

## Thoughts on Parish Staff Transitions

Every year, it seems 20 to 25% of our parishes experience a change in personnel related to faith formation – whether the DRE, a youth minister, director of lifelong faith formation. These job transitions may be related to other changes in a parish – perhaps sharing a program between two parishes, creating a new position, or reducing overall staff.

Even though there may be one position that changes hands, many people are involved. The outgoing staff member, the newcomer, the supervisor or pastor, and co-workers all have roles to play in making for a fruitful transition.

**The outgoing staff member** – If you are leaving, leave. Unless you have a special arrangement that your time will overlap with your replacement, clear the way for the new person. If you belong to that parish, act like a parishioner, not a staff person. An exception might be when a staff member is planning to retire and the parish brings someone on board to learn the ropes, with the veteran serving as mentor. Handled skillfully, this kind of transition can benefit the parish. If you want to offer help, say “call me if I can be of assistance.” But don’t expect to be called, and do not feel slighted if you are not.

Prepare your office – Place in your office, or with your assistant, easy-to-locate information about the programs - calendars, budget, catechist lists, vendor contacts and so on. Note what happened last year, and whether anything has been scheduled for next year.

Prepare others. If you are able to do so graciously and enthusiastically, encourage volunteers and co-workers about working with a new person. If circumstances make it difficult, the less said the better. Then trust your people.

**Newcomer** – Meet people; ask for help. Respect your predecessor, those who remain involved, and their traditions. Make changes when necessary.

The common wisdom is to give it a year to see how things are done and to assess along the way. If change is needed, do it next year. But that rule of thumb only goes so far. The program or parish may need some innovations sooner. The point is, don’t change just to make your mark, change for the benefit of the people and parish that you serve. At the same time, be aware of people’s grief, fear, hurt feelings, loyalties or lack of loyalty.

**Supervisor or Pastor** – Celebrate and show appreciation for the staff person who is leaving. When you have hired a new person, introduce them to the parish, to their co-workers, to key leaders in the parish. Use the bulletin, website, and pulpit announcement to inform parishioners of the change. As with any employee, discuss expectations, invite questions. Recognize that each person has a unique personality. The new person fills the old person’s function, but may have a very different role among the relationships on your team. Keep quiet about the past staff member and programs. Focus on the future. What are your hopes for what will develop? Criticizing the predecessor or expressing sadness about the change can undermine trust. Recognize that the new person has their own style and expectations as well.

**Co-Worker on staff** - Be professional. Do not talk about the past staff person, except to affirm their service. Offer the new person assistance, but on their terms. Let them take the field and learn the terrain. To parishioners, speak well of both old and new person.

One of the greatest challenges to building up strong faith formation programs is instability. A staff change can be particularly unsettling. But the way in which the change is navigated by all involved can go a long way toward instilling trust and confidence in the program and in the parish.