

Beginning a Parish Vacancy

Some useful information
for Lay Ministers and
Churchwardens



Called together
grow enrich resource

The announcement of a parish vacancy “The vicar is leaving us.....!” usually comes as a complete surprise to most of the congregation, and can be a time of shock and sadness. Even for the members of the congregation who may not always have seen eye to eye with the vicar, change is rarely welcomed.

For the lay ministers and churchwardens in the parish, you will be losing a colleague in ministry, who is hopefully a friend, and



who might also have been the person who first encouraged you into ministry. He or she might be the only vicar you have ever worked with, or might be one of a number over many years.

The congregation will probably quickly begin asking you questions about what will happen next, many of which you won't be able to answer, like “Who will be our next Vicar?” At the same time you will have your own questions about who will do what in the vacancy, and whether you will be able to continue doing what you are currently doing in ministry.

This booklet is unlikely to contain the answers to all your questions, but it will hopefully be a start.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Karen".

Karen Senior, Warden of Lay Ministry

What happens next – and who is in charge?

During a clerical vacancy the **Area Dean**, under the **Bishop**, has a general oversight for the Parish, and the **Archdeacon** will usually meet with the **PCC** as soon as is practical after the announcement has been made, in order to explain the appointment process and the tasks which the PCC will need to embark upon now (eg, preparing the parish profile).

The vacancy formally comes about when the former Vicar's Letter of Resignation takes effect, eg, on their taking up a new post. A vacancy period of a few months is very likely, but it can be a time of positive growth in various ways.

Whilst the vacancy is not the time to make radical changes to the mission and ministry of the parish, it can be a time when people are willing to get more involved, and to do things they have not done before, and it can be a time when individuals grow in their faith and new gifts develop.

Lay ministers are licensed, commissioned or authorised by the Bishop, and **churchwardens** are the officers of the Bishop, according to Canon Law (E1.4).

The churchwardens (and the sidesmen) have legal duties, as do members of the PCC and other officers, so churchwardens and lay ministers should aim to work together as colleagues, maintaining the mission and ministry of the church whilst there is not a vicar in post.

Your churchwardens might not have had the experience of a clerical vacancy before – it might all be new to them too, and they will value your support and encouragement.

Once churchwardens take up their office, they:

- (a) must be the foremost in representing the laity and co-operating with the incumbent (E1.4):
- (b) must 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* (E1.4);

That unity and peace should begin with the lay ministers and churchwardens; both will face new challenges at this time and working on being encouraging and supportive will benefit one another and the whole church. The vacancy can be a great blessing as new gifts for ministry are grown and developed amongst God's people.

Clear communication is vital, and some parishes have found it helpful to introduce regular meetings through the vacancy where churchwardens and lay ministers can meet face to face, share concerns and encouragements, and pray for one another and the parish as a whole.

"As soon as our vicar announced her departure, our churchwarden (we only had one at the time) convened a meeting of the church leaders (Churchwarden, readers, PAs, parish administrator, and principal Sunday school leader) with the intention of this group meeting every 6 weeks or so throughout the forthcoming period of vacancy. The vicar was not involved in this in any way (something she totally agreed with), so that by the time she left we had a fully functioning church leaders team, every member of which was kept in the loop about all that was going on, anyone who felt overburdened could be supported, and anyone dealing with a particularly difficult situation could also be supported and prayed with. With the arrival of our new priest-in-charge the group was disbanded (so far as future meetings were concerned), but it had served us well in the day-to-day running of the church"

A Reader reflecting on how his parish faced a vacancy.

"Maybe constant communication between wardens and ministry team could be emphasised more. In fact, constant communication of the various stages of a vacancy with the congregation in general is very important for allaying fears and rumours spreading."

A Pastoral Assistant's reflections after a vacancy.

"What also really helps us is that we work as a team, and have good communication. (Good old email!) And importantly have God's grace among us in order to maintain our relationships even when people do sometimes get stressed, and be able to support each other as well as those we minister to. We have a Pastoral Care Team who help with pastoral visits - one person (we have a PA) cannot possibly do all that by themselves. Having teams that are already working together when there is a vicar in post means that it is easier to keep going when there is a vacancy."

A lay minister coming to the end of a long vacancy

Lay ministers are volunteers,

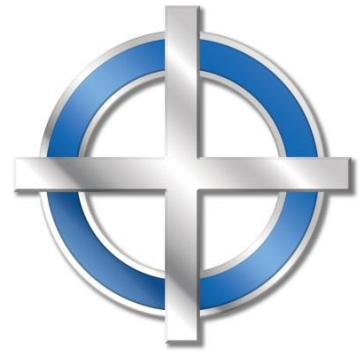
It is important that you are not expected to be "on duty" every week, and should have opportunities to be ministered to as well as to minister. This might be difficult in the vacancy. You might choose to occasionally worship elsewhere in the deanery, to "be" and to receive from God.

If you need someone to offload the challenges with, contact the Warden of Lay Ministry or the deputy wardens for your archdeaconry – their contact details are at the back of this booklet.



Readers

During the vacancy readers should be able to exercise their ministry to the full both pastorally and liturgically. It will probably be a time when they will be busy and this can be very rewarding, but if their personal circumstances do not allow for them to do more, they must not be embarrassed to say no to extra duties. It is better that Readers continue to do what they can do and do it well.



Licensed Lay Ministers

LLMs are all licensed but each minister has their own specific working agreement. If your ministry has a focus within the parish, like readers you may find there are more opportunities to preach and lead worship. If your role is more of a chaplaincy/outreach one, you might feel isolated without the incumbent's support. You might want to ask the area dean or your deputy warden of lay ministry if they can suggest someone who will support you and pray for you.

Readers or LLMs with Permission to Officiate

Lay Ministers with PTO are not listed as parish ministers in the diocesan directory, because their permission is wider than the parish, but in a vacancy they often play a very helpful part in maintaining the worship life of the church.

If your parish doesn't have any readers, there might be readers with PTO in your deanery who are willing to help regularly until the vacancy is ended. If you aren't sure who they are, contact the Warden of Lay Ministry who will be able to tell you.

Pastoral Assistants

A parish vacancy can be a time of uncertainty for the congregation, and that may mean an increase in pastoral work-load for those who are authorised ministers. After the vicar has moved on, pastoral assistants might feel if they don't visit the sick and housebound, nobody will, but whilst PA's might be the obvious people to do that, they still only have 7 days in a week, and it is important they look after themselves too. If there are other Lay Ministers in the ministry team they may be able to share some of the pastoral responsibilities, and there might be other members of the congregation who will be able to drop in on, or phone up, those who are housebound.

Anna Friends and Chaplains

Anna Chaplaincy ministers have a calling to care for elderly people in the congregation and the community, and have been trained and commissioned by the Bishop to do this.



Sometimes PAs and Anna Friends may be able to help those "ordinary" church members in their efforts at pastoral care.

Evangelists

Evangelists are those people who have a real 'heart' for the outsider, for those who as yet do not recognise the impact of God, through Jesus, in their lives. They are people who also help those who have lost their sense of faith to recover their relationship with God and to be strengthened in it.

Evangelists will notice if the PCC and churchwardens are putting all their energy into maintaining the ministry of the church and sidelining the mission. They might have a role in (lovingly) pointing that out, and perhaps suggesting achievable ways that the church can continue to reach out into the community whilst awaiting a new vicar.

Lay Ministers and Funerals

A number of readers and LLMs, licensed and with PTO, and a small but growing number of other lay ministers, are authorized to conduct funerals following the appropriate training. If the parish is one where funerals take place frequently and a Reader or LLM finds him/herself taking significantly more, it might not be possible for him/her to preach as often on Sundays.

Some parishes have nobody authorized to conduct funerals once the vicar moves on.

If there is a death of a member of the congregation, the lay ministers are best placed to offer bereavement care, and perhaps take part in the funeral service along with a visiting minister who is authorized.



People who hold the Bishop's Certificate

Some congregations include people who have completed the Bishop's Certificate course in Christian Ministry. The certificate gives the Bishop's permission to undertake on behalf of the church such duties as agreed locally. These duties *may* include preaching not more than every other month (or about six times a year) and/or leading Services of the Word up to 6 times a year. The permission relates specifically to the parish/benefice specified, under the guidance of the incumbent, and in a clerical vacancy the Area Dean has ministerial oversight.

Admin and Paperwork.

Most lay ministers are licensed, authorised or commissioned to the parish on the nomination of the incumbent. In a vacancy, your licence, authorization, commission or permission will remain current until the renewal date on it. At that point, when it is renewed, if you have a new incumbent in place he/she will nominate the renewal.

If your authorisation needs to be renewed in the meantime, the Area Dean will meet with you and nominate the renewal. In parishes with associate clergy this might be delegated to one of them.

Readers and LLM's with Permission to Officiate (and pastoral assistants with Permission to Minister) need their permission renewing every 3 years. PTO for readers is on the nomination of the Area Dean, and in a vacancy he/she will also nominate renewal of PTM for pastoral assistants.

Maintaining up to date DBS clearance, and undertaking the required safeguarding training is not dependent on the vicar, and both are essential for all lay ministers regardless of whether there is a priest in place. Tricia Cliffe will continue to remind lay ministers when DBS needs renewing, and your parish lead recruiter will know how to process it.

What about Holy Communion?

It is likely that visiting priests will be booked for communion services, but if a minister who is known to the congregation is able to take part in the leading of that service, acting as deacon, or leading intercessions, for example, this may reassure those of the congregation who are feeling unsettled by the changes.



Lay ministers cannot preside at Holy Communion, but in exceptional circumstances, the Bishop may give permission for communion by extension, and specific provisions for this are set out in Bishop's guidelines.

Your Area Dean will know if you are likely to be able to rota visiting priests to preside, and this question is worth asking even before your vicar leaves.

If your parish wants to explore the possibility of communion by extension, if there are Sundays in the vacancy when you cannot find a priest to preside, please contact the Bishop's chaplain on 01634 842721 or lindsay@rochester.anglican.org and she will advise.

At the end of the vacancy

When a new parish priest is instituted he/she will be welcomed into the parish as the leader of your ministry team, and will be prayed for along with the ministry team.



Around the time of the institution, the Warden of Lay Ministry will write and ask him/her to get to know you, and then to meet with you to renew your working agreement.

This may not change at all – but it is important that you look at it with the new incumbent as it will give him/her an idea of what you are currently doing. It might be that you extended your ministry during the vacancy and would like to add new elements to your working agreement. Of course, any changes you agree at this stage can (and should) be reviewed subsequently – working agreements are not set in stone.

Your new incumbent may not have worked with lay ministers before, or may have worked with different categories of lay ministers to the mix in your parish. He or she might be new to Rochester Diocese, and the way we do Lay Ministry may be new to them. They will be sent our information booklet which introduces lay ministry in this diocese, and the Warden of Lay Ministry

speaks to new clergy at the “New Posts” conference which they will probably attend in their first 6 months.

Parish priests are also offered the opportunity of a visit from one of the deputy wardens of lay ministry in their archdeaconry, who is likely to know some of the lay ministry team. All new clergy are offered this visit – not just those who are first time incumbents, because your parish will be different to his/her previous parish, and your ministry team is unique to your parish.

Your new vicar will be unique too – and is bound to do some things differently to the previous incumbent. The first months of his/her ministry will be a time of transition for him or her, as well as for the parish. He/she might seem more or less efficient than the previous incumbent, or might take time to settle and make friends. He or she will need to get to know an entire congregation, as well as the local community, whereas you will know them well and be known.

The strength of the ministry team depends on the strength of the relationship within it. Encourage one another. Pray for each other.

Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you. Eph 4.32

Please do feel free to get in touch with me, or with your archdeaconry deputy wardens of lay ministry, if you have further questions, or need help or give support at this time.

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