

BEING A CHURCH WARDEN



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It can be daunting or mystifying to contemplate the task of being a churchwarden. This booklet is a brief and introductory summary of the task of a churchwarden and is written primarily for those who have recently been elected to serve as a churchwarden or who are thinking of standing.

WHAT IS A CHURCHWARDEN ?

A churchwarden is

- The Bishop's officer

When the archdeacon admits you as a churchwarden, he is formally appointing you to this office on behalf of the Bishop. The Bishop may want to consult with you about the parish during the year, and you may need to consult with him. If you need to resign in the course of the year, it is the Bishop you write to!

- A support for the vicar/rector/ priest-in-charge

Clergy look to their churchwardens to be dependable colleagues and (hopefully) supportive friends in their shared responsibility for the life of the parish. 'Cooperating with the incumbent' is required of wardens (Canon E1*)

- 'Foremost in representing the laity' (Canon E1*)

Lay people will often follow the example and lead of their churchwardens both in the PCC and more generally in the parish. They will sometimes come to a churchwarden with their concerns about the church. A churchwarden's wisdom and common sense are great assets for a church.

- Responsible for some church property and for order in church services

Churchwardens have responsibilities concerning the safe keeping of certain items of the church and often for the maintenance of the building, though this can be delegated. The managing of church services (in terms of opening building and preparing for worship) often falls to the churchwardens, but again can be delegated to sidespeople and sacristans.

- A 'caretaker' during a vacancy

The Bishop will probably make the rural dean and the churchwardens caretakers of the parish during a vacancy, 'sequestrators' in legal language. So there will be further demands when a parish is between vicars.

So it does take commitment to do justice to the task of serving the church as a churchwarden. A 'deputy warden', though not an official position, can in practice greatly ease the burden of a busy churchwarden.

* See Appendix

KEY RELATIONSHIPS

There are some key relationships in the task of a churchwarden, for example

Your Vicar

First and foremost, the churchwardens' relationship with their vicar will be hugely influential in the parish. To put it negatively, if a churchwarden cannot give support and public loyalty to his/her vicar, then it is probably wrong to have stood as churchwarden in the first place. Loyalty and support do not have to be uncritical, of course. Vicars should welcome constructive ideas and advice. But there needs to be a measure of mutual understanding and solidarity between incumbent and churchwardens. A regular and definite meeting, however informal, between vicar and churchwardens is desirable for real effective teamwork in the leadership, lay and clerical, of the parish church. An incumbent and churchwardens need to collaborate with each other. The relationship is of fellow-workers; not of a squire with his chaplain, nor of a mini-pope with his servants!

Your PCC officers . . . and everyone

Good relationships with everyone in the church is the aim, but it is especially helpful to have good relationship with the PCC treasurer and secretary. No-one works harder for the parish church than the treasurer, and churchwardens need to be ready to give moral support and to have a working understanding of the finances of the PCC. Money forms a large part of many issues. A good treasurer is a treasure in him/herself, and to be looked after. Churchwardens can do much to foster a tone of good relations and healthy attitudes throughout the church. Canon E1 (see Appendix) states that churchwardens shall *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.*

Your Rural Dean

Your Rural Dean, usually a nearby vicar, will be someone you may have quite a lot of contact with if you have a vacancy in your parish or your vicar is sick. He or she is there to help and will be glad to know of difficulties or challenges and may well be able to suggest avenues of help. New arrangements for parishes or local mission may well involve discussions with the Rural Dean. Rural Deans often provide links to what is happening in nearby parishes and sometimes opportunities to meet with the churchwardens of other parishes.

Your Archdeacon

Feel free to ring or email your archdeacon who will be glad to help if you have questions or problems that can't be sorted within the parish. Usually an experienced former vicar and rural dean, (s)he will have a practical knowledge and experience of all sorts of things, and (s)he sits on many committees at the centre of diocesan life so can give a view from a wider perspective. He is often a good place to go to for practical advice. (S)He can at least usually point you to the person who can help you most or advise on the best way to proceed. He is used to being asked about churchyards, church buildings, DAC procedures, Parish Contributions, procedures about Annual Parochial Church Meetings or to suggest other parishes who have recently faced similar issues to yours.

Please tell your archdeacon if there are pastoral matters he needs to know, eg if there is sickness in the vicarage or a new baby.

Your Bishop

Bishops do of course listen to churchwardens, especially when there is a problem in the parish, as well as to licensed ministers. During a vacancy in particular, you will probably meet and be in touch with the (area) bishop, as well as the archdeacon.

KEY RESPONSIBILITIES

What follows is an attempt at a non-technical summary of the responsibilities and duties of churchwardens.

Being a support to the vicar

A vicar will hope to be able to look in the first instance to churchwardens for their advice and counsel in the running of the parish and the thinking out of church policy. Being an incumbent can be a lonely calling and the support of churchwardens can be vital. On the other hand, constructive criticism given in a relationship of trust is often needed by clergy as by any other public figure. A churchwarden can often help a clergyman to take a full day off each week, breaks after Christmas and Easter and adequate annual holiday. A churchwarden can be a useful sounding board for a vicar on a whole range of ideas, needs or problems.

A leader in the PCC and the Standing Committee

A churchwarden is automatically a member of the PCC and its Standing Committee. A churchwarden's input on these bodies will help shape the parish's plans on mission, on finance, on maintenance and development of the church building, on staffing and much else.

In particular, a churchwarden may need to help members see their place in God's wider church down the centuries and outside the parish. This means in practice seeing their responsibility for the care of their church building handed on to them by previous generations, for realistic and generous giving and for collaborating with God's other parishes and churches and with the diocese at large.

A churchwarden can give a lead in the Standing Committee and PCC to make sure that the clergy's full working expenses are being reimbursed.

Everything always needs to be done in cooperation with the vicar!

Support for Services

The churchwarden can do much to help the congregation enjoy and participate fully in the services. By a consistent example of worship, witness to Christ and doing things 'decently and in order' their influence will encourage others and have a positive effect on the church.

Churchwardens have specific responsibilities to ensure the services take place without disturbance. Under ancient law they have power to arrest those making a disturbance but this is used sparingly!

Much of the work of welcoming people and preparing the church for a service can and should be delegated to sidespeople, who operate as the wardens' deputies. Wardens should have a clear idea of what needs to be done and be ready to step in to cover for any absences. By leaving the details to sidespeople the churchwarden is then free to 'float' and keep an overview of things and welcome people. Both sidespeople and warden do well to be in church in good time for a service, so that all is ready by the time most people start arriving. Some churches have additional people allocated for welcoming people and helping newcomers to fit in. Recruiting of sidespeople needs to be fairly continuous. An annual social gathering of sidespeople can be helpful as way of saying thank you and for suggesting improvements.

If, in an emergency, the priest or Reader fails to arrive for a service and no other authorised minister is available, then the churchwarden can conduct the service with the following clear provisos. If the planned service is Holy Communion (the Eucharist), there can be no Ministry of the Sacrament (i.e. Eucharistic Prayer and distribution of Holy Communion), so the warden should bring the service to an end after the Intercessions or, in the Book of Common Prayer, after the 'Comfortable Words', using the Grace or the Blessing. The hymns and readings should be the same as arranged. The churchwarden would take the service from the clergy stall, unrobed. In the absolution after the confession, and in the blessing, he or she should say 'us' instead of 'you'. Further hymns may be sung. Do not attempt an off-the-cuff sermon! If the service is Morning or Evening Prayer, it can be followed as planned. These same general principles should apply if a visiting minister fails to appear for a family service or Service of the Word.

Although it is unlikely that this event will happen while you are in office, it might be worth acquainting yourself with the services in the Book of Common Prayer or Common Worship with a view as to how you would do it. In any case, don't panic, just do your best! The congregation will be grateful to you.

Buildings and church property

The PCC will certainly need someone to oversee the care and maintenance of the buildings of the parish: church and churchyard, hall, curate's house. (The vicarage is maintained by the diocese, apart from interior decoration which the PCC does.) The churchwardens will normally oversee this maintenance of this property or arrange for some other suitable person to take on this responsibility.

Churchwardens are required to

1. Maintain a Church Property Register of all the lands and all articles belong to the parish church.
2. Maintain a Log Book recording all alterations, additions and repairs to the church, its lands and articles, as they occur.
3. Produce the Church Property Register and the Log book to the PCC early in the calendar year. At the annual visitation, when all churchwardens are sworn in, the archdeacon should be given a list of any changes to either of these documents from the last twelve months.
4. Inspect the fabric of the church and articles belonging to the church, and make an annual report to the PCC meeting before the Annual Parochial Church Meeting (and later to the APCM.). This should say what has been done or proposed for the fabric and articles of the church in the last year, and especially any action taken or proposed to implement the recommendations of the Inspecting Architect's latest Quinquennial Inspection report on the church.
5. Produce the up-to-date Church Property Register and Log Book (and other registers) when the archdeacon or his representative makes the three-yearly visitation to the parish. The archdeacon will want to see them.

(A Church Property Register and a Log Book can be obtained from Church House Bookshop Westminster or various other Christian bookshops.)

Church maintenance is very much a matter of 'a stitch in time saves nine.' Repairs become more expensive the more they are delayed. Seek to foster a good relationship with your architect. You will need his/her expert and specialised advice.

Ancient buildings have no damp proof course and are different from contemporary and domestic buildings. Your architect is your expert adviser on aesthetic or technical matters to do with your church. In practice, huge benefits can be reaped very simply on your building by volunteers or a small builder, by clearing gutters and removing vegetation growing out of cracks in the stonework and walls. Remove the beginnings of elder trees or buddleia bushes or weeds growing out of your church, and arrange for gutters to be cleared of leaves twice a year. It is very simple but can save lots of money and nervous energy dealing with dry rot later!

If you are unsure about what permission you need for work to be done on the church or how to steer it through, talk to your archdeacon or the Diocesan Advisory Committee (DAC) Secretary

During a vacancy

When the vicar leaves, churchwardens will have extra responsibility for keeping the parish ministry going. It depends on the parish but typically it may involve finding clergy to take services, helping the PCC to draw up a 'Parish Profile' stating the needs of the parish, being involved with the Bishop or patron in the process of appointing a new priest and then making arrangements for the licensing service of the new priest.

SUPPORT AND PROBLEMS

There is usually support for churchwardens, readily at hand. Do search it out, eg from your priest, your fellow churchwarden, your PCC treasurer and secretary, perhaps a former churchwarden in the parish. If you need advice over any tricky or intractable problems in the parish, your archdeacon is the person to contact.

When problems arise on church buildings issues, large or small, particularly when you need a faculty, the DAC Secretary is available to advise or point you someone who can.

Quinquennial repairs can be a headache. Work on the real priorities and matters that will get worse if not fixed. Your good relationship with your Inspecting Architect will be a great help.

Professional fees are not to be resented (though they can of course be negotiated.) Set up a regular or rolling programme of repairs. As with your home, not everything can be done at once.

Child protection and safeguarding policies and their implementation require diligence.

ADVICE TO A NEW CHURCHWARDEN FROM AN OLD HAND

1. **Be true to yourself** –your parish needs all of your talents
2. **Find a mentor** –to help accelerate development of your effectiveness
3. **Listen to the people of the parish** – try to identify and understand the real needs of the parish and gain the support you will need to address them
4. **Make the churchwardens/rector team work effectively** –spend the time needed to get to know and appreciate your colleagues and build understanding and trust
5. **Make thoughtful proposals** –well grounded proposals stand the best chance of leading to change (Poor proposals usually collapseand end in tears)
6. **Make sure your parish has time for the future, not just the present** –however difficult, find time to get away from things of the present and focus on the future. Immersion in the present can give a false sense of security
7. **Don't take criticism personally** –you can expect people to resist change and seek to personalise their anxiety. Keep going!
8. **Make sure you seek advice** –it can make a critical difference
9. **Be optimistic and positive in what you do** – it will spread!
10. **Support and look after your vicar** –work to enable your vicar to achieve all he/she can. Take good care of them: they need your support.
11. **Spread the load.** Don't take on too many other jobs in the parish. With your colleagues identify strengths available in the PCC or congregation and use your position to encourage others to take on non-warden responsibilities.
12. **Pray!** Don't underestimate the difference it makes to 'let your requests be made known to God.' He is your greatest resource.

Recommended reading

Practical Church Management by James Behrens (Gracewing) 456pp approx £20.

A very lucid, readable and practical handbook, written by a churchwarden and lawyer. Worth the investment! A fine reference book eg on churchwardens (13pp) copyright (8pp) food safety, hygiene and serving alcohol (10pp), employing lay people, and much else.

The Churchwarden's Handbook by Ian Russell (Kevin Mayhew) 48 pp approx £9

A clear and fairly detailed account of what is involved in being a churchwarden. (Published 2001)

Handbook for Churchwardens and PCC Councillors by Kenneth MacMorran & Tim Briden (New revised edition 2010) 180 pp approx £11

Longstanding reference handbook on correct procedures and law on PCC and Annual Parochial Church Meeting.

APPENDIX

The Canon Law of the Church of England includes Canon E1 of CHURCHWARDENS

4. The churchwardens when admitted are officers of the Ordinary (i.e. the Diocesan Bishop). They shall discharge such duties as are by law and custom assigned to them; they shall be foremost in representing the laity and in cooperating with the incumbent; they shall 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. They shall also maintain order and decency in the church and churchyard, especially during the time of Divine Service.

5. In the churchwardens is vested the property in the plate, ornaments, and other moveable goods of the church, and they shall keep an inventory thereof which they shall revise from time to time as occasion may require. On going out of office they shall duly deliver to their successors any goods of the church remaining in their hands together with the said inventory, which shall be checked by their successors.