

C: Interview

These articles have been prepared as a CPAS resource for any ordained person looking to apply for a new post as incumbent, priest-in-charge, team vicar or chaplain.

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Introduction

I am writing as a CPAS patronage trustee and in a style as though I am one of the team who are short-listing and interviewing for an appointment. I do this not because I wish to appear to put myself in a position of power. No, in this process we are both on a journey to discover God's will for this post and your application so he must be the one in control.

But I want you, in your application, always to have someone like me in mind. Put yourself in the shoes of those responsible for the selection and you are more likely to write and present yourself in a helpful way.

These are edited versions of a slightly longer article for anyone applying for any post in a church or Christian mission which may be found as Articles A22 and A23 in the Resources section of my website: www.john-truscott.co.uk. Those files include a little more detail on writing a CV than here and give illustrations relevant to a range of clergy and lay posts in churches and mission agencies.

The other articles in this CPAS series ([A: Homework](#) and [B: Application](#)) are available to download from www.cpas.org.uk.

C: Interview

So, you have been short-listed or head-hunted and now invited for interview. This part seeks to tell you what you might expect, and how to approach the whole event.

C1 Prepare the formal interview

The interview process may include a number of elements, but here I am focusing solely on what I have termed so far in this article 'the formal interview'. So here are you, without any other candidates, in a room with the selectors who are going to ask you some questions. It sounds terrifying – but remember that parish reps, if not used to doing this, may be almost as nervous as you!

Your task is simply to be true to the person that God has made as you. You will have prayed about this – and the church or mission agency will be praying for you too. You are not there to create a false impression, to hide your faults or to shine above the other candidates. But you do want to put yourself across in as good a light as possible. So here are some ideas.

Be ready for the likely format

A typical interview may last from 40 to 60 minutes. Normally you should be asked to wait somewhere comfortable when you arrive and given proper hospitality. Be ready for the programme to run late which may mean you are kept waiting there for longer than you expected – take something to do that will calm you down if anxious. If you hear the previous candidate leaving remember that the selectors may take ten minutes for a comfort break or to write up notes.

The person chairing the selectors should then come and take you into the interview room, at which point you will probably be introduced to each person while your mind is in a haze. It is wise to do some preliminary research to find just who will be interviewing you and who each of them represents. There will usually be the patron(s), the bishop or archdeacon (or even both), the rural/area dean (in an increasing number of cases) and the parish reps (normally two, but if this is a multi-parish benefice you might have two from each church).

A good selector will start with a pretty general question (such as "What attracted you about this post to make you apply?") or ask you to tell the panel a bit about your present role or background. Each member of the panel will probably have a pre-arranged set of questions to ask you and every other candidate, though the supplementary questions will depend on your answers.

After the panel have been through their list (see next section), you should be asked if you have any questions to ask them. It is a good idea to have something ready at this point. You should then be asked for your contact availability later that day or the next day and informed when you are likely to hear the outcome. There should also be a check that your expenses are being covered.

You should also be asked, 'If you were offered the post, would you be likely to say "yes"?' If the answer is indeed 'yes', do include some slight hesitation in your reply. 'It is very likely but I would of course want to check with my spouse and children first before I gave you a definite answer,' or 'Almost certainly but I would value a pause for an hour or so to pray and be sure this was right for me'.

When you leave you are usually free to go home.

Dress appropriately

The position is not as straightforward as it would have been a few years ago.

You cannot go far wrong by erring on the formal side, but whatever you do it is wise to look smart even if it is smart casual. A dark pin-striped Savile Row suit (for men or women) may be further than you need to go for most local-church posts, but most panels will want to see that you are taking this process seriously. Whether you wear a dog collar or not is up to you, though the more formal the culture of the parish (or the bishop), the wiser it would be to do so.

It is harder for women who will probably want to avoid the dangers of coming across as safe but dowdy with a tweed skirt and no make-up through to something that calls attention to aspects of you other than your aptitude for this post. Be sensible for the post in question, the church and the likely interviewers. But don't go far outside your own comfort zones or you will feel uneasy and not interview well.

Think body language

When I am interviewing I pay particular attention to each candidate's body language.

You should be given an upright chair so practise walking in and sitting down. What will you do with your legs? If you spend the interview crossing and uncrossing them, the selectors will start to focus on you and not your answers. What will you be holding and so where do you place your arms?

Practise shaking hands with the panel by asking a couple of friends to mock up the situation for you. As a selector I notice both the limp hand and the one that grips me like a vice. You will be nervous but try to get it right.

But the most important part of your body will be your eyes. When you are introduced to me will you look at me? When I ask you questions will I get your attention or will you stare down at the floor? I want to engage with you at interview so I want you to look at me, and around at the other selectors as you give an answer, then back to me again. With some interviewees I end up staring a candidate in the face willing him or her to look at me and engage with me.

If all this comes naturally to you, fine. If not, ask a friend to give you a mock interview so they can check out how you come across in every way: appearance, mannerisms, posture, answering questions. Do try to smile from time to time.

C2 Be ready for the questions

Put yourself in my shoes, reread your application and the profile for the post, and think of the kind of questions *you* would want to ask the candidate. Write them down and think how *you* would answer them.

When in interview, obvious though it may sound, listen to the question. So often I hear a candidate answering a question that has not been asked. If the interviewer does not know how to interrupt you, you then speak for three minutes, only to hear 'But what I really meant was...' and that is not good news. If you do not understand the point being made, ask for clarification.

Secondly, pause for two or three seconds to think how to answer it. If you rush in immediately you may not give the answer you later wish you had, and the panel may feel you never stop and think. Don't play for time with the comment 'That's a very good (or intriguing) question'. I've had that a number of times and I am afraid I come straight back with, 'But what I want is a very good answer'!

But don't pause for more than two or three seconds or the whole interview slows right down. If you are stuck, think of an alternative. A panel I was on asked a candidate 'What kind of conflicts have you had to handle in your present church and how did you deal with them?'. The candidate paused and then said, 'I can't think of one because I have not been in the leadership role (he was a curate), but I could give you an example from my position as a manager in my previous office – would that be all right?' It was and he convinced us all in no time that he knew how to deal with conflict.

When listing possible questions, consider also the following:

- Which parts of the role here and/or person profile do you match best, and which parts least well?
- What have been your three main achievements and your one greatest failure in your current post?
- What are your views on (current issues of the moment in the Christian world)?
- What do you teach on (specific issues of debated doctrine)?
- What are your own practices in (issues like pastoral visiting, policy on women's ministry, and other topics listed under Q6 in [section B3](#))?
- What experience in your present ministry will prepare you well for (each main feature of this parish)?
- How do you develop your own spiritual life? How have you grown as a Christian over the past year?
- Which commentaries would you use for preparing a sermon on a synoptic gospel?
- How do you protect your time off? Do you overwork and if so what do you do to maintain boundaries?
- How would you solve these problems: (any issues for Q4 in [section B2](#))?
- What is your experience of solving conflicts / building a team / pastoring difficult people / helping people to go with you (and other people issues)?
- What would you do in the first six months in post?

Aim to get a dialogue going

Your answer to any question should not be too long. Better to stop short and let the panel ask a supplementary, or at least ask something like, 'Do you want me to give some more detail about that?'. A good interviewer should stop you if you go on too long, but many do not know how to and then everyone gets bored.

The best interviews stop being Q...A...Q...A...Q and turn into a discussion. A panel who are good at asking supplementaries can do that, but you can help. Throw in the occasional question yourself and the whole interview comes alive (S: Selector, C: Candidate).

S How would you go about introducing 'Back to Church Sunday' into our programme?

C Well, first there is no point in encouraging anyone back to church if they don't like what they find there! So I would want to ensure we had a service that was outsider-friendly. Then it is vital the whole congregation is welcoming to newcomers. Have you done any training for everyone on welcome and hospitality?

S We once did something for our welcome team.

C That's a great start, but I feel we need to work with everyone – almost so we don't need a welcome team! So that would be one idea to check out. But then there needs to be a next step on after they come back to church. Can you give me an idea of how many newcomers you might see in the course of a month at present?

And so on. But be careful you don't overdo it.

Be prepared for a case study approach for some questions. You might be given a situation such as the following:

‘A parishioner comes to you to book a wedding. She says her partner is prepared to turn up on the day in church provided he doesn’t have to do anything else that is church-linked. But she’s heard his ex-wife is threatening to disrupt proceedings. How would you deal with this?’

Such cases will be testing legal knowledge and the ability to think quickly, but are really about your pastoral abilities.

C3 Make a presentation

Within the interview procedure, candidates may be asked to prepare some form of presentation. A typical example would be a five-minute talk for a mid-week service on the gospel for that week, or a five-minute talk for a seasonal Sunday coming up – harvest, Mothering Sunday...

A PowerPoint display may be permitted but if you include this, keep it very simple with only a few slides and no fancy slide transitions. What the interviewers are looking for is your ability to communicate well; that depends on your material and your personal enthusiasm and clarity much more than the hi-tech aspects. They may also be checking your theology.

The presentation, if used, will be an important part of the formal interview. Here are some points to remember.

- 1 If you have been asked for a five-minute talk, ensure it is no longer than that. Obvious, but in my experience of interviews few people manage to stop within the time allotted.
- 2 Address the panel as your congregation or audience as if they really are. Of course it is a forced situation, but play it for real.
- 3 There will not be time for anything complicated so aim for one point to get across.
- 4 The beginning is so important. Tell a story, bring out an object as a visual aid, relate it all to us playing the part of church members or whatever we are supposed to be.
- 5 Get the body language right – and do look at panel members as you speak. Glance at your notes, but try not to read a text.

C4 Get the most out of your visit

In most posts of any responsibility, the formal interview will only be one element in your visit. For many posts the visit may extend over a full day, or sometimes over one and a half with the formal interviews taking place the morning after the visit of the day before.

First, there will be parts of the visit where they are observing you, as in the formal interview and any presentation. The key is to prepare in advance as far as you are able, and to have an attitude that simply says that you will seek to be yourself before God, rather than to be competing to find a ‘winner’.

But, secondly, there should be a significant amount of time where you are, in effect, observing them and learning about the church or mission. Every interview should be a two-way process so that both parties can assess whether they might be right for each other. Possibilities include:

- A tour of the church plant and related properties. Do pick up any free literature that might give you helpful background and do not be afraid to be asking your tour guide questions about how things work.

- A visit to any tied housing. It is vital that both partners in a marriage see the property and if that is not possible on the day because the spouse is at work, another visit will be a must if offered the post. Ask about redecoration: who is responsible, who pays, and what choices the new post-holder will have.
- A tour of the area served by the church. Try to discover what kind of people live there, what the employment patterns are, what social problems exist, and so on.
- Meet other staff and/or key office-holders. Their reactions to you will obviously be important in the decision of whom to offer the post to, but normally they should not be interviewing you as such, though they may try to do this.
- Meet the church leadership body. This is likely to be a buffet meal with all the candidates. The purpose here is to give you an opportunity to ask questions. But everyone will be forming an opinion of the candidates. Social skills are important here. If this is a problem for you, work out in advance a plan for how you will try to cope with the situation and talk to people.

Throughout this, your test will be how you react to strangers and build immediate links with them. Just coming across as being interested in each person you meet will be fine. And in asking questions yourself, try not to come over as aggressive or with ideas already formed. Make use of every opportunity to assess the church to see whether this post might be right for you if offered it. You are the interviewer in this part of the process.

C5 Learn from the outcome

After it is all over, turn the whole experience into a learning exercise. It will probably have been quite a draining experience so put some time aside to think carefully. Here are some possible questions to try. You might want to talk them through with a friend or close family.

- What did I learn about myself as a person and child of God?
- Would I change anything about the way I approached this whole process, knowing what I know now?
- What do I need to learn about technique in any way for future applications?
- If I am offered this post, would I feel it right to accept? Or what might I want to see changed?
- If am not offered this post, what do I learn for my future and/or my next application?
- Whatever the outcome, what have I gained from this process? And what do I thank God for?

If you are told you are not short-listed

Remember that some posts will have many more people not short-listed than the number offered an interview. So seek to learn from the experience (you can use the questions above in this situation too).

It is quite in order to contact the person to whom you sent your application. Rather than ask 'Why was I not short-listed?' (you are unlikely to get a straight answer, anyway) try instead, 'Do you have any advice for me on the way I should put in a written application or the type of post I might apply for?'. It might be wise to email the person first and say you would value it if you could ring the next day (or whenever). This gives the person a chance to look out your papers and prepare an answer.

If you are told the answer is 'no' after interview

Be aware that in most interviews that your emotions may run high at this point. But it is quite in order to ask some questions. Do be careful not to come across as angry at the outcome.

Again, do not ask why you failed to get the job. Good selectors will know that it is dangerous to say anything too much here and the question may appear to be rather too forceful. Ask instead if the selectors can help you learn positive lessons from this for the future. Do you need to change the way you come across? Should you be applying for jobs that are rather different from this one?

When you have answers (or as much of an answer as you have been given), spend some time to assess carefully what God may be saying to you. Talk to friends and family.

If you are offered the post after interview

Make sure this does feel right. If you have hesitations, raise them – never bury them at this point or you may regret that action later. Do not delay too long in accepting unless there are unresolved issues that need further discussion and even another visit, but give yourself time to talk with your family or close friends, to set aside time to think and pray.

Then you will need to sit on the information until it is in the public domain. The usual arrangement is to announce the appointment in your present and future churches on the same Sunday.

The real challenge, of course, is yet to come.

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