

Canon 8 FAQ

So, what's this all about?

At the 2016 Diocesan Convention, deputies voted to form a task force to reimagine and rewrite a big section of Canon 28 — “Of Congregation,” building on the work of prior groups who had done good work on identifying issues with the existing Canon. Parishes facing structural, financial, or ministry issues need a different structure to help them improve their status. A draft of this new structure, developed as a new Canon 8 — “Of Parish Status and Oversight,” was presented at the 2017 Diocesan Convention. The task force was given another year to gather feedback from congregants throughout the diocese and finalize the new canon.

What's wrong with the old canon?

There are many causes that can lead to a congregation being in a state where the help and oversight of the wider church would be beneficial in order to restore it to health.

Currently, there is no national or diocesan canon that describes how such a process would work. Over the last several decades, processes such as diocesan Canon 28, or the process to dissolve a pastoral relationship, or the use of a godly judgment on the part of a bishop have been used to address these cases. None of these instruments were designed to be supportive, and many of them place the burden on the bishop's office without wider buy-in and regular review by the governing councils of the diocese (e.g. the Standing Committee and Executive Council), or active involvement by the parish itself.

The purpose of this new canon is not to create new ways to discipline a congregation (as the processes mentioned above already permits) but to create an agreed-upon and conciliar framework by which congregations of this diocese understand their duties and obligations should such a process be invoked. The proposed canon seeks a way to enter into a holistic process with parish leadership to help restore the congregation to a state of health.

Where did the base of this draft come from?

Several dioceses across the country have canons that address situations when a parish is in one sort of crisis or another. Some of them are called “Imperiled Parish Canons,” or “Distressed Parish Canons,” and there are other similar terms used as well. For this canon we drew upon Province V canons, and we borrowed from the Diocese of Bethlehem, Pennsylvania, and also the Dioceses of Virginia and Maryland.

What are some things that the diocese has already provided to some parishes to help them improve their status?

- Parishes trying to get a commercial loan for a given project have been given a loan from the Permanent Development Fund.
- The diocesan Finance Department has met with new parish treasurers to assist them with accounting and reporting questions.
- Parishes behind on their diocesan assessments have been given an opportunity to talk about their situation with the diocesan Finance Committee and make a plan for repayment.
- Parishes in need of development have received assistance through financial grants and special training for clergy and lay leaders.
- The diocese has sponsored and administered the Diocesan Church Development Institute, a congregational development formation program, throughout the diocese.
- Vestry retreat days and diocesan Leadership Days have covered a wide variety of topics relevant to parish life and leadership.

Why is there a 60-day review period for parishes to accept the commencement of the inquiry process?

To allow parishes a reasonable period of time to fix the concerns without assistance from the diocese.

It seems like there are some questions that aren't answered by this new canon.

True. This canon doesn't exist on its own. It operates within and among the other canons. In other words, this canon speaks to a select set of situations that may arise in the life of a parish. This canon works in concert with the existing Canons and Constitutions of the Episcopal Church and those of the Episcopal Diocese of Milwaukee.

Can the Parish at-risk be perpetually at-risk?

No, the Ecclesiastical Authority and the Standing Committee must review it at least every six months.

I'm concerned about Section 5 (d). The title of all real property of the parish is conveyed to the diocese?

Yes, but this provision is already in effect due to a larger canon from The Episcopal Church: Title 1.7.4 (commonly called the Dennis Canon). This new canon is designed to work within and among the other canons of our diocese and The Episcopal Church.