- A lay volunteer cannot have the same ministry for more than three years. They may come back after a year off; they can also serve in a different ministry if they wish.
- The lay leader must train other people to make sure the ministry continues during their Sabbath.

Through doing this, the ministry can be sustainable. Sabbath becomes a way of empowering lay leaders.

How do we help people understand that they need a break? Law suggests having a Bible study and conversations on the topic with the congregation to help people understand the idea of Sabbath and its grounding in theology. Keeping the Sabbath is a commandment, and it is just as important as the others. However, the congregation is seldom upset if the priest doesn't take a day off. "As a culture," Law reports, "we don't value Sabbath. If a priest doesn't take a day off, people say, 'oh, she works so hard, God bless her.'"

Another way to help people understand and value the Sabbath is by having quarterly or, for some jobs, monthly reports on how leaders are doing with their wellness. This should be modeled by all clergy and vestries. This approach has to be relational so people can have honest conversations about their ministry, their wellness, and how the ministry can be sustainable. It is crucial to engage the volunteers in problem solving and in thinking about what God is calling them to do.

Eric H. F. Law, an Episcopal priest, is the founder and executive director of the Kaleidoscope Institute, which provides resources to equip church leaders to create sustainable churches and communities. For more than 20 years he has provided transformative and comprehensive training and resources for churches and ministries in all the major church denominations in the United States and Canada. Visit his blog at ehflaw.typepad.com

The two books quoted [in the video](#) are:

Holy Currencies, Chapter Seven: Currency of Wellness

Holy Currency Exchange, Chapter 87: Holy Currency Job Description

Resources:

- [Eric Law on Wellness](#) Video
- [Kaleidoscope Institute](#)
- [Holy Currencies](#) by Eric H. F. Law
- [And on the 7th Day](#) by Nancy Davidge, ECF Vital Practices Blog, April 11, 2011