EPISCOPAL DIOCESE OF ATLANTA

Bishop's Customary for Pastoral Visitations

updated July 2026

Introduction

The regular pastoral visitation of all parishes and worshiping communities of the diocese is among the principal responsibilities of the Bishop's ministry, and one of the great delights of the episcopal office.

The Bishop is the spiritual and temporal leader of the congregation and, as such, is not a guest. The Bishop is an extension of the parish's own pastoral leadership. Whatever the occasion for the visit, the Bishop is there to strengthen the ministry of the local congregation.

The pastoral visitation should be both business as usual and a special occasion in the life of the parish. In a liturgical-sacramental church such as ours, these are not competing interests, and the Bishop's visitation ought never to feel "unusual," no matter how infrequent. The central act of every visitation is the preaching of God's Word and the joint celebration of the Holy Eucharist with the clergy and people of the parish. All other aspects of the visitation are auxiliary and must never be allowed to overshadow this central purpose.

Confirmations, receptions, and reaffirmations will continue to take place during visitations, but these rites are not the principal reason for the Bishop's visit. The availability of candidates for confirmation or reception should not factor into the scheduling of a visitation.

Scheduling Visitations

Pastoral visitations are scheduled to balance the following priorities:

- the length of time since the parish's last pastoral visitation
- the need to schedule episcopal rites, such as major parish anniversaries, building dedications, and groundbreakings (some of which, by necessity, fall on days other than Sunday)
- particular pastoral needs of the parish
- the celebration of the parish's feast of title or another significant event in its life

Scheduling may be initiated by the parish's Rector or Vicar or by the Bishop's Office. As a rule, a parish will not receive a second regular pastoral visitation until every other parish has been visited.

The visitation schedule covers the upcoming six months to facilitate planning. Parishes may request dates further out, but the Bishop's Office generally does not finalize commitments more than six months in advance. Some flexibility is unavoidable: parish emergencies, illness, travel delays, and similar circumstances may require last-minute rescheduling. Changes will be kept to a minimum, but they will occur from time to time.

The Day of the Visit

The Bishop will make every effort to arrive no less than thirty minutes before the service, and earlier if needed to sign confirmation certificates, prayer books, and the like before the service begins.

Where space allows, the Bishop prefers that the parish merge its morning liturgies into one service. An occasional opportunity to gather the whole parish together is good, and there is perhaps no better occasion for it than the Bishop's visitation. Doing so also gives the Bishop more time for adult forum, meeting with youth and children, spending time with the Vestry, or simply enjoying fellowship with parish members.

The Liturgy of the Day

All visitations include the celebration of the Holy Eucharist.

When the liturgy does not include a baptism, confirmation, or reception, it should include the renewal of baptismal vows in place of the Nicene Creed — at every service, including those otherwise celebrated according to Rite I.

The Bishop is always pleased to sing as much of the liturgy as the parish desires.

The Proper of the Day is used even when a rite of initiation is included, and the liturgical color is ordinarily that of the day; any departure from this should be discussed with the Bishop's Office before the visitation. For visitations during Ordinary Time that include one or more rites of initiation, any of the following may be substituted for the second (epistle) reading: Romans 6:3–5 (6–11); Romans 8:14–17; Romans 12:1–8; Galatians 5:16–25; or Ephesians 4:7, 11–16. If a substitution is made, please inform the Bishop's Office no less than one week before the visitation.

The Revised Common Lectionary (Episcopal Edition) is the norm in the Diocese of Atlanta. If other readings seem appropriate, they must be cleared with the Bishop well in advance of the visitation.

The Bishop does not offer children's sermons, but is always glad to spend time with the children of the parish in other settings.

The Bishop will bring a plain alb, mitre, and pastoral staff, and will wear the parish's vestments. The chasuble is worn for the entire liturgy; the cope is reserved for non-eucharistic liturgies, or for the rare occasion when the Bishop is present for the Holy Eucharist but is not the principal celebrant.

Because every liturgical space presents its own challenges, the Bishop will generally preside from the place or chair customarily used for that purpose. The Bishop stands for confirmations and receptions, so the bishop's chair need not be placed front and center except in unusual circumstances.

A deacon (or two) should be prepared to assist the Bishop. Duties will vary but normally include:

- holding the Prayer Book so that the Bishop's hands are free for liturgical gestures
- holding the Bishop's mitre during prayers
- holding the Bishop's pastoral staff when not in procession
- assisting with chrism at baptisms

In the absence of a deacon, these duties may be performed by a senior acolyte or assisting lay minister. Except in unusual circumstances, they should not be performed by presbyters. (A "Bishop's Chaplain" is a liturgical anachronism from the era when the diaconate had been suppressed, and is generally unnecessary.)

The Rector, Vicar, or Priest-in-Charge should make the necessary parish announcements. While it is always nice to be greeted, the Bishop prefers that announcements of the visit not use the word "welcome," as one would for a new member or guest.

The Discretionary Offering

It should be announced to the congregation that the undesignated offering goes to the Bishop's discretionary fund, which supports emergencies and non-budgeted ministries throughout the year.

Please do not give the Bishop any of the money collected. Instead, send it by ACH directly to the Bishop's discretionary fund:

- **Bank Name:** Truist
- **Routing Number:** 061000104
- **Account Number:** 8800821723

Please send a confirmation email to Jackie Martinez in the diocese's Finance Office at *jmartinez@episcopalatlanta.org*.

If preferred, mail one check, payable to:

- The Diocese of Atlanta
- 2744 Peachtree Road, NW, Atlanta, GA 30305-2920

Please note *Bishop's Discretionary Fund* on the memo line.

Baptisms (BCP pp. 299–314)

Unless space prohibits it, the baptismal liturgy should unfold as follows:

- The presentation of the candidates, the interrogation, and the baptismal covenant are conducted from the chancel steps (or their equivalent).
- During the litany (the prayer for the candidates), the procession to the font moves in the following order: the deacon or acolyte bearing the paschal candle; the Bishop; presbyters, deacons, and assisting clergy; baptismal candidates and sponsors; and, where practicable, the congregation.
- The Bishop will bless the water and will generally sing the Thanksgiving over the Water. The altar book should be available for the water blessing.
- After the water bath, the newly baptized (or their sponsors, in the case of infants and small children) are given a candle lit from the paschal candle. The prayer for the gifts of the Holy Spirit and the chrismation take place before the procession returns to the altar.

Please notify the Bishop's Office in advance if chrism will be needed for the visitation; otherwise, the Bishop's Office will assume the parish has an adequate supply. Please make the chrism available in a vessel worthy of the public celebration of the liturgy — oil stocks are for pastoral, not liturgical, use.

Confirmation, Reception, and Reaffirmation (BCP pp. 413–419)

Diocesan-wide liturgies for confirmation and reception are scheduled at the Cathedral of St. Philip no less than three times a year, typically in March, June, and December. The Bishop will continue to perform these rites at parish visitations upon request, but prefers, where possible, to keep the visitation focused on the Sacraments of Holy Baptism and Holy Eucharist rather than on confirmation and reception. One benefit of the diocesan-wide services is that they underscore that committing to this Church means being related to, and part of, the Body of Christ beyond the local parish.

Changes made to the Canons regarding church membership by the General Convention of 1985, and refined in 1988, have made the distinctions among these rites relatively simple in practice:

Confirmation is the public proclamation of faith by a baptized person, appropriate for anyone, at any age, making a mature commitment for the first time.

Reception is for those who have previously made a mature commitment in any other Christian church, regardless of the minister's pedigree. Because the Canons require that all persons come "under the hands" of the Bishop, those who are received are, for canonical purposes, understood to be confirmed.

Reaffirmation is for those already baptized who wish to publicly reaffirm their faith and commitment to their baptismal vows- whether returning to the church after a period away, or entering a new level of spiritual life.

Under the present Canons, adults coming from other Christian traditions should be received, not confirmed. Parishes still following the older, unofficial custom of receiving only Roman Catholics and Eastern Orthodox and confirming everyone else should know that the Prayer Book and Canons set that practice aside more than a generation ago- it was never itself a canon or rubric. Please contact the Bishop's Office with any questions.

To comply with the Canons on church membership, the laying on of hands is used for confirmation, reception, and reaffirmation alike. Chrism is not used for these rites: in the New Testament, anointing is associated with baptism, and in the Prayer Book, chrism occurs only in the baptismal liturgy.

Candidates for confirmation, reception, or reaffirmation may come forward in whatever order is most convenient. Name tags are preferred over cards for identifying candidates.

Within two weeks of the service, information about those presented for confirmation, reception, or reaffirmation must be submitted to the Bishop's Office through the online form: on the diocesan website, go to Clergy Resources > Clergy Forms > Confirmation / Submit the Form > "Persons Presented for Confirmation, Reception, or Reaffirmation."

Celebration of New Ministry (BCP pp. 559–565)

The Bishop's assistant will schedule the Installation Service with the new Rector. Where practical, the service should take place within ninety days of the call.

A sample bulletin and invitation are available as a resource, if needed. A draft bulletin should be sent to the Bishop for review and approval no less than a week before the service.

A copy of the Letter of Institution will be emailed to the parish for inclusion in the service booklet, and a hard copy will be mailed as well.

Questions or need more information? Contact the Bishop's Office at (404) 601-5352 or *bishopsassistant@episcopalatlanta.org*.