

# resource sheet 18

## situations vacant

A guide to finding your first post after training

This resource sheet aims to provide a guide to the process of appointment for first posts in stipendiary ministry after training and to give you issues to consider, information to gather and ideas on decision-making. It won't tell you whether you should go to a particular parish or not, but rather suggests areas to consider together with the incumbent as you think and pray about whether the post is appropriate for the parish and for you.

This document is thus designed to prevent memory lapse and ignorance, rather than being exhaustive. It is to stimulate thought, rather than make decisions for you. In particular, you need to think carefully and honestly about your own expectations and concerns in considering posts. In the end you may find yourself called to serve in a parish which is not what you might first have thought of, and one danger to be avoided is that of looking for heaven (or a clone of your home church!) in the place where you serve immediately after training. Clearly prayer is critically important

in the whole process, along with a dependence upon God and trust in his ability to lead you and the incumbents you meet.

Throughout what follows, we use assistant (staff) to cover curate/deacon /accredited lay worker etc. and vicar to cover vicar/rector/priest-in-charge etc.

### The process of appointment

The whole process of appointment to a first post is covered by a code of procedure produced by the bishops in consultation with college and course principals and diocesan directors of ordinands. Your college/course staff have copies and it is usually reproduced in the Association of Candidates for Ministry (AOCM) handbook, *Training for Ministry* each year. It is also available from the Ministry Division website, where it is Appendix 7E of the DDO Handbook Ministry Division Code of Procedure: Reports on Sponsored Candidates and Arrangements for First Appointments. What follows is based on the code of procedure.

In the whole process of seeking your

first post considerable amounts of paper and correspondence are generated. It is helpful to have your own file to keep all these things in for reference.

In seeking your first post your sponsoring diocese has 'first refusal' on you. The bishop will receive a report from your college/course about you (which you will have seen and discussed with the college/course staff before it is sent) at the end of your penultimate year of training. You will also prepare (in conjunction with your college/course staff) a personal profile, whose expected contents are outlined in the code of procedure. The diocese (often through the DDO) should then either suggest a post for you to consider or let you know that they are unable to place you and that you are advised to look elsewhere in the country. This should happen by the end of October in your final year of training.

If there is an offer of a post within your sponsoring diocese, keep your DDO in touch throughout the whole process: he/she is an important friend.

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If your sponsoring diocese lets you know verbally that you may look elsewhere in the country, it would be wise (to avoid possible misunderstanding) to confirm this to the DDO in writing yourself (e.g. a note to the effect that as the DDO has told you that the diocese cannot offer you a post, you are now considering posts in other dioceses).

If your sponsoring diocese cannot offer you a potential post, you will find that details of posts are sent to the college and course principals by dioceses and parishes. Your principal will be able to tell you what system operates in your college/course with these details. Someone within the college/course (often the principal him/herself) will talk over with you the possibilities and advise you.

Whether you find a possible post through your sponsoring diocese or elsewhere, the bishops' code of procedure states that you should look at only one post at a time and that vicars should only look at one potential assistant at a time. 'Look at' means precisely that, though you may read and consider details of more than one job at a time before deciding which vicar to contact. Equally, a vicar may have written information about more than one potential assistant before deciding which one to contact. If you do get in touch with a vicar who says that he or she is already looking at another person, but would be willing to look at you alongside that person, talk to your college or course principal before responding.

Once you are in touch with a potential parish you (and your partner, if you are married or engaged) will then visit and meet the vicar and (usually) others. Sometimes this will be one visit (usually at a weekend, so that you can take part in the services and meet lay leaders) and sometimes more than one visit. Contact needs to be long enough for both sides to get to know each other well enough to assess whether it would be appropriate to work together.

This then leads to a mutual decision. The vicar decides whether to offer you the job and you then decide whether to accept. Both have the opportunity to say 'No' – although if you say 'No' to a post for apparently trivial reasons you will find your college or course staff asking tough questions of you about your willingness to serve God and his Church – rather than the Church serving you! Decisions to offer a post and to accept should then be confirmed in writing by both sides. It is wise at this stage, to avoid misunderstandings later, to have written confirmation of arrangements for accommodation, holidays and the like – plus anything else which is of particular importance to you or the vicar.

## Issues to consider

It is said, with good reason, that in the first post one looks for the vicar rather than the parish or the church. In the end your relationship with the vicar (and sometimes the vicar's spouse) is a very critical issue for the success or otherwise of the training in your first post. Those first posts which are unhappy or excessively difficult almost always stumble at the hurdle of relationships. Incompatibility with the church or the parish is seldom the problem.

Further, do remember that you are going to be a trainee. You are still in the initial training phase of your ministry and therefore need to be willing to be trained by *this* vicar and through *this* parish. The vicar there will be a very significant influence in shaping, for better or worse, the ministry you have in the future. This means that you need to look carefully together at: the vicar's and your aims; the vicar's and your expectations of each other; the working practices of both of you. These things will be very important to your mutual decision as to whether it is appropriate to work together.

The role of the Church in appointments is important too. This has been the case since New Testament times, when the idea of a personal 'sense of call' to serve

in a particular place or a particular ministry was almost non-existent. Indeed, some people take the view that a parish suggested by your sponsoring diocese is 'the Church's call' to serve there.

There are obviously other issues to consider if both you and your spouse are candidates for ordained or accredited lay ministry (so-called 'joint ministry') and are looking for first posts simultaneously. Talk this one through carefully with your DDO, especially in regard to your and the diocese's expectations about working in the same/different parishes, number of stipends available, etc. The Ministry Division booklet *Partners in Marriage and Ministry* (1995) is a valuable guide to the practicalities. (Sadly, there is no more recent publication on the subject.)

## Information to gather

Some of the information that follows can be gathered from the details about training parishes supplied to college and course principals by the parishes seeking staff. Other information can only be obtained by your own research, either when you visit or by talking with others who know the vicar and/or the parish. You might find it helpful to look at the list below and mark points which you see as important to follow up.

## Background information

This first block of questions provides background to the place, the church(es) and the deanery and diocese. As such they are not likely to be decisive factors in your decision about a particular post.

## The place

Are you prepared to serve wherever the Lord may send you?

- Geographical location: near city, town, university library, theological college, other resource and interest centres.
- Socio-economic type(s) in parish: urban, country, inner-city, suburban, industrial, mixed, etc.
- Vital statistics: numbers in parish by age groups, housing, social groups, occupations, etc.

- Non-church organisations in the parish: e.g. WI, Round Table, Working Men's Clubs, etc.

### The church(es)

N.B. Attitudes of the congregation(s) to things will not necessarily be those of the vicar!

- Sizes of congregation(s), electoral roll.
- Liturgy: pattern of services used (1662, Common Worship, etc.).
- Music: organist, worship group, choir, data projector, hymn-books, hymns, songs.
- Churchmanship of the church(es): attitudes to robes, vestments, incense, dog collars, reserved sacrament, prayer for the departed, etc. How welcome are evangelicals, charismatics, reformed, Anglo-Catholics, radicals, liberals, etc?
- Church organisations: children, young people, men, women, older people, etc.
- Other meetings: Bible study, prayer meeting, home groups, midweek – who leads them and what purpose do they have?
- Unpaid leadership: quantity and quality, potential for development. NSMs, elders, other staff: functions and responsibilities. Relationship of other forms of leadership to PCC and churchwardens.
- Does the church have a mission statement?
- Are the congregation(s) aware of where they are going? Are they conscious of the wider community, of the Church at large? How about morale? Are they open to change?
- Policies for evangelism and teaching, now and over, say, the next three to five years.
- Any Fresh Expressions?
- Scope for pioneer mission?
- Policies on baptism, weddings, (divorced people, preparation), funerals, communion (unconfirmed people and children), all-age services.
- Attitudes to the leadership and ministry of women (ordained and lay).
- Contact of church(es) with the area: schools, social services, sports clubs, medical practitioners, police, etc.

Relation to other local agencies: Relate, Samaritans, etc. Contact with the media: local press, radio, TV, national press, etc. Publicity, image, magazine, noticeboards and the like.

- Church facilities: building(s), plant, visual and audio aids, secretarial services, etc. Is there a church office? Is there a church bookstall and/or library?
- Missionary interest: are there link missionaries, how are they supported? Other link areas with the worldwide Church.
- Future patterns of ministry in the area around (e.g. Is pastoral reorganisation in the offing?).
- Ecumenical relationships: Methodists, RCs, Baptists and others; local Council of Churches or equivalent.

### The diocese and deanery

- Policy over curates, duration of posts, ordination dates, etc.
- Post-ordination training: is the vicar aware of the diocesan rules on this?
- The deanery: chapter – what is it like?
- Are there other assistant staff in parishes nearby?
- The area or rural dean, archdeacon, bishop(s): who are they, what help can they offer?

### Specific information

These questions are likely to be more critical to your decision about a post. Nevertheless, beware of the dangers of nit-picking and perfectionism! In some cases you will find that the answer to a question here tells you what you would be taking on in the post, rather than what you might ideally want.

### The vicar and staff team

- Age and previous experience (see entry in *Crockford's Clerical Directory*).
- Particular interests inside and outside the church.
- What's the vicar's sense of humour like, not least in laughing at him/herself?
- Will this vicar set a good example and provide training in preaching, teaching, leading worship, pastoral visiting, work with all-age groups within the church, prayer, counselling, working within the

diocese (and not totally apart from it), and personal training (including any academic work)? Where the vicar knows him/herself to be weak, will he/she provide help in those areas? Is there really evidence that training will take place?

- How far is the vicar involved in diocesan, synodical or other para-church organisations? How often is the vicar away from the parish as a visiting speaker or on other events?
- How does the vicar see his/her leadership style and abilities, both in strengths and weaknesses?
- How good is he/she at modelling collaborative ministry?
- What are the vicar's aims for the parish? How is he/she making these happen, so far as he/she is able?
- What developments have there been in the life of the parish and the church through the present vicar's ministry?
- What's he/she like at chairing meetings? Can he/she handle administration? If not, are there people around who can take responsibility for it?
- What does the vicar expect from assistant staff?
- Attitudes to key topics: sacraments, mission, ecumenism, spirituality (their own and yours!), charismatic renewal, the Church of England, preaching and worship, the role of the laity, other religions, contemporary ethical issues, buildings, money, etc.
- The vicar's spouse and yours (where they exist): relationship of spouse with the vicar and to the parish, links with other clergy spouses, relationship of vicar's spouse with assistant staff and their spouse(s), etc. What expectations are there?
- What attitude has the vicar to mutual loyalty? What happens when you make mistakes (for you will)? How does the vicar handle his/her own mistakes?
- What is the vicar's attitude to women in ministry?
- Is the vicar honest in discussing problems, both problem areas and problem people?
- Valuable insights can be gained by talking to the present and the previous assistant staff, if you can.

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## The job

- Written or unwritten job specification.
- Type of person required.
- Type of work required of you by the church and the vicar.
- Is the job focused on one section of the church's life e.g. youth? Will time be spent on all aspects of parish ministry?
- Occasional offices (baptisms, weddings, funerals): what experience of these will you get?
- Preaching and leading worship: how often? What will you be expected to wear?
- Weekly programme, staff meetings, feedback sessions: how often and how much? When and how e.g. daily office, informal, etc. Will the staff pray together?
- Proportions in post of maintenance of present scheme of things to pioneering new work or projects?
- Training: how will you be trained – more structured or by following the vicar around? How much will the vicar expect to supervise your work?
- What do the vicar and the church expect you to give in quantity and quality of work? Does the vicar expect you to be like him/her in this?
- How do assistant staff fit into the overall strategy of the church?
- Opportunities for ministry outside the parish: how does the vicar view this?
- Time for study, other interests, recreation?

- Is a car driver/owner necessary?
- Expected duration of post: often three or four years. Is there flexibility to stay longer (which may be important to you, e.g. for children's schooling) or is the time limit fixed? Is the vicar staying or are there plans to move within the duration of the assistant's post?

## Practical arrangements

- Accommodation: location, size, etc. What arrangements are there for decoration? When will it be empty? If there is no house at present, what is happening?
- Stipend, time off, holidays and expenses (car, stationery, telephone, secretarial help: who pays and how much?).
- Day off – is there flexibility over this?
- Date of ordination (Petertide/Michaelmas).
- Family considerations: schools, job prospects for spouse, etc. Are your expectations of the 'fit' between work and family life the same as the vicar's?
- Expenses for visit.
- Is a further visit needed?

## Making a decision

Christian decision-making is rarely easy and there needs to be a combination of faith and realism. If you pay too much regard to the snags in a potential post you will leave yourself with a sense of guilt in your faithlessness. But equally, it is reasonable to weigh the gifts you

have against the opportunities the post presents. None will have all their hopes for their first post fulfilled either in the tasks they undertake or the vicar they work with. So another balance is between idealism and being self-critical about your expectations.

In the whole process a trust in God, our loving heavenly Father, that leaves ourselves open to go where he sends, is crucial. Sometimes we may experience this as a strong inclination to go to a surprising place, and at other times we may simply have to say our prayers and make our minds up, trusting God to lead us. But either way the dependence on God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, can hardly be over-stressed.

## Further reading

The various papers referred to in this resource sheet are available from Ministry Division, Church House, Great Smith Street, London SW1P 3NZ; ([www.cofe-ministry.org.uk](http://www.cofe-ministry.org.uk)).

This resource sheet had its origin in a document prepared by the Rev Paul Simmonds while a theological student, by asking previous leavers what they considered important in seeking a first post after college. We are grateful to him, and to a number of others who have provided comments, for help in producing this sheet.

## resource sheets

Download sheets free of charge from [www.cpas.org.uk/vocationresources](http://www.cpas.org.uk/vocationresources) or buy a complete set of printed sheets at [www.cpas.org.uk/shop](http://www.cpas.org.uk/shop). For bulk copies of individual sheets, phone 01926 458461 or email [mnorris@cpas.org.uk](mailto:mnorris@cpas.org.uk).

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