Searching for a Priest in the Diocese of Hawai‘i

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“Deployment.” For years that strange word has meant in the Episcopal Church the “search process,” whereby priests looking for a new position and churches looking for a new priest engage in a series of communications and interviews, until finally (everyone hopes) a match emerges between an applicant and a church, a call is extended, and a new ministry begins.

These days, the word “deployment” has been replaced with “transition ministry,” recognizing that in this work we are working with priests and churches in transition. I have been doing this work in the Diocese of Hawai’i for the past six years, and also had previous experience with it elsewhere. I am what is now called the Diocesan Transition Minister.

The name is not the only thing that has changed. The search process is different now than it was even two years ago, and especially different than five or six years ago. Transition ministry has changed because the church, the society, and economics all are undergoing radical and rapid change. I won’t go into all the changes here, but will mention several that specifically affect search processes.

- The rate of priests retiring outpaces the number of people being ordained. We have known for years that this was coming. The result of this trend is that the clergy pool is smaller.
- Priests are less mobile, meaning they are less likely to move. Often the reason might be that a spouse’s career ties them to a specific place (especially if the priest does not have a full-time position). After the economic collapse of 2008, a number of priests were “upside-down” in their houses and so could not leave where they were.
- At the same time, a priest’s average tenure in a congregation is shorter than it used to be. In the past six years, three priests of the Diocese retired who had served a congregation here for 25 to 30 years. It is highly unlikely that anyone taking a position in a church now will ever serve that long in one place. The average tenure is about five years, maybe seven.
- There are fewer full-time jobs. We have seen here in the Diocese of Hawai’i several positions that had been solidly full-time become part-time positions. We are now telling everyone in the ordination process that they cannot be guaranteed a full-time position for the length of their active ministry. In other words, don’t plan on the priesthood as a “career.”
- There are fewer “curacies” in the Church in general. A curacy traditionally was the first position for a graduating seminarian. The newly ordained person served as a “curate,” meaning an assistant in a church, with a senior priest (the rector) as a mentor. These days, fewer churches can afford to have an assistant, and so that

mentorship and training must take place in other ways. In Hawai'i, we have two churches that can offer an assistant position: the Cathedral and St. Clement's.

- The Episcopal Church's database that we had used for "matchmaking" — finding priests with the skills to match an open position — has been drastically altered. While the changes were instituted for good reasons, because the old system had outdated categories and wording, one result is that I can no longer conduct a global search of the database for the priests who best match the skills and experiences required in a particular position here in the Diocese. I used to email the top 100 priests who showed a potential match for a position, inquiring if the priest was interested in being considered. I can no longer do this. The result is that the Church again must rely on networking and word of mouth to find priests that are potential fits for a position. Dioceses are also finding other ways to advertise positions, but with the demise of print publications in the Church, this is not easy.

These changes affect transition ministry across the Episcopal Church (and other denominations as well), so that the pool of applicants for most open positions is smaller. We here in the Diocese of Hawai'i have a further constraint: namely, the number of priests who are able and willing to serve a church in Hawai'i is narrow. We have found that the priests who are most likely to adjust to living here, and to stay, are those who have lived in rural or remote places or who have international experience, and who do not have strong family ties on the U.S. mainland.

For this reason, Bishop Fitzpatrick has emphasized from the time he became Bishop the desire to raise up people from within our own Diocese to be ordained, to both the priesthood and the diaconate. We now have local programs for training both priests and deacons. I'll be writing about these programs in the next e-news, so stay tuned.

Three of our congregations now use what we are calling a "sabbatical supply" model of ministry. Retired priests, or priests on sabbatical or vacation, come to serve a congregation for anywhere from a few weeks to a few months. The priest is vetted first by the Office of the Bishop, and then the congregation handles the scheduling. Sometimes the priest returns on an annual basis. The congregation offers a furnished house, a car, and sometimes a small stipend in return for Sunday supply, and occasionally (depending on the congregation) emergency pastoral care or weekly Bible study. A rector or vicar of another nearby congregation serves as the "priest with oversight" of the congregation, to help the lay leadership with administration and sometimes to provide pastoral care. The Episcopal Church on West Kauai; St. Augustine's, Kapa'au; and St. Jude's, Ocean View now use this model of ministry.

So how have all these changes affected the actual search process? Here are some of the differences in the search process now as opposed to several months or several years ago:

- An open position has fewer applicants than was true even six years ago. I saw a drastic change in the number of applicants as soon as the 2008 economic collapse happened.
- We rarely use an interim, except in cases where one is obviously necessary, to keep momentum going or to resolve conflicts. When we do use an interim, we try to find one who is already in the Diocese, rather than move someone here, and then have to move them back.
- We try to have searches be faster. It is not advantageous to have a church wait an entire year between settled priests.
- To help speed the process, churches can occasionally reuse portions of an earlier profile. A profile is a document that describes the church and its ministry, and what a church needs in its new priest. Ideally, it has lots of pictures. I post the profile on the diocesan website, and prospective applicants read it to discern if they are a potential fit. In previous years, we would never reuse a portion of a former profile.
- Rather than publishing a profile, even as an electronic document, churches now have the option of simply updating their website, and putting all the relevant search information on the website. Then, not only is the search information available, but also the congregation gets its website updated.
- It used to be that the Search Committee and the Vestry/Bishop's Committee were two completely different groups. That is still an option. Recently, however, two churches have conducted successful searches with a subcommittee of the Vestry serving as the Search Committee.
- Usually in such cases, the Office of the Bishop supplies just a few names. In any search, applications come first to the Office of the Bishop for an initial screening. In years past, we would pass on all applicants to the Search Committee unless there was a glaring reason not to. Now, however, several churches have asked for us to pass on a few names or even just one, so as to make their work easier and the process shorter.
- Often a church might want just the name of one final candidate (whether from the Search Committee or from the Office of the Bishop) to bring in for the final interview. The goal used to be three final candidates, but housing, feeding, and interviewing three finalists can be expensive. Restricting the pool to one finalist decreases the costs, and the wear and tear on the Vestry/BC, substantially.
- The Search Committee used to compose five questions that applicants had to answer. They no longer have to do that, because the "portfolio" of a priest and of a congregation on the national database now includes eleven questions that both priest and congregation answer (example: "Describe your liturgical style and practice"). I see this as a positive development. It puts the priest and the Search Committee on an equal footing, rather than allowing the congregation to call all the shots in what is discussed in the initial interview. (The interviewing and

discernment are mutual, after all.) In addition, both the priest and the Vestry/BC must reflect upon their respective ministries and to describe it in writing.

Right now, we have just a few openings in the Diocese of Hawai'i. They are always posted on the diocesan website, on the "Transition Ministries" page.