

When the Incumbent leaves

PRACTICAL CHALLENGES FOR CHURCHWARDENS AND PCCS

Lay leaders and PCCs face both a challenge and an opportunity as they take on the task of sustaining and developing the life and mission of their churches after their incumbent has left.

This briefing offers a checklist of matters that may well need to be addressed. Lay people may not be aware of the details, particularly if the incumbent has taken sole responsibility for them in the past. So before the incumbent leaves, use this checklist to discover what you don't know about!

THE CHECKLIST

In each of the following areas, you will need to know how matters were dealt with when your outgoing incumbent was in post. You will then be in a better position to agree what issues arise because of the vacancy, and consequently how they will be handled and by whom. In all financial, legal and property matters, advice from the Archdeacon or Rural/Area Dean will be essential.

A. WORSHIP

- Who will be responsible for the planning of worship i.e. preachers, officiants, hymns, advertising, music, printing, readers, intercessors, sidespersons etc?
- What patterns of worship will need to be changed because of the vacancy?
- Who will order the requisites i.e. candles, wine, wafers, palm crosses etc?
- Who will organise the church heating?
- Who will organise the payment of clergy fees and travelling expenses?
- What mid-week services can take place?

B. PASTORAL CARE

- Who will be responsible for Home Communion?
- Who will be responsible for Communion to residential homes, etc?
- Who will be responsible for sick visiting?
- How will people be informed who to contact in times of emergency?
- What procedures will be needed in relation to parishioners entering hospital?

C. OCCASIONAL OFFICES - FUNERALS

- Who will be the point of contact with funeral directors - Churchwarden, Rural Dean or Assistant Curate or ... ?
- Who will take responsibility for the organisation of the churchyard?

- Who will arrange the minister to take the service?
- Who will complete registers and any legal requirements?
- Who will be responsible for the employment of vergers, organists, etc?
- Who will be responsible for the opening and closing of the church, and the church safe?

D. OCCASIONAL OFFICES - WEDDINGS

- Who will advise the local Registrar of Births, Marriages and Deaths about the forthcoming vacancy?
- What arrangements will be required for couples wishing to book a wedding, e.g. just a contact phone number or a set time in the Parish Office or Church Vestry?
- Who will be responsible for the legal requirements of applying for banns, a licence, arranging for the calling of the banns, registers and the quarterly returns to the registrar?
- Who will help the couple with their practical arrangements i.e. organist, hymns, flowers, video application, choir, vergers, bells, car parking, etc?
- Who will be providing the wedding preparation/rehearsal?
- Who will arrange the minister to take the service?
- Who will deal with the collection and distribution of the fees?

E. OCCASIONAL OFFICES - BAPTISM

- What arrangements will be required for families wishing to book an infant baptism?
- How will the parish baptism policy be maintained? Who will perform the preparation?
- Who will arrange the minister to take the service?
- Who will deal with the registers and issuing of a certificate?
- Who will be responsible for the aftercare of the families?

F. COMMUNITY

- Who will continue the ministry in schools e.g. taking of school assemblies?
- How will key contacts in the wider community be maintained?

G. ADMINISTRATION

In many parishes, far too many of the functions of an administrator based in a parish office are still performed in person by the incumbent in the Vicarage study. This presents a particular difficulty when so much correspondence is now handled by email – often via the incumbent's personal email account. If this is true in your parish/benefice, finding answers to the following questions will have a particular urgency!

- Who will be responsible for dealing with any correspondence addressed officially to the incumbent?

- Can an answerphone be installed in the Vicarage/Rectory to inform people of contact persons with phone numbers? NB The PCC may need to pay the line rental.
- Who will be responsible for dealing with Diocesan administration?
- Who will be responsible for printing service sheets, etc?
- Who will be responsible for magazine production and for supplying material that might previously have come from the incumbent?
- Who will order necessary stationery items?
- Who will manage the maintenance of office equipment?
- What items of office equipment will need to be purchased, because previously these items have been the personal property of the incumbent?
- How will decisions be taken about which documents are to be kept, destroyed or taken by the outgoing incumbent – and where will the retained files be kept?

H. FINANCIAL

- Who will be responsible for any petty cash, postage book, etc. normally handled by the incumbent?

I. THE PARSONAGE HOUSE

Churchwardens and PCCs should always seek advice from the Rural/Area Dean or the Archdeacon about the extent and limits of their responsibilities in relation to the parsonage house during the time of a vacancy. Among matters likely to need attention are:

- Security of Rectory/Vicarage
- Upkeep of Rectory/Vicarage grounds
- Issues surrounding who will bear the cost of decoration for a new incumbent
- Discovering from the outgoing incumbent what problems there may be with the house so that repairs can be carried out before the new incumbent arrives.
- Arrangement for collection of official mail
- Key holders confirmed and notified to police, etc.
- Responsibility for gas/water/electricity and bills
- The possibility of letting the parsonage house if a long interregnum is likely.

In all the planning for the vacancy, don't forget to thank your departing incumbent. Arrange for a gift to be made at a suitable farewell function. And make it possible for non-church people in the community to be involved in this. If it is not too far away, it may be possible to take a party over to your incumbent's new parish for the induction and licensing service. Many parishes organise a coach for this so that everyone can relax and enjoy the event.

A "BRIDGING GROUP":

A "Bridging Group" could be valuable to ensure that all the arrangements for the vacancy are co-ordinated and run smoothly. In a parish the group would typically include the Churchwardens and staff members (Readers, other Clergy and/or paid project workers) and others with practical roles in the life of the church. In multi-parish benefices each PCC should be asked to meet and choose representatives to join the group.

A secretary should be appointed at the first meeting together with a chair person. The Rural/Area Dean should be kept informed of progress and invited to any meeting when issues concerning his role and that of the deanery are to be discussed.

It will be helpful to everyone if, at the earliest opportunity, a full list of duties can be printed together with who is responsible for them with their addresses and telephone numbers. These lists should be distributed to people with key responsibilities and available for all to use in the church.

A plan of worship should be organised for at least the first three months of the interregnum as soon as possible.

AN OPPORTUNITY TO GROW

At the beginning of a vacancy, responsible local church people will say, "*We want to do more than just keep things ticking over*". The Church is not just the Vicar; we are! We are the Church, part of the Body of Christ – and every member of Christ's Body has some part to play, whether in pastoral care, or mission, education, work with young people, stewardship or social responsibility. Every member of Christ's Body is called to prayer and to being attentive to the leading and energising of the Holy Spirit.

So how do you strengthen these activities and build on the base you have got? How do you expand and develop them? You may not set out to do it, but a growing spiritual maturity is likely to be one of the spin offs from committing to making it a 'good vacancy'. It will be something you will find you have done without knowing it.

In the process you will identify those jobs that could be better transferred to lay people even when the new Vicar does finally arrive. And you will also gain a clearer picture of the jobs that are not easily taken over from your ordained ministers without damaging the Church or yourselves.

Clearly the managing of a good vacancy is not done without cost in terms of time, effort – and no doubt some anxiety! The announcement that the incumbent is leaving will always provoke a mixture of emotions and an element of 'trauma' in the church community. It is the end of a distinct phase in the life of that community and the beginning of a journey towards something new.

If you find new life during the vacancy, make sure that you don't lose it when and if an appointment is made. Don't lose the positive things that you have gained through working together as God's chosen people. You are the Church; so become what you are!