

Guidelines for Readers during a vacancy

Before it happens...

Experience shows that good preparation can help ease the transition, and there are certain matters that need to be clarified. For example, 'Who's in Charge' (see below) and who will organise visiting clergy etc. It is a good idea for the Ministry Team (however that is constituted - it might be Readers and clergy plus the Churchwardens, Pastoral Team leader) to meet together to pray and plan. Some parishes have found that this is best done in an 'Away Day'.

Who's in charge?

The Bishop's Regulations for Reader Ministry paragraph 4.8 states:

'During a clergy vacancy it is normally appropriate for the Reader's ministry to continue with supervision and support from the Rural Dean and churchwardens. A potential incumbent should be made aware of any existing Readers in the parish and declare acceptance of the principles and practice of Reader ministry,' and specifically in Birmingham: 'at the beginning of a vacancy, the Churchwardens shall apply to the Bishop to continue the licence during the vacancy, and the Bishop, having granted this permission, shall request the Area Dean to oversee the Readers' work.'

The guidelines for Churchwardens and PCCs from the Archdeacons say this:

'When the vicar leaves, the churchwardens and Area Dean have prime responsibility for the parish. For this purpose they are known as Sequestrators (see below under Parish Finance). The lay Vice-Chair chairs the PCC and the Area Dean may be asked to attend meetings.

Curates are normally under the direction of the Area Dean. Though not in charge of the parish they will often be looked to for advice and leadership; close co-operation between all parties is important. Readers similarly come under the oversight of the Area Dean. If they are to continue their ministry during the vacancy, the churchwardens should write to the Bishop seeking his permission.'

So the Area Dean, for example, is the person to contact at the time of Annual Returns to do the annual review and for help and advice at any time.

Organising visiting clergy and Readers.

The Archdeacons' Guidelines again:

'The Churchwardens, in consultation with the Area Dean, make arrangements for Sunday services, baptisms, marriages and funerals. Some services will almost certainly be cut. Fees and travelling expenses for ministers conducting Sunday services and no more than two week-day services may be reclaimed.

Travelling expenses within the diocese only should be reimbursed for all visiting clergy and visiting Readers at the diocesan rate, currently 45p per mile.

Stipendiary clergy, paid Chaplains, Self-supporting Ministers and visiting Readers should not be paid fees.'

Child Protection Policy and Criminal Records Bureau

Archdeacons' Guidelines: *'If any person is to work with children or vulnerable adults for the first time, Churchwardens must contact the Area Dean immediately, who will deal with all the confidential paperwork required.'*

Note that care needs to be taken in this area, since a vacancy may be a time for unsuitable people to seek to have responsibility with children or other vulnerable people.

Handing over. Working with other members of staff - lay and ordained. The Area Dean.

As the incumbent leaves and farewells are made, this needs sympathetic planning with the incumbent and the rest of the ministry team. It needs to manage feelings of loss from both sides, as well as celebrating what has been achieved. It can vary from a quiet last service to a big festival.

The Readers should arrange to meet regularly with the Churchwardens and other members of the ministry team e.g. curate and active retired clergy, in order to be mutually informed. One Reader, speaking from a recent experience of a vacancy writes:

'It is important to keep in contact with one another, and a 'Ministry team' group email, with people making thoughtful use of the 'reply to all' button is a good way of working if all the 'team' are on email and read it regularly. Emails give people time for reflection, if only of a few minutes, which I for one find helpful. I don't react well to being asked to think quickly on the 'phone, and the 'phone limits exchanges to 1 to 1 at any time.'

The taking of services by visiting clergy is the responsibility of the Churchwardens in consultation with the Area Dean, as noted above. They will be aware of the part a Reader can play in this (see the Bishop's regulations above), but Readers need to be aware that when visiting clergy come to preside they often also preach and this may reduce the opportunities for a preaching ministry to continue for a Reader. This is a common experience, but a Reader may have an intermediary role in care of the congregation and liaising with other members of the ministry team. So in some parishes a Reader may find he or she is doing more. It is important to maintain a balance and to know whom you can turn to for support. (see below)

Parish Administration generally, and organising of rotas for services, may sometimes be the role of the Reader and Churchwardens together, and final responsibility for cover rests with the Area Dean. If there is a parish administrator, talk through what expectations she or he might have.

It may be a good idea if the members of the Ministry team who are available during the day can form an 'on call' rota which is publicised as a point of pastoral, rather than administrative contact.

Occasional Offices (Baptisms, Weddings , Funerals)

A Reader writes:

'In principle it's the Wardens in consultation with the Area Dean who organise these. In practice you may be able to find Clergy willing to officiate at Weddings (They can be paid for this). A Reader with the correct training can officiate at funerals. Baptisms usually take place within public worship so officiating Clergy will baptise, and local readers may take a part in the liturgy (There is guidance available from the Diocese on this - see the Birmingham Readers website: www.readersbirmingham.org.uk)

Problem areas can be

- *Weddings where one of the parties is divorced with a former partner still living. Synod's guidance on this is detailed and envisages deep pastoral interviews with Clergy, which may be hard to arrange. Even if this is possible, decisions as to carrying out the ceremony are a matter of individual clergy conscience. You are advised to download and study Synod's guidance notes on this. [<http://www.churchofengland.org/media/37453/mcad1.doc>] Note: in these circumstances it is always essential to consult the Area Dean.*
- *Weddings where one or both of the couple are foreign nationals - you need to arrange for the marriage by licence through the Diocesan Registrar. Any haste in seeking to arrange the wedding should raise concern.*
- *Funeral directors who continue to send you funerals which are not strictly yours to perform under Canon B38 – some of their staff don't even seem to know of the Parish System. Check carefully – there may be a very real pastoral link which is not at first apparent, but again there may not, and there is not a lot to be gained by taking on extra workload which really should fall on someone else.'*

Parish finance

During a vacancy the Churchwardens and Area Dean are called Sequestrators and implies the separation of part of the church accounts under their administration. The Archdeacons' Guidelines for Churchwardens and PCC give a fuller account of this, if you need to know. If there is no Treasurer Parish Finances are the responsibility of the Churchwardens.

A Reader writes:

'If the vacancy goes on for some time it is possible for giving to fall off and be less than is needed to sustain parish life. A good PCC treasurer who can spot this is valuable, as is willingness to call upon outside help for Stewardship, and someone prepared to, if necessary speak out about giving and Stewardship.'

Support

Your Area Dean is your first point of contact for questions and matters of concern. As mentioned above your licence transfers to the Area Dean when there is no incumbent in post.

However the Warden of Readers or an Assistant Warden, if there is one in your Deanery are also very happy to be contacted for advice and support

The Revd Martin Stephenson, Warden of Readers, 0121 777 1935
martin.stephenson@cantab.net

Prayer and moral support from fellow Readers, your Spiritual Director or Soul Friend may also be a great source of help.

Process of appointing a new incumbent.

There is no statutory role for the Reader in the appointment of a new incumbent. It is the responsibility of the Patrons in consultation with the Parish Representatives appointed by PCC.

The PCC should take full account of the Reader and other ministers in the parish when preparing the Parish Statement.

When a new incumbent is appointed.

The Reader may have an important role in helping the new incumbent be aware of the parish and the complex relationships that exist already, and in helping him or her to settle in. It can be helpful, for example, to have a flow chart to show how information moves around the parish. There is formally a period of six months in which Reader and incumbent get to know one another. The draft Working Agreement, available from the Warden of Readers may be a help here in clarifying roles and drawing up a way of working. Following this, the incumbent may write to the Bishop asking for your licence to be transferred to his or her name.

MWS

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