

An Invitation to the Church to wonder and ponder with the Board for Transition Ministry

Our goal in writing this document is to invite the church to think out loud about how we bring ordained leaders to our churches. From our experience, study and prayer, we recognize these to be important issues in our time. We invite dialogue in the many and diverse ways we have available: conversations on social media, at church gatherings such as meetings of diocesan transition ministers, diocesan conventions, the House of Bishops, and other leaders in our church. We offer this not as a declaration, but as an invitation to dialogue.

These invitations to ponder about clergy transitions might seem like a very “churchy” endeavor. But we are reminded that the Church exists not for itself but for the glory of God and the transformation of the world. We are the Episcopal Branch of the Jesus Movement that is out to change the world from the nightmare it is for so many, into the dream God has for it. God's will is to be done “on earth as it is in heaven.” We are to develop disciples that go out into the world and “turn it upside down” (Acts 17:6) - which our Presiding Bishop tells us “is actually right side up.” The Church exists to fulfill the mandate of Matthew 25.

And we offer these reflections as a people reminded 365 times in the Bible to “be not afraid.” These are times of challenge and opportunity. The Spirit blows where it will and yet we are assured it is always with us. With the confidence of a people reborn in the Resurrection of Jesus we invite us all to discover new life now as we live into God's future.

1. Aging Church.

We invite the church to ponder with us about the aging of The Episcopal Church. What does it mean that, not only is the average age of members of our parishes increasing, but that 67.3% of active priests are aged 55 and over?¹ Since 2009, retirements have outpaced ordinations to the priesthood by almost two to one.²

2. Dual-Call Couples

Episcopal clergy include 428 dual-call couples (both partners ordained).³ Approximately 14 percent of active priests are married to another Episcopal clergyperson. (This figure does not include Episcopal clergy married to clergy in other traditions.) It is reasonable to expect that this number will only continue to grow. In some search processes, dual-call couples have been seen as a burden. We see a need for a culture change in which dual-call couples are considered a blessing.

3. Energy Beyond the Parish

We see a growing need for leaders in non-traditional, non-parochial ministry, to which the Jesus Movement calls us: urban challenges, underserved populations, veterans, the “church without walls,” environmental concerns, prisons, to name a few. We need to find sustainable financing for these developing areas of ministry.

¹ “Age Distribution of Active Priests (and ELCA Pastors) in Episcopal Congregations by Diocese: 2015.” The Office for Research and Statistics, The Episcopal Church.

² “The State of the Clergy 2012: A Report for The Episcopal Church.” Church Pension Group.

³ Church Pension Fund report, “Married Clergy Analysis: Key Findings,” 2013

4. Diversifying Our Clergy

Although search committees have worked hard to offer slates of candidates for bishop with more non-traditional candidates—women, LGBT clergy, other racial and ethnic communities—we still see that straight, white, married males are most often elected. From 2013 through Oct. 28, 2016, there were 23 elections for bishops. Women were candidates in 16 of those elections, African-American and Hispanic candidates in 13. Women were elected in five of those dioceses. (One is no longer serving as a bishop; three are awaiting consecration.) Four Hispanic male candidates were elected, one Korean male, and one African-American male. These elections of untraditional candidates validate the normalcy of female candidates, but there is still much work to be done before the House of Bishops looks like the rest of the Episcopal Church.

5. Interim Ministries

How can the time between rectors or vicars best be used on behalf of the worshiping community and the diocese? We find that the time between priests is a valuable opportunity for looking at who the parish is and envisioning the future. We invite the church to discuss the roles of interims and priests-in-charge during times of clergy transition.

6. Part-time Clergy Leadership

We invite the church to consider the effects of part-time ordained ministry on both parish and priest. The number of full-time calls continues to decrease, and the number of priests able and willing to work part-time fails to match the need. The church has long advised of the need for bi-vocational clergy, but that has not yet become a practical reality.

7. Full-Communion Partners

We acknowledge the great gift of our full-communication agreements with Lutherans and Moravians. In some places these joint ministries are flourishing; in many others, the practice has yet to be implemented. We need to devote attention to clarifying and simplifying the procedures of these shared ministries, which are a blessing to the church.

8. Diversity is reality

How can we more effectively minister in multicultural settings, given our increasingly diverse society? Many of our churches are still not currently reflective of the diversity outside their doors. Multicultural churches are the fastest growing segment of TEC.⁴ We invite the church to prioritize raising up clergy and lay leaders who are multilingual, and who able to effectively serve in multicultural settings.

9. “Calling” is Not “Hiring”

The best calls happen when the Holy Spirit is part of the process. We remind our communities that seeking new clergy leadership is a spiritual process, not an executive search, and we encourage our congregations to be open to God’s imagination as they seek new spiritual leaders.

⁴ Page 4 of New Facts Report, http://www.episcopalchurch.org/files/new_facts_on_growth_2014_final.pdf

10. Transitions Have Changed

We urge those involved in the process to be mindful of these points:

- The number of applicants for clergy positions will be fewer than in years gone by.
- Clergy are less willing or able to relocate.
- More clergy are trained through local or distance-learning models, and fewer through traditional seminary settings.
- Many clergy have already had a first career before responding to a call to the priesthood.
- Members of the diocesan staff, particularly the diocesan transition minister, are your guides and supports through this process.
- The church requires background checks on candidates.
- The bishop must approve your choice of a new clergy leader.

Please join us in conversation as the whole church considers what it means to be leaders and to be in the process of calling new leaders in the context of the 21st century.

The Board encourages everyone to converse around these topics within parishes, dioceses, provinces, and inter-denominationally. Direct feedback to the Board may be sent to Judy Stark, Chair, at btmboard@gmail.com.

Members of the Board of Transition Ministry and their dioceses are:

Judy Stark, Chair, Southwest Florida; Michael Spencer, Vice Chair, Eastern Michigan; the Rev. Canon Stuart Wright, Secretary, Maryland; the Rev. Paula Clark, Washington; the Rev. Canon Elizabeth Easton, Nebraska; Bishop Douglas Fisher, Western Massachusetts; Bishop Anne Hodges-Copple, North Carolina; Canon Jill Mathis, Pennsylvania; Denise Obando, California; the Rev. Canon Jim Pritchett, Western North Carolina; Bishop Allen Shin, New York; Bishop Kirk Smith, Arizona; Presiding Bishop Michael Curry, *Ex-Officio*; President of the House of Deputies the Rev. Gay Clark Jennings, *Ex-Officio*.

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