

A Churchwardens' Guide to Visitations

By the Venerable John S Cox, formerly Archdeacon of Sudbury

The Annual Meeting of parishioners to appoint churchwardens has to take place by 30 April. However, churchwardens do not officially or legally take up their office until they have been formally *admitted*. Admissions normally take place at a Visitation. Churchwardens are, of course, officers of the Bishop; but most years the Archdeacon holds the Visitation, although occasionally the Bishop will do it himself.

Visitations may also be held for less specific purposes. Canon G.6 gives the Archbishops, Bishops and Archdeacons the right to visit *'the province, diocese or archdeaconry committed to his charge'* and to perform *'all such acts as by law and custom are assigned to his charge in that behalf for the edifying and well-governing of Christ's flock that means may be taken thereby for the supply of such things as are lacking and the correction of such things as are amiss.'*

In practice the most common visits are those carried out by the Archdeacons (or Rural Deans acting on their behalf) as an inspection of *'churches, chancels and churchyards'* when *directions are to be given for the 'amendment of all defects in the walls, fabric, ornament and furniture of the same.'* (Canon C.22.5).

Two kinds of Visitations are considered here:

- * Visitations for the admission of churchwardens
- * Parish visitations for the inspection of the fabric

ADMISSION OF CHURCHWARDENS

The Visitation process begins with a SUMMONS. This is a notice, often in quite formal language, sent to churchwardens giving the date, place and time of the Visitation when they will be admitted to office. It makes it clear they are expected to attend. Indeed they are not legally churchwardens until they have done so. Retiring churchwardens continue to act until this point.

If a churchwarden cannot attend it is usual for the incumbent to be asked to carry out the admission on behalf of the archdeacon. In some dioceses the rural dean has this responsibility.

The summons may also require clergy to be present for the Visitation. Whether a formal requirement or not,

many clergy like to attend, together with other church members, in support of the churchwardens.

ENQUIRIES

At some point earlier in the year Articles of Enquiry are sent out by the Archdeacon to the churchwardens containing questions about matters relating to different aspects of the life of the parish, the condition of the church, its finance and administration. These questions will differ from year to year and will depend on current issues e.g. changes in worship patterns; child protection matters; insurance; provision for young people in the church.

Form filling is always a chore and Archdeacons take care not to ask for information that can be gathered from elsewhere. The answers are not only carefully studied by the Archdeacons but the information is passed on to others who need to act upon it.

Long serving churchwardens will no doubt see that some topics are repeated, but this usually reflects the need for up to date monitoring – as in the case of Child Protection, for example.

Space is often left on the form for churchwardens to raise any matter they wish to bring to the attention of the Archdeacon. Occasionally these can be matters of some sensitivity since churchwardens are charged with reporting anything that is amiss or irregular in the parish. The Visitation itself can provide an opportunity for such matters to be discussed although if they are of a serious nature then more extensive time will be needed.

THE EVENT

Unless a cathedral or very large parish church is being used for the Visitation, there may well be more than one Visitation in each archdeaconry, simply because of the number of people involved. Each deanery may have its own.

The pattern of the occasion will vary but usually contains an act of worship, the admission of churchwardens, a 'charge' and the opportunity to meet informally. Some archdeacons like to meet all the churchwardens individually. This provides the opportunity for a few words, allows a check to be made on who is present, and

makes it possible for the new churchwardens to be welcomed in person.

The act of worship will vary by custom and personal choice - anything from Evensong to Compline, from Holy Communion to an informal hymn sandwich.

It is traditional for the Archdeacon to issue a CHARGE, reminding the churchwardens of various aspects of their role and matters that are of particular concern. This can be a tedious experience, but does not have to be! There are of course a number of basic concerns, usually summarised in terms of 'drains and gutters' but these days there is also, for example, an increasing volume of legislation that churchwardens need to be aware of such as Health and Safety and The Disability Discrimination Act, Employment legislation and changes in Faculty Jurisdiction. Copies of the charge or a summary of it are often made available for churchwardens to take home and use for reference.

Some Archdeacons prefer to deal with all such matters purely in a written document handed to each churchwarden at the end of the Visitation – and instead deliver a sermon within the act of worship itself. Either way the Visitation and the Charge provide an important opportunity for the Archdeacon to draw a range of significant matters to the attention of the churchwardens as they undertake their responsibilities as Bishop's officers in the life of the local church.

ADDRESSING A WIDER CONTEXT

The Canons indicate that the responsibilities of Churchwardens are wider than simply for buildings and artefacts. Churchwardens should be supported and encouraged in that part of their task which is (in the words of Canon E.1.4) to *'use their best endeavours by example and precept to encourage the parishioners in the practice of true religion and to promote unity and peace among them.'* The Visitation can be one way of offering such support and encouragement.

To address this, the Visitation may therefore be placed within the setting of a full day of seminars and workshops planned not only to assist the churchwardens (and others) to keep up to date on more administrative matters, but also to provide opportunities for exchange of information and news of good practice.

This can be of particular help to new churchwardens, many of whom can feel a bit daunted by what they have agreed to take on.

It also avoids the danger that a concern for the repair and maintenance of the church building, for example, can be seen as an end in itself rather than as part of the whole church's responsibility for the way its resources are used for worship and witness.

PARISH VISITATIONS

Originally the Archdeacon's Visitation would have included an inspection of the church and churchyard, but these days parish visitations usually take place on another occasion, while retaining the name. The requirement is set out in Canon F18: *"Each archdeacon shall survey the churches, chancels and churchyards within his jurisdiction at least once in three years, either in person or by the rural dean."*

In practice there is considerable variation in what actually happens - if indeed it happens at all. Some archdeacons will alternate with their rural deans; others always delegate this task to the rural dean. Others again will take both the rural dean and deanery lay chair with them on a visitation. A parish visitation may involve little more than a cursory look round and a checking of the registers; others will be much more thorough and take the best part of half a day.

In making arrangements for the visitation it is helpful if the Archdeacon (or Rural Dean) gives a clear indication of what will be involved and the documents that will be required. These will usually include: registers, PCC minutes, electoral roll figures, annual accounts, insurance policy, recent faculties, the Terrier and Inventory of the church and its Log Book.

A good place to start the Visitation is in the church vestry, since this is usually where the safe is located, where the church's silver and registers are stored.

THE REGISTERS

A look at the church registers can be very informative and lead to a helpful discussion about patterns of services, the number of occasional offices, parish outreach, etc.

Many a visitation has found banns books not fully signed-up, mistakes in marriage registers incorrectly noted, churchyard burial plans missing, and the ubiquitous biro used instead of proper document ink.

The marriage certificate book is particularly significant since blank certificates have considerable value in the 'criminal' world and it should not only always be kept secure but also be checked that there are no

discrepancies between the certificates and the counterfoils.

Old registers need to be deposited with the Records Office. Parishioners will often prefer to retain their old documents and will argue that visitors often come to refer to them. However, few churches have a really suitable environment in which to store old records and most archdeacons have seen registers from the early 19th century whose paper is so damp that the ink is beginning to spread and the writing increasingly faded and blurred. Some of these registers, old as they are, still have space for further entries. Nevertheless they should be closed and deposited at the Records Office. The Advice of the Superintendent Registrar may be sought if in doubt about marriage registers.

DOCUMENTS RELATING TO CHURCH FABRIC ETC

The traditional purpose of the Parish Visitation was an inspection of the fabric, furniture and ornaments of the church building.

Archdeacons claim no special expertise in relation to the building – although it is not difficult to spot grass growing in the gutters! Since 1955 they have been supported by the Inspection of Churches Measure, which introduced the **quinquennial survey of churches** by a qualified professional architect or surveyor.

A Visitation will still normally include a tour of the church and a discussion with the churchwardens about the work done (or not done) since the last quinquennial survey. Useful advice can sometimes be given on sources of grants for repair work and clarification about faculty requirements.

The Archdeacon will want to see the church's **Log Book**, which maintains a record of works done on the property. Details of repairs carried out should also include the specification and plans.

Theft from churches continues to be a problem; so the churchwardens will need to show an up to date **Inventory** of the contents of the church and a **Terrier**, which shows all the parish's land and buildings. The Archdeacon may well conduct a spot check! The Articles of Enquiry usually require churchwardens to sign to confirm that they have checked and are satisfied that all is in order. (See also Canon E.1.5)

The Visitation can also provide an opportunity for discussing questions of security. Issues include whether the church should be kept locked or unlocked, the micro

dotting valuables – not least the silver in the vestry safe, as well as levels of insurance, etc. A photographic record of all items of value is recommended (preferably NOT kept in the church safe!) and a copy provided for the Archdeacon.

MORE THAN A PERFUNCTORY INSPECTION

While a Visitation might appear like an inspection, and both clergy and churchwardens can sometimes dread the arrival of the Archdeacon, in practice it should be an occasion for informative interchange, encouragement and help. It should be carried out with care, as a matter of significance, but also with sensitivity. It provides an opportunity for churchwardens to talk to the Archdeacon or Rural Dean about matters of concern without the formal approach of a letter. Well used, the visitation can be an excellent way of building up relationships and the Archdeacon's knowledge of a parish, while offering support to the churchwardens and encouragement in what is an increasingly responsible job.

Just as the visitation for the admission of churchwardens may be set within a whole day planned as an opportunity for training and discussion, so too the Parish Visitation may be undertaken within the context of a visit to the parish generally, including an opportunity to meet with the PCC.

If, as in some places, Parish Visitations are undertaken on a deanery wide basis over several days the opportunity might well be taken for the Archdeacon (or Rural Dean) to hold an **open deanery meeting** when matters of mutual concern can be raised - e.g. pastoral reorganisation; deanery training programmes; current community concerns within the deanery.

What at one level could be a perfunctory inspection of buildings and artefacts, can, with imagination and care, become an opportunity for helpful meetings and conversations to the benefit of the local church, leading to a widening of vision – as well as better informed Archdeacons!