

“Barbara Kerkhoff blends her pastoral education, her real-parish experience, and skillful use of professional tools in this book. With these gifts she provides a reflection and guidance source for people serving God and parish community. This resource both fosters pastoral sensitivity and deepens personal spiritual growth. Her synthesis of the INSPIRE project benefits the individual ministry, parish life, and the Church as a whole.”

—Rev. Louis Anderson  
Grand Rapids, Michigan

“The exploration of the stages of transition provide an invaluable tool that enables personal and pastoral growth. The individual and group reflection questions are exceptional, providing moments for spiritual and human insights to emerge and provoke transformation. Strategies for Effective Transition offer wise, realistic and practical ideas for engaging a pastor transition for parishes of all sizes and circumstance.”

—Emily Filippi  
Director for Christian Formation  
Office of Catholic Education  
Diocese of Richmond



# Navigating Pastoral Transitions

A Staff Guide

Barbara Kerkhoff



LITURGICAL PRESS  
Collegeville, Minnesota

[www.litpress.org](http://www.litpress.org)

Cover design by Stefan Killen Design. Cover photo © Thinkstock.

Scripture texts in this work are taken from the *New American Bible, revised edition* © 2010, 1991, 1986, 1970 Confraternity of Christian Doctrine, Washington, D.C., and are used by permission of the copyright owner. All rights reserved. No part of the *New American Bible* may be reproduced in any form without permission in writing from the copyright owner.

© 2013 by Order of Saint Benedict, Collegeville, Minnesota. All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced in any form, by print, microfilm, microfiche, mechanical recording, photocopying, translation, or by any other means, known or yet unknown, for any purpose except brief quotations in reviews, without the previous written permission of Liturgical Press, Saint John's Abbey, PO Box 7500, Collegeville, Minnesota 56321-7500. Printed in the United States of America.

1            2            3            4            5            6            7            8            9

---

### Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Kerkhoff, Barbara.

Navigating pastoral transitions : a staff guide / Barbara Kerkhoff.

pages cm

Includes bibliographical references.

ISBN 978-0-8146-3807-1 — ISBN 978-0-8146-3832-3 (ebook)

1. Catholic Church—Clergy—Relocation—Study and teaching. I. Title.

BX1912.K47 2013

254'.02—dc23

2013019770

# Contents

Preface vii

Introduction 1

The Spiritual Dimensions of Pastor Transition 5

The Journey of Transition 10

Endings Put Us on the Road 18

Along the Road, Somewhere in the Middle 23

Arrival at the Beginning 29

Paradox for Parish Employees during Pastor Transitions 36

Strategies for Effective Transition 42

Bibliography 54



# Preface

The Archdiocese of Chicago and Loyola University Chicago funded this guide through a grant from the Lilly Endowment, Inc. *Sustaining Pastoral Excellence* (SPE) program. Dedicated to finding and sustaining excellent pastoral work in several U.S. Christian denominations, SPE helped the Archdiocese and University found INSPIRE. The INSPIRE project promotes pastoral excellence in parishes of the Archdiocese. Its acronym summarizes its mission: to Identify, Nurture, and Sustain Pastoral Imagination through Resources for Excellence. Serving parish staffs throughout the Archdiocese, INSPIRE helps them develop collaborative expressions of excellence in pastoral leadership.

On behalf of the Archdiocese of Chicago Department of Personnel Services, the Office for Lay Ecclesial Ministry submitted a proposal to INSPIRE recommending a Pastor Transition Study Team to explore the challenges and opportunities inherent in pastor transitions. The task force formed the following question to express their singular mandate: Can we find better ways for priests to make their way to new parishes as pastors?

Subsequently the quest was extended to see how parish staff and parishioner leaders can best work through this difficult time in the life of the parish, and booklets were developed for these groups.

Members of the Study Team designed and implemented surveys of pastors, parish staffs, and parishioner leaders in the Archdiocese of Chicago who had recently experienced a pastor change. The team is grateful for the participation of ordained and lay leaders who generously contributed their observations and insights.

The following persons contributed time and effort to the Archdiocese of Chicago Pastor Transitions Study Team:

Mark Bersano, Assistant Director, INSPIRE  
Ralph Bonaccorsi, Office of Conciliation  
Rev. James Donovan, Secretary, Priest Placement Board  
Rev. Vincent Costello, Co-Vicar for Priests  
Daniel Gast, Director, INSPIRE  
Rita Kattner, DMin, Office for Councils,  
Christ Renews His Parish  
Kathleen Leggdas, Director, Office of Ministerial Evaluation  
Carol Walters, Director, Lay Ecclesial Ministry  
Cathy Walz, Office for Catechesis and Youth Ministry

**Commissioned Author:**

Barbara Kerkhoff, MDiv

Barbara Kerkhoff served as one of the INSPIRE project's original Parish Consultants who helped pastoral staffs—pastors, ordained ministers, commissioned lay ecclesial ministers, lay leaders, and staff persons—develop collaborative expressions of pastoral leadership and ministerial practice.

The author acknowledges for their support and insights:

Phyllis DiFuccia, SSJ, INSPIRE Parish Consultant; St. Joseph Academy Vice President of Mission

Dominic Perri, INSPIRE Parish Consultant; Principal at Essential Conversations Group

Participants in a survey of pastoral lay ecclesial ministers and staff persons conducted in the Archdiocese of Chicago, in 2011–2012, with special thanks to participants in three focus groups conducted in August of that year.

# Introduction

The pastor is leaving the parish where you serve on staff. What does this mean for the parish? What does this mean for you? What will happen to the programs that parish staff and leaders have worked to create? How can you have any impact on what is happening?

When word of the pastor's leaving gets to the staff, life and ministry are never quite the same. During a time of transition you live and work in a space that holds both questions for the

future and emotions that range from simple anticipation to grief to hopefulness. Sometimes those feelings are all mixed together. You may experience moments of not thinking clearly or low energy. You may pick up conflicting signals from your colleagues, from the pastor who is leaving, and from parishioners who fill in lack of information with assumptions and rumors.

While transitions are normal life experiences, and individually we can describe how we personally navigated a transition in the past, a change of pastors is unique. It is an ecclesial experience. Whether you are paid or unpaid staff, you have a special place and role in the community during a time of pastor transition. Whatever your particular role, a pastor change calls you to new opportunities of service in your ministry. The parish staff can provide stability and familiarity as the parish moves

"I believe that this is one of the important and positive results of the Council: the co-responsibility of the entire parish, for the parish priest is no longer the only one to animate everything."

*Pope Benedict XVI<sup>1</sup>*

into a time of adjustment and uncertainty. However, here's the irony and here is the question addressed in this guide: "Who ministers to the minister?" The first answer but not the last, you will learn, is *you*. Know that you will not walk this path alone.

In this guide, leaders and parish ministers from the Archdiocese of Chicago will share what many of them learned about serving in a time of pastor transition. The following pages identify dynamics that may occur during a pastor transition, offering resources that support parish staff, both in their ministries to the parish and individually as professional persons. The guide is intended for everyone on parish staff regardless of title. Questions that encourage individual reflection and communal conversation appear at the end of each section. They invite vitally important conversations among three critical partners: staff, parishioner leaders, and pastors.

## **The Pastoral Leader's Journey**

It seems part of our nature to view episodes of change and transition as necessary speed bumps to get over so that we can settle back into "normal" living. With each new change experience, we learn to efficiently perform the necessary tasks that serve a transition: informing others that a change is imminent; setting timelines for projects; rearranging living and working spaces; setting up new procedures. Yet, tasks are only one element of transition. They are important as symbolic markers on the journey, but below the surface lies even more important work. There is the matter of coming to terms with intangible realities, readjusting personal hopes, objectives, and priorities, and coping with challenges to one's spirit and sense of well-being.

Saying good-bye to a departing pastor and welcoming an arriving pastor is both a public event for the community and a private experience for each staff person. In the eyes of the parish community you are a parish leader. Parishioners watch you for clues and cues. It can be helpful to recognize, especially during a pastor transition, that you need to have the grace to be yourself. That grace usually requires seeking the counsel of wise ones who have already traveled this road.

The *Navigating Pastoral Transitions* series comprises three guides addressed to parishioner leaders, to staff persons, and to transitioning pastors themselves. These supplemental resources are not intended to replace the policies and procedures of your own diocese or archdiocese. Links to many such documents are provided at [www.litpress.org/pastoraltransitions/resources](http://www.litpress.org/pastoraltransitions/resources).

Each text in the series assumes God's active, loving, and transforming presence in all of life's transitions. It also assumes that our partnership with God and God's people leads to life-giving choices that help ensure successful transitions in any situation, particularly ministerial settings.

As you reflect on these materials and dialogue with respected and trusted individuals (colleagues, spiritual director, friend), you may begin to recognize this critical time

For where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them. *(Matt 18:20)*

as an opportunity for renewed engagement in life and a renewed vision of your ministry. This particular transition could easily tempt you to narrow your focus to the "logistics of change," the doing of tasks to just get through it. What a loss of opportunity that would be! It could, however, move you to recognize that change can be transformative. It will involve struggle, but it can lead to renewed life and purpose. That is a message people need to hear from their pastoral leaders, particularly from ones who can also testify to having personally "been there" themselves.

## Peer Consultation

Quotations from parish staff persons in the guide come from three focus groups conducted in August 2012 at the Archdiocese of Chicago, and from responses to a survey of parish staff members who experienced a pastor transition during 2011 or 2012. Their valuable insights and contributions inform the text, particularly the strategies and conversation questions.

Some questions asked of parish staff were:

**"How did the staff recognize the contributions of the current pastor before departure?"** Sample response:

#### 4 *Navigating Pastoral Transitions*

“We planned a Mass of Gratitude and party for the parish. The planning was an essential tool as we dealt with the emotions surrounding his leaving.”

**“What would you like to say about your pastor transition experience?”** Sample response: “Overall, I’d say it has been a fairly smooth transition. There are many issues to be addressed in the parish at the moment, and time is definitely needed to help sort this out. On the other hand, trust is needed from the new pastor in order to help staff members continue to do their jobs well and effectively in order for the best collaborative efforts to evolve.”

Responses like these remind us that transition evokes a wide array of emotions and requires adjustment from everyone involved. There are no shortcuts. The process must work at its own pace. As parishioners and staff come to accept the new pastor, and he in turn comes to understand their history and current situation, mutual trust begins to grow and openness to change increases.

The reality is that staff, parishioners, and pastors *expect* change. All would be naïve to think otherwise. Everyone in the faith community, from their place in the system, needs to discover how the change can evoke vitality and grow parish mission. They will be well served by tapping into one another’s wisdom through faith-, hope-, and love-oriented conversations and consultations with those who have traveled similar pathways.

#### **Notes**

1. Pope Benedict XVI, “Meeting With Clergy,” *Origins*, 37, no. 11 (August 16, 2007), 190.

# The Spiritual Dimensions of Pastor Transition

Pastor transitions are paschal mystery experiences. The community of faith is extended an invitation to walk the road with the disciples—and one another—to discover God’s presence in and through the experience. It is a time of reflection, prayer, and celebration.

Like the disciples on the road to Emmaus, who were struggling to make sense of “all that had happened,” you too may find it difficult to see, to understand, and to trust in the midst of a pastor transition. The surprising paradox is that precisely in this confusion and chaos, when you do the simple acts of recalling your story, sharing hospitality, and breaking bread together, you rekindle your hearts.

The Emmaus story is a “round trip” journey that begins with discouragement, grief, and confusion, and ends with hearts burning, a new vision, and a renewed urgency to share the Good News (Luke 24:13-35). In *Dining in the Kingdom of God*, Eugene LaVerdiere places this story in context: the disciples were meant to be prophetic teachers; they were to remind the community of what Jesus said and did; and they were to help the community understand events that were being fulfilled in their midst. Yet, before they could take up that role, they needed to be reminded of all that had taken place and its meaning.<sup>1</sup> Having experienced the journey, when the disciples returned to the community, they and the community were at a very different place:

## 6 Navigating Pastoral Transitions

- in their understanding of the meaning of events,
- in their recognition of their relationship with Christ and one another,
- in their renewed call to share the Good News with hearts burning.

The time of pastor transition is a time of grace. It offers the possibility of renewal, for each member of a parish staff and for the parish as a community. Parish employees must take time, personally, with one another, and with parishioner leaders to reflect on all that is taking place and to ponder its meaning. Several parish staff persons mentioned the sustaining power of reflection and prayer on their journey through a pastor transition:

*“(I) prayed a lot. Personally, I prepared myself to be as open and accepting of the new pastor as possible.”*

*“Prayer and the support of a spiritual director (helped me through the transition).”*

*“Having to be present (to others) to do my labor for Christ, I took a personal retreat, I prayed, and asked for prayers.”*

*“(I) breathed a sigh of relief and prayed for the people of the parish that their new pastor would recognize what a special group of people they are.”*

While each person must tend to his or her own personal work, it is by no means a solitary journey. There is a community of faith that has gone before and gathers around with their wisdom and hope for the future. You are encouraged to walk

They were all astounded and bewildered, and said to one another, “What does this mean?” (Acts 2:12)

the journey with your questions, listen to the stories of God’s presence in new and unexpected places, and break bread with strangers. Come to the table and share the

holy bread and wine of our shared lives through the word that will be broken open by a pastor transition at your parish.

## **Invited into the Space of Transition**

As a central premise of the INSPIRE Project, pastoral teams came to understand their parishes as living, organic systems. The health and vitality of Catholic parishes rely on pastors and pastoral leaders. INSPIRE's research explored emerging best practices in collaborative pastoral leadership in parish life. Soon after the project launched, pastor transition surfaced as a critical challenge to ministers and parishioners alike. Project leaders learned that, particularly at points of leadership transition, opportunities for persons to do personal work needed complementary settings for supportive conversations, discernment, and planning. This guide serves the unique perspective of parish staff during pastor transition. Companion resources include a pastor guide and a guide for parishioner leaders. The three texts may be used to foster reflection and dialogue among all engaged in the transition.

A pastor transition is a liminal experience bringing everyone to a threshold, an in-between time, in which the leaving is not complete and the arrival has not quite occurred.<sup>2</sup> The complexity of the experience grows as we consider the dimensions of each of the actors in the sys-

tem: the pastor who is leaving, the employees of the parish, the parishioners, and the pastor who is arriving.

Imagine transitional space as a room with an entrance on each of the four sides. While everyone enters into the same space, each enters from a different doorway (and at different times) and each sees the room from a different point of view.

Do not fear: I am with you;  
do not be anxious:  
I am your God.  
I will strengthen you, I will  
help you,  
I will uphold you with my  
victorious right hand.  
*(Isa 41:10)*

One may walk in to find a blank wall facing them. Another's entrance reveals windows with flowers on the sills. Yet another doorway opens to a colorful wall that invites imagination. The fourth portal displays plaques and historical paintings. Everyone arrives focused on different perspectives about threat and opportunity, and each person brings previous experiences of transition.

### ***Points for Reflection and Conversation***

Pastor transition invites you into sacred space. To engage that space personally in prayer and reflection, you will need to set aside time and grow the disciplines of discernment. You can forge new relationships with both pastors—the one who prepares to leave and the one who arrives. Some of this you will do privately, yet some will play out in public and in communal settings with parishioners. It will be helpful to gather as staff persons to engage questions like those below. It may also be helpful to gather at other times with pastor and/or with parishioner leaders. The reflection points draw from the wisdom of pastors, staff persons, and parishioners who found themselves in the sacred space of waiting, wondering, wandering, and carrying on. They testify to the value of exploring the dynamics and opportunities that emerge when pastors change. As a staff person during this extended period of ecclesial expectancy, you are called to holy work.

#### **Questions for Individual Reflection**

1. What were my initial feelings when I heard that the pastor was leaving?
2. How have I navigated past transitions? What have I learned about myself in these times? Is there something I want to do differently?

3. What moment on the Emmaus Road journey speaks to how I am experiencing this transition?

### **Questions for Group Reflection**

1. What is the view of the “transition space” from a parishioner doorway? How has the parish dealt with past transitions?
2. What does this transition mean for our pastor who is leaving? What might be the view of the “transition space” as he enters into this time?
3. What are the unique perspectives of various staff persons (custodian, choir director, youth minister, receptionist, school principal, and so on) that can help expand our collective understanding of this transition?
4. What pledges might we consider making to one another during this time?

### **Notes**

1. Eugene LaVerdiere, *Dining in the Kingdom of God* (Chicago: Liturgical Training Publications, 1994), 157.

2. “Liminal space” refers to the experience of standing at a threshold, a time of “in between” what is passing and what is coming to be. It invites reflection and proactive observation, and as we will see, anything but inaction. Another parish staff person observed: “I was a ‘dry sponge.’ I was ready and willing to get started. I also tried to observe the dynamics that other staff members used. It was very unique because our pastor was there for (several) years and no one on staff had any experience in pastor transition.”