

Report to the 232nd Annual Convention of the Diocese of Virginia

Canon for Clergy Transitions

*The eyes of all wait upon you, O LORD **
and you give them their food in due season.
*You open wide your hand **
and satisfy the needs of every living creature.
-Psalm 145:16-17

Introduction

2026 has been a year of God's provision for the Gospel in the Diocese of Virginia! Though the entire Episcopal Church and Christianity generally has struggled against both spiritual and macroeconomic tides, God has provided, even if not in the ways we expect. This report highlights some statistics, and identifies future trends for the Convention's consideration as we all seek to equip our churches for their ministries.

The topline is: The Diocese of Virginia continues to be an attractive place for clergy to do ministry, and our churches are able to identify and call gifted clergy partners to join them in proclaiming the Gospel. This is amidst a significant clergy shortage in the Episcopal Church (and mainline Protestant churches and Roman Catholic churches generally). However, there are significant challenges that require the Convention's attention and plans.

Finally, the relational approach of the Office of Transition in our Diocese in the last few years has been well-received by our churches. Making an effort to meet in person whenever possible, with time set aside for relationship-building and clear communication of transition processes to clergy, vestries, and congregations, have all contributed to greater trust.

However, it is a significant challenge to perform this ministry relationally with dozens of churches in transition and one full-time employee dedicated to Transition Ministry (see Future Needs below).

Statistics

Completed Searches

As of 10/15/2026, the Bishop's Office has processed 45 Letters of Agreement for new calls in the past year (since the previous Convention).

Of these, 23 were to call clergy from outside the Diocese.

This is a healthy balance of attracting talented clergy from across the Church/Anglican Communion, while retaining our own gifted clericus.

Clergy tenure (length of time served in any given call) across the whole Episcopal Church trends between 3 and 5 years on average (source: Church Pension Group). Anecdotally, tenure trends longer in the Diocese of Virginia than churchwide, another healthy sign.

However, clergy remaining in place may also be attributable to macroeconomic trends (including higher interest rates discouraging moves/purchasing of new homes, higher cost-of-living). See

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headwinds below. Additionally, there is a significant disconnect between our lay congregations' expectation of "normal tenure" and the reality.

The Transition Office looks forward to having more significant demographic and tenure data to report for the 233rd Annual Convention.

Churches in Transition

Nationwide, typically 10-15% of churches in a diocese are in some stage of transition at any given time. Virginia has tracked between 20 and 25 churches in transition at any given time in the past year, which tracks this metric. The Canon for Clergy Transitions is able to care, coach, and guide 15-18 churches in transition at any given time with full pastoral attention and availability. Additional churches above that limit require triaging attention, pastoral concern, and relationality.

Headwinds

There are not enough priests to serve our churches in the way we are accustomed.

Significant challenges face churches in transition in their efforts to call clergy.

Clergy Shortage

Due to the nationwide clergy shortage, applicant pools are significantly smaller than in previous decades, and this trend continues across the Church. This is especially acute in rural areas, where the previous "pipeline" of rural churches sponsoring candidates for ordination who desire to return to rural ministry has slowed.

Individual applications are of higher quality, due to the excellent work of our discernment committees in developing honest and compelling portfolios and the ready availability of information about our churches online. Yet the smaller number of applications in each pool contributes to longer searches and, in many cases, a lowering of trust in the quality of a search.

Rural Churches Especially Impacted

Due to the clergy shortage and the orientation of many/most clergy to metropolitan areas with greater amenities, rurally-located churches outside of the 95 and 64 corridors are particularly affected by these trends. Often it is a matter of an individual clergyperson's life circumstances bringing them to a particular area, and connecting with churches searching for a priest there. Predictably, this leads to some churches spending years in transition without a dedicated priest. The number of churches in this position will continue to rise.

Holy Creativity to Meet the Moment

More of our churches are beginning to explore collaboration for the sake of Mission. Churches that cannot independently secure clergy ministry are developing relationship with other churches. Different from "yoked" relationships of the past, imposed from above, these are relationships developing organically with support from diocesan staff. Three examples include:

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- 1) The shared Curate position in the Culpeper Region: St. Stephen's, Culpeper and St. Stephen's, Catlett identified an opportunity to connect with the unchurched community between them and the need for a dedicated priest for St. Stephen's, Catlett. The Rev. John Hager has been called to this position and serves as Priest-in-Charge of Catlett and Assistant at Culpeper.
- 2) The James River Area Ministry, a collaboration between Grace, Goochland and St. John's, Columbia, where a team of ordained and lay ministers are providing for ministry at St. John's, and relationship between the two churches is expanding what ministry is possible.
- 3) St. Mary's, Fleeton at the tip of the Northern Neck has built a relationship with Wicomico Parish Church, allowing for continued and shared ministry for both of the churches, with the hope of becoming a training parish for newly-ordained priests to learn and grow.

Future Needs for Transition in Virginia

- 1) Resources: If the number of churches in transition in Virginia continues to hover around 20-25 (or higher), it will be necessary to seek additional support for the Office of Transition in order to ensure the same standard of care, accompaniment, and support to each church in transition. This could take the form of additional diocesan employees or transition consultants who serve as needed and necessary. *Future budgets brought to this Convention for its consideration are likely to include increased funding to accommodate this need.*
- 2) Continued collaborative efforts across the Diocese: between churches, on regional levels, and from the Bishop's Office will allow more churches to meet the challenges of the moment. Collaboration between the Canon for Clergy Transitions and the Canon for Congregational Vitality continues to equip churches experiencing challenges in both areas. *All of these efforts will need to continue and expand.*
- 3) Continued energy toward active recruitment: the Canon for Clergy Transitions dedicates time to connect with colleagues in Transition ministry across the Church, through the Transition Ministry Conference (covering Provinces I-V), churchwide Transition Ministers' gathering every three years, and visiting seminaries regularly. This is in addition to other diocesan staff and bishops performing their own recruitment efforts. These will likely need to increase to continue to secure the level of gifted, competent ministry we now enjoy.

Respectfully submitted,



The Rev. Canon William S. Dickinson

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