

# The Episcopal Church in Almaden San Jose, California



## The Search Process For a New Rector An Outline

*The Rev. Dr. Frank Hegedus  
Interim Minister*

The search process for a new rector in an Episcopal church can at times seem frustrating and confusing to the person in the pew. Why can't we just get a new priest in here in a month or two and get on with it? After all, when someone quits their job at work, we usually find a replacement in two or three weeks. Can it be that much more complicated at Church?

Well yes, it can...

People invest a lot of spiritual energy into their lives at church. Having a priest who is able to relate to parishioners on their spiritual journeys – both individually and corporately – is important to the health and growth of a parish community. The search process is designed to assist parishes to find a good match for the needs of their community. Here, in broad outline, is how it works...

**But First, a Big Disclaimer.** This article will outline the rector search process broadly as it unfolds at most parishes and in most dioceses. Keep in mind that no one process fits all situations, much less all churches. Each Diocese has its own way of doing things. And, each parish is different.

**The Rector Leaves.** At some point, the rector of every parish will leave. For most parishioners, this will be a bitter-sweet time – celebrating achievements, saying thank you and good-bye, mourning the loss of a familiar and trusted figure, and experiencing anxiety about the future. Parish leadership will make initial contact with the Bishop and Bishop's Office and establish preliminary plans for the future.

**The Interim Minister is Chosen.** Typically, the vestry with help from the Bishop's Office will find a qualified priest to serve as interim rector or minister for the time it takes to call a new and more permanent rector – usually about one year. Larger, established parishes will usually want as interim a priest who has had specialized training in transitional ministry. It is important to note that the interim has primary responsibility for parish matters and rarely gets involved directly in the search. And, the interim is not a candidate for rector.

**The Search Committee is Organized.** At some point, the vestry will solicit members for the rector search committee. (In some dioceses, this committee is referred to as the Call Committee.) This is normally done after the incumbent rector has left. The search committee should represent a good cross-section of the parish – young and old, old-timer and newcomer, and so on. Likewise, the Bishop will often assign a seasoned search consultant to work with the Search Committee, shepherding them through the process. The search consultant can be lay person or clergy. Like the interim, the consultant will often have specialized training in the search process.

**The Search Committee as Ministry.** The most successful search committees are those which approach their task as a ministry of service to the parish community. It is important that members of the committee foster a sense of spiritual community with each other. Prayer, scripture, and reflection are important components of this effort. Most search committees will find themselves meeting several times a month for the duration of the process, so it is essential that they work well with each other.

**The Parish and its Developing Identity.** It may seem strange to speak of a parish identity. But of course each parish is as unique as the people who are its members. Each parish is different today from what was yesterday and from what it will be tomorrow. The Search Committee, the vestry, and the people of the parish must look long and hard at their history, the larger community of which they are a part, and their diocese, as their developing identity unfolds before them. What has worked in the past may not work anymore today or for the future. The task of developing and owning a parish identity can be accomplished through parish meetings, small and large group discussions, readings, workshops, questionnaires, and so on.

**A Note on Methodology.** It is tempting, when discerning a parish's identity, to look at what is not working in the parish and try to change it for the better. This is the sort of approach we often find in clinical settings, management, and academia. It has been used with varying degrees of success in rec-tor search processes as well. More recently, parishes have come to discern their identity through a method called Appreciative Inquiry, which emphasizes a parish's strengths and capabilities. Instead of asking, "What is wrong and how can we fix it?" Appreciative Inquiry asks first, "What really works well here, and how can we get more of it?"

**The Narrative Parish Profile.** As the parish's developing identity becomes clear, the search committee, with assistance from vestry and other members of the parish, will set about writing a Profile or narrative statement of who and what the parish represents and treasures. A good Profile will contain information about parish history, demographics, the neighborhood, outreach efforts, stewardship and finances, worship, fellowship, and so on. Photos and graphics can help bring the Profile to life. Not only is the narrative profile an essential part of the search process, but elements of it can also be used in parish literature and on the website. Nowadays many parish profiles can be found in electronic format only.

**The Church Deployment Office (CDO) Parish Profile.** The narrative Parish Profile must be translated into a predetermined computerized online format which the Bishop's Office can then post to the Episcopal Church's restricted search website for clergy. This is a kind of Episcopal job bank (e-Harmony...?) which clergy throughout the country can access in their own search for a parish to serve. Since most clergy have an online profile as well, the Bishop's Office can proactively search the website for clergy who might be appropriate for a given parish. Interested priests submit their names, resumes, and profiles to the Bishop's Office for preliminary consideration.

**The Initial Screening.** The Bishop's Office will make an initial review of candidates, screening for overall appropriateness to the parish. Many bishop's offices will also make contact with the candidate priest's own bishop to again confirm appropriateness. In the meantime, the search committee may begin honing its "human resource" skills, deciding how to manage, review, file, and collate the materials they will soon receive.

**The Search Committee Receives Names.** This is usually a very exciting time for the Search Committee. Members begin pouring over the resumes and clergy profiles they have received from the Bishop's Office. They may make an initial "cut" of those candidates who seem best to fit the parish's Profile. The "fit" to the Parish Profile is very important because many stellar candidates and excellent priests may simply not be the right fit for a given parish. Search committees will often assign a "shepherd" to each candidate whose task is to keep the candidate well informed of the process and answer any process questions.

**A Note on Confidentiality.** While the search “process” should always be transparent, all information about the candidates is strictly confidential. In other words, the Search Committee will do all it can to communicate with the parish about the status of its work, but anything and everything about the actual candidates – down to their shoe size -- must be held in strictest confidence. Members of the search committee may not even share with their spouses information about the candidates. This can cause some anxiety for all, but it is the only fair way to proceed – both for the parish and for the candidates.

**Written Questions.** Many search committees will next submit a number of written questions to the candidates. They are usually open-ended questions, such as “Tell us about your worship style.” It is wise to limit both the number of questions as well as the length of answers so that the search committee does not become overwhelmed with data. Again, the number of candidates may be narrowed after reviewing the written responses.

**A Side-Bar about Candidates.** Priests are people and professionals. They come in all shapes and sizes and vintages. Some, for their own reasons, will feel very ready for a change and energized by what they see as a genuine opportunity to move on to a new pastoral challenge. Other candidates may be open to move and accept a call at a new parish but are not necessarily keen to make a change. Some candidates may have submitted their names to several “open” parishes for consideration. Candidate spouses and family members also of course have a say in any decision to seek or accept a call at another church.

**Telephone Interviews.** The Search Committee will decide if and how to conduct telephone interviews with the candidates. The entire Search Committee can get in on the act. Or, a small group can be assigned for the task. Or, one or two members may ask the questions while the entire committee listens in. And so on. Some search committees may even arrange “mock” interviews in order to hone their interviewing skills. As with written questions, most committees will ask a small number of questions by phone and, for fairness sake, the same questions are typically asked of each candidate interviewed. Following the interviews, the Committee will again assess the candidates against the Parish Profile and decide on a list of “finalists.”

**Visits to the Candidates’ Parishes.** At this point, the Committee will probably have narrowed its list of potential candidates significantly. The Committee may now assign its members to go – usually two-by-two – to visit the candidates in their home setting, including attendance at a Sunday worship service and fellowship. Needless to say, the visits must be done carefully and with coordination from the candidate so as not to sow confusion or alarm in the candidate priest’s current parish. The visitors’ impressions of parish life in the candidates’ churches will often speak volumes about the candidates as well.

**Visits to the Parish.** The search committee may now be ready to invite a small number of finalists to visit the parish, tour the plant and neighborhood, perhaps meet the vestry and bishop, share a meal, and answer additional questions. Needless to say, the candidates will also – at all stages of the search process – have lots of questions for the search committee. Parishioners at large are not involved in these meetings.

**A Note on Background Screening.** At some point as the search process is drawing to a conclusion, the Bishop’s Office will conduct a very thorough and detailed background check on the finalist or finalists. This is usually done through the auspices of a professional organization which does this kind of work as a business.

**Vestry Recommendation.** Another joyous moment. The search committee is now ready to submit its findings and recommendations to the Vestry for decision. Usually, this recommendation will include the names of three to five candidates. Some search committees will also rank the candidates; others may not. But only the vestry itself, with the approval of the Bishop, may actually “call” one of candidate finalists to become the new rector. After a period of negotiation regarding everyday matters such as

salary, housing, and the like, the candidate will accept – or not – the call of the vestry to become the new rector.

**Conclusion of the Interim Ministry.** It may take the new rector anywhere from one to three months to make the transition to the parish. In the meantime, the interim will conclude his or her ministry. The parish will use the remaining time before the arrival of the new rector to plan the welcome and the initial stages of the new ministry ahead.