

moving on: from curacy to next post

So it's time to think about moving on. You know that by the end of your third year (or in some cases, your fourth year), you need to have moved on to your next post. But how does it all happen?

In some dioceses, there is a clear process. You have a chat with your IME (Initial Ministerial Education) officer, or your bishop or archdeacon about what you are looking for, and they explain the process of finding your next post. But for some, this can be a bewildering experience. Are you supposed to wait and see if the diocese offers you a possible post, or are you supposed to go out and look for one? And if the latter, how do you go about it? Are you only supposed to look at one job at a time, as you did with your curacy, or is it more like finding a 'normal' job, where you can apply for as many different posts as you want at the same time?

The companion papers by John Truscott, [Applying for a Clergy Post: A Homework, B Application, C Interview](#), explain in more general terms the process of seeking God's will for a next post: clarifying what you are looking for; making an application; and being interviewed. This paper aims to supplement it, giving more detail for those who are moving on from their curacy.

What is the process?

When I explain to potential ordinands about how the discernment process in the Church of England works, I often say that there are 44 different ways of doing things, and it is much the same with this process too. Dioceses vary. In some, the bishop expects to offer you a post, and he will be annoyed if he thinks you have jumped the gun by starting to look at advertisements in the church press or on diocesan websites, or you've put yourself on one of the 'lists' (the [Clergy Appointments Adviser's General Circulation](#) or the [Evangelical Patronage Consultative Council's Register](#) administered by CPAS).

Understanding the clergy appointments system

The whole system of clergy appointments may seem a complete mystery! It may help to understand a little about how clergy used to move post, and what more commonly happens today.

Until about twenty-five years ago, there were very few teams of clergy and only a few parishes were 'suspended' (and thus appointed a priest-in-charge rather than a vicar) because of parish reorganisation. Clergy were often directed by bishops into new parishes – they waited for the bishop to phone and say, 'Would you like to look at x parish?' Patrons – people or groups of people with the historic right to appoint clergy (if they were different from bishops) – would have many networks by which they learnt of a clergyman's availability (it was only men in those days), and could present him to the bishop for approval. Then, if you looked at the parish and liked it, that was it.

It was a secretive and confusing system that was open to question, and even abuse, and the criticism that was most often heard was, 'It is not *what* you know but *who* you know that gets you a living in the Church of England.' The process started in the last year of theological training when the 'title parish' was decided on and the ordinand had only a minor role to play in the choice.

By the early 1980s, transparency began to replace trust as a mechanism for ensuring that fair play was seen to be at work in the way people obtained employment, and organisations experienced

major changes in the way staff were being appointed. Application and competitive interview became the norm. From the late 1980s, in most employment situations, monitoring of age, gender and ethnic origin also helped to ensure that all candidates were considered fairly.

The way incumbents are appointed changed in 1986, with the Patronage (Benefices) Measure. This legislation enhanced the role of the Parochial Church Council in the process and gave the elected parish representatives (appointed by the PCC) the power of veto on the patron's choice of a particular candidate. This played a part in ensuring that gradually the whole business of clergy appointments became more transparent. You can read more about the appointment process in *Situation Vacant* (see the [reading list](#) at the end of this paper), and there is now a [paper](#) of recommended good practice available to those making appointments.

The way in which clergy are trained, and styles of leadership, have changed in recent years. Clergy no longer work in isolation; a collaborative climate is becoming the norm and this is now reflected in the way appointments are made. But as always, long established ways of operating are very slow to change and there is still a lot to be said for the discernment of others, especially bishops and patrons, in the development of an individual priest's ministry. The call of the Church and the guidance of the Holy Spirit can often lead to some very strange decisions that have no seeming logic at the time, but are later revealed as absolutely the right direction to take.

Ultimately, the decision about what your next post is going to be should be yours. It can feel flattering if your diocese says in effect, 'We want to keep you, and we'll find you a post'. That may work for some. But will there be a good 'match' between what the diocese thinks suitable for you and what you are actually looking for? It partly depends on how you view guidance. The voice of the bishop suggesting you look at a particular post may be the voice of God – or it may be that he just has a post to fill.

If you have checked with your bishop or archdeacon, and you are free to look for posts, you need to be proactive. There may be plenty of jobs, but some are inevitably more popular than others. You can submit applications for more than one post at a time, but most people would advise you only to apply to those you really believe might be right for you, otherwise you are wasting your time and other people's, too. Of course, finding out what is right for you may be a process, and often curates find that it's after going to a couple of interviews that they are much clearer about what the right post might look like.

You need to be realistic about the level of job you are applying for. You may be ready to be incumbent of a medium-sized church, or you may want to work in a team, perhaps as a team vicar, before feeling that you are 'on your own'. If you are wondering about what is the right level of post, then the advice of your training incumbent, your archdeacon or a mentor may be valuable. It should help ensure that you don't aim too high, and that you don't overlook the possibility of being stretched in a good way. Going onto a 'list' such as the EPCC Register can also be a way of getting this kind of advice. Some curates (and more commonly women than men) under-rate themselves, don't apply for posts which they would be perfectly capable of, and are more likely to take a post which they don't really want just because it is presented to them.

Sometimes people are put off leading a church because they think 'I can't do finance', 'I can't cope with buildings', or 'I don't think I'll be any good at chairing PCC meetings'. But that is where teamwork comes in. None of us has all the gifts needed for leadership, and if we don't inherit a good team when we become an incumbent, then one of our first tasks will be to create one. We will find ways to learn, and we'll get better at finance, buildings, chairing meetings or whatever it is. We may also find that if we try to play to our strengths, God will provide others who can play to theirs.

People sometimes find themselves restricted to a particular area, because of a spouse's job. If you feel you are in this position, there may be a number of creative solutions. Whose 'career' is more important? Could you take it in turns to have priority in terms of job moves, and how the other fits in? What are commuting options, which might widen the choice in terms looking for a parish? Could you work without a stipend for a while, but with the clear intention of waiting for the right stipendiary post to come up in the area you need to be? Have you considered other possibilities, such as chaplaincy in a hospital, prison or higher education, or some other kind of specialist post?

Additional note for women

For women looking for posts, the situation is a little more complicated, as you will probably know, and there are different challenges for those who are priests and those who are permanent deacons.

When the legislation making it possible for women to be priests was passed in 1992, it was accompanied by other legislation, which among other things set in place Resolutions A and B and C in order to safeguard the wishes of those who were opposed to women priests. Resolution B states 'That this PCC would not accept a woman as Incumbent or Priest-in-Charge of the benefice or as a Team Vicar in the benefice.' (A 'benefice' may be a single parish or a group of parishes). This resolution tends to be passed by churches at the more Catholic end of the church spectrum, and if it has been passed, this has to be made clear in advertisements.

Some churches from the more evangelical end may also be opposed to appointing a woman as vicar (and sometimes also to other posts, such as associates), but this may not be apparent in the advertisement or even in the paperwork. If you are in doubt, some discreet research may be useful: such discrimination (ie where the church appears to be looking for a man, and this is not supported by Resolution B) is illegal, and you can report the church to its diocese. On the other hand, you could try the 'playing naive' approach of applying anyway and seeing what happens.

For women who are permanent deacons (usually those who feel that women should not be ordained to the priesthood or lead a church), the issues are different. Some dioceses are not open to employing permanent deacons, and as permanent deacons will always be in some kind of associate role, they will usually be limited to large churches or to sector ministry such as theological education or chaplaincy.

If you are struggling with the issues this raises for you, you should be able to chat matters through with your diocesan adviser for women's ministry (or equivalent).

If you need advice, don't hesitate to ask for help, and those who administer the 'lists' (see below) are happy to help you explore your options, and perhaps suggest a solution which you had not thought of.

Using the Lists

The very idea of putting your name on a 'list' may seem very strange. But it's part of how the system works, and the process can be extremely helpful, even if it could sound a bit like the ecclesiastical equivalent of a dating agency.

The Clergy Appointments Adviser (CAA), based in London, is available to anyone looking for a next post. The Adviser's role is to circulate the Vacancy List to clergy looking for a post, and to circulate the [General Circulation](#) (a compilation of brief CVs of stipendiary clergy looking for a move) to those making appointments. The adviser also runs CME days in many dioceses on the appointments system, writing CVs, interviewing skills and so on, and these are definitely worth going to if you are looking to move.

All those who want to be included in the General Circulation are interviewed by the Adviser, after filling in some forms. Both the form-filling and the interview are very helpful processes, because they will help you to clarify your thoughts about the future.

The key thing to remember is that you need to find out how your diocese operates, and check if and when it is OK to start looking outside the diocese. Then book an appointment, and discuss with the CAA when you want your name to go on the list.

If you're an evangelical, the [Register of the Evangelical Patronage Consultative Council](#) (EPCC, administered by CPAS), operates in a similar way. There are forms to fill, and the Register goes to about seventy individual subscribers (mainly bishops and archdeacons) as well as trustees of all the evangelical patronage trusts. You can also opt for an interview with the CPAS Patronage Secretary, who is based in Warwick, or with one of the nearest patronage trustees. It is much better to have an interview than just to complete the form, because it may help you to process your thinking, and it will enable the EPCC trustees to have a much better idea of who you are, and thus, what posts might be most suitable for you.

What am I looking for?

Before you rush into accepting the first post you are offered, or you fill in an application form or put your name on a list, it is worth spending time thinking and praying about where God may be leading you. As Christians we tend not to think in terms of career, but of service; having said that, God wants us to use our God-given gifts to the full, so if you have particular gifts and skills, how might they best be used? Often it's not easy to find the balance between thinking ahead and planning, and being open to God's surprises, as he leads us somewhere we'd least expected.

There is a brief section on this in John Truscott's paper, [section A1](#), but here are some questions to reflect on:

- Who am I? How has God shaped me? Do I have a realistic estimate of my gifts and skills? If you think you need more help here, there are a number of tools you can use and books you can read. Some of these are listed at the end of this paper.
- What sort of situation most motivates me? Am I a pioneer, a self-starter or entrepreneur? Do I enjoy a challenge? Would I rather try to turn around a difficult or struggling parish than take on one which seems to be more 'successful'?
- What sort of context am I drawn to/gifted for/willing to go to? Am I open to rural, urban or suburban? Would I be prepared to lead a group of churches which have recently come together, or to manage a multi-parish situation?
- What sort of churchmanship am I most comfortable with? Would I only be able to work well in a context where I felt 'at home', or am I flexible and able to cross the boundaries of traditions while still being true to myself and my own convictions?
- What have other people seen in me, things that I may be too modest to admit to myself? This is where a mentor might help, someone who can keep confidences and help us to make a realistic assessment and can encourage us to take steps of faith. For example, if you can foresee yourself leading a large church at some stage, what experience of working in a large church do you have so far? Does your next step need to be an associate role in a large church? Or if you want to teach theology, do you need additional qualifications, and what opportunities might there be to do some teaching alongside your role in a parish? We don't normally aspire to be a bishop or archdeacon, but if others have seen exceptional potential in us, how can we best develop it, and what posts and roles might give us the right kind of experience?
- Have I considered options other than parish ministry? There are short courses for those who are thinking about various kinds of chaplaincy. Take time to find out more. Or some clergy enjoy dual-role ministry, that is, two supposedly half-time posts, leading a church or churches and a deanery or diocesan role such as mission enabler, lay training adviser, or youth work specialist.

Applying for posts

When you know what you are looking for, and you've sent for details and like what you see, it is time to apply. For extensive notes on the process of application and interview, see Applying for a Clergy Post, sections [B \(Application\)](#) and [C \(Interview\)](#).

For parish appointments where the patron is the diocesan bishop, there is often a standard application form, which has [accompanying notes](#) on how to fill it in. It is worth reading the notes closely, because they will help you to avoid some pitfalls. If you are applying to a post which has another patron, there will be a different form (or no form at all) and what is asked for varies widely.

Applying for a clergy post, section [A \(Homework\)](#), includes the recommendation that you first prepare a CV. This is useful advice because it may remind you of important information you want to convey that the form does not appear to ask for. For example, you may not have gained much leadership experience in your curacy, but if in your life prior to ordination you have been responsible for thousands of people, or run a hospital, or had a significant leadership role in a voluntary organisation, you will want those who read your application to know. Make sure you include this in section 3 iv of the standard form, and you may also want to refer to it in any supplementary paperwork you are asked for, or in your accompanying letter.

Interviews

Most people find interviews daunting. But preparation counts for a great deal, and if you have completed your application form carefully and you have prepared for the interview, this should enable you to present yourself with confidence. Remember that first impressions are important, and you will make most impact by:

- The way you dress
- Your smile rate and eye contact
- Your body language
- Conveying a brief summary of what you would bring to the post (in business terms your USP or unique selling point: why you believe God may be calling *you* to this role).

Remember to 'check the buzz': what are the buzz words or phrases current in the Church or in the diocese at the moment? Read the Church press, and check the diocesan website about current emphases and strategies. Has the diocese got a mission statement or strapline? If the diocese is looking for a 'leader in mission' or for someone to plant a 'Fresh Expression' of church, you will look foolish if you don't realise what is meant.

And be prepared to explain anything which the interviewers may think unusual about your application: e.g. a shorter than normal curacy, a gap in employment, less experience than they might expect for the post.

It has been suggested that there are only three basic interview questions:

- Can this person do the job? (experience, track record, achievements)
- Will this person do the job? (motivation, disposition and approach to the task)
- Will this person fit in? (values, character, emotional intelligence)

The following are a sample of questions that may be asked at interview, and which fit into these areas. Could you respond to them? Note the word 'respond' rather than 'answer'. Of course you want to be honest, but you are in control of what information you give to those interviewing you. And don't say anything unless you can expand on it or give an example of what you mean. There are a variety of ways to prepare: writing notes on how you would respond to each

question, rehearsing with a friend, or if you feel you need additional help, arranging a coaching session – your diocese may be able to recommend someone to do this. If you have not been interviewed for some time (or at all), you may find this helpful. Ideally the interview may become more of a dialogue, but if you don't have to think so hard and you are not caught out by a question, you are likely to feel more relaxed.

For additional notes, and some sample interview questions, see [Applying for a Clergy Post, C1-2](#). Other useful books on application and interview are listed [at the end of this paper](#).

For starters

1. What led you to apply for this post? Why now, and why here?
2. Tell us about yourself.
3. What have you got to offer us?
4. What have you most enjoyed about your curacy/last post?
5. What have you found most challenging?

Questions about your achievements

1. What have you contributed to your current parish?
2. Give us an example of a project or piece of work you've achieved in your current parish that you feel proud of.
3. Can you tell us about a time when you've dealt with disagreement (e.g. among PCC members) and how you resolved it? What did you learn? What would you do differently?
4. How have you identified new leaders and developed existing leaders?
5. What will you be remembered for in your current parish?

Questions about your potential

1. What are your priorities in ministry?
2. How do you see yourself fitting into this parish?
3. We have struggled to relate to x part of the parish/ y age group of people. How would you approach that as a mission opportunity?
4. How would you approach your first 6 months in this parish?
5. How would you encourage others to develop their gifts and ministries?

Questions about your personality and how you would fit in

1. Do you prefer to work on your own or with others?
2. What sort of people do you find most difficult?
3. What style of worship are you most at ease with?
4. What have you read recently that has most influenced or inspired you?
5. What do you prefer to wear when leading a service if it is left to you?
6. How do you arrange your time off? What do you like doing? What do you do for fun?

Difficult questions and questions about weaknesses

1. What do you see as your greatest weakness?
2. Why did you stay in your current post so long? Or why are you leaving so soon?
3. We all make mistakes. Tell me about one of yours.
4. What decisions do you find it difficult to make?
5. What has been your attitude towards marriage after divorce/unmarried couples looking for their children to be baptised?
6. We've never had a woman vicar before – how might it be different if you came?
7. There are five churches in the benefice. How would you ensure that ministry happens and that you did not get burnt out?

Questions about areas of debate in church doctrine or practice, or in wider society

Applying for a clergy post (B3) mentions a number of issues which may be raised at interview. It's good to be aware about current controversies – which might range from homosexuality to prophecy and healing, to clergy pensions! For example (writing in early 2010):

1. Do you think the Anglican Communion has a future?
2. Isn't it time we had women bishops?
3. Do you think common tenure is a good thing?
4. What was your response to the recent debate about equality legislation?
5. How do you respond to recent calls for assisted suicide to be made legal?

Questions to ask *yourself* on the pre-interview visit (if there is one) and during the interview:

1. With God's help, would I be able to do this job? Would I be able to find help if and when needed?
2. I know what they said they are looking for, but what do they really want?
3. Would I be happy living and working here? Would my family be happy? (NB if housing is the only issue, is anything negotiable? The parish may already be aware that the house is too small for someone with two children, and they might be open to building an extension, or finding a new vicarage).
4. Would I be able to work with the other clergy and lay leaders?
5. Do I share the values, churchmanship and aims of the church enough to work comfortably here?
6. Would this post help or hinder my longer-term aims (if those are important)?
7. Do I believe God wants me here? It might be full of challenges, but still the right place.

And finally

Any major transition may be stressful and exhausting in terms of emotional energy. Allow yourself time and space to give to the process. It may take several rounds of application and interview before you find the right post, but most clergy start to find that they have a way of knowing whether each is right or wrong. Sometimes, for all kinds of reasons, you may not be sure why this or that job is the right one, but have to trust God. Serving God as an ordained person is rarely easy, but it should continue to be a great adventure.

Further reading

David Parrott and David Field, *Situation Vacant: a guide to the appointment process in the Church of England* (Grove Books P65, 1996)

Written when David Field was CPAS patronage secretary, this booklet was published some years ago (but since women were ordained as priests). It has not been superseded and remains a useful guide to the sometimes complex process of church appointments. It's mainly written from the viewpoint of those making appointments (but that is helpful to understand); chapter 7 gives the candidate's angle, and there is some useful advice provided one bears in mind that now nearly all posts are advertised and therefore to go on a 'list' and certainly to be proactive is essential. It also explains models of pastoral organisation (what is the difference between a team ministry and a united benefice?) and models of ministry.

John Witcombe (ed) *The Curate's Guide: from calling to first parish* (CHP, 2005)

Chapter 8 ('Moving on') gives much valuable advice about the process of preparing to find a post, making an application, interviews, and the transition process. There is also a section in chapter 3 (Finding a curacy) on guidance (how do I know if this is the right place?), looking at a parish profile, visiting a parish and making a decision. There is much common ground between looking at a curacy and looking for the next post.

David Ison (ed), *The Vicar's Guide: life and ministry in the parish* (CHP, 2005)

Giving information, survival tips and theological reflection on a wide variety of issues in parish life, this book is particularly aimed at those going into leadership of a parish for the first time.

If you are unsure about how to write a good **application** (filling in the form and any supplementary material) or about the **interview** process, it may be worth buying or borrowing one of the many general books on offer. Here are some suggestions:

Angela Fagan, *Brilliant Job Hunting* (Prentice Hall, 2nd ed 2007) – what to consider, application forms and CVs, interviews

Ros Jay, *Brilliant Interview* (Pearson, 2nd ed 2005) – preparing for interview, interview questions

Max Eggert, *Perfect Interview* (Random House, new ed 2007) – a handy guide to interviews

Rebecca Corfield, *Preparing the Perfect CV* (Kogan Page, 5th ed 2009) – advice and sample CVs including old (lists of information, previous roles, etc) and new styles (starting with a profile and using summaries of achievements in each position), and covering letters.

James Innes, *The CV Book* (Prentice Hall, 2009) – a recent book by the founder of the UK's leading CV consultancy. CVs at a more senior level than the book above, with plenty of examples and tips – may be useful for considering how best to present one's experience.

If you want a book to help you to reflect on your unique gifts, strengths, passions and purpose, you might find one of the following books useful:

Eric Rees, *SHAPE: Finding and fulfilling your unique purpose for life* (Zondervan, 2006) – a guide to discovering your SHAPE – spiritual gifts, heart, abilities, personality and experiences.

Marcus Buckingham and Donald O Clifton, *Now, Discover Your Strengths* (Pocket Books, 2005) and other *Strengthsfinder* books

Bruce Bugbee, *What you do best in the body of Christ* (Zondervan, rev ed 2005) – a guide to discovering how God has made you and how best to serve.

Dan Allender, *To be told: God invites you to co-author your future* (Water Brook Press, 2005) – an introduction to using your 'story' to explore God's future for you.

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Appendix

This reflection, written by Mandy Carr soon after she became an incumbent for the first time, may give you some pointers on questions and issues to consider.

The process of looking for a parish

Even when a relationship with one's training incumbent is strained it is dangerous to rush into seeking out a first incumbency for the reason that 'I have to get out!' Advice should be sought from more senior clergy to make sure that you are ready, and there will soon be a formal assessment process which measures whether curates are considered suitable to move to a post of greater responsibility. How the move on from curacy is handled varies from diocese to diocese; I know some colleagues who waited to be approached by a bishop or archdeacon bearing gifts, whereas others explored independently. Although I was part of the latter group I made sure that I sought advice from my suffragan bishop. This helped to eliminate vacancies where there was an established view that this was 'not for first incumbents.' I still don't know what this means, because some of the bigger parishes reserved for those with more experience, by their size and

nature appear to be able to support their incumbent better than the smaller ones that are often in the archdeacon's pile for first incumbents.

One colleague of mine said that looking for a post was a very stressful experience. There seemed to be no consistent approach. Some posts were advertised in the Church press, others were on personal recommendation with what she called 'the illusion of personal choice on the part of the applicant'. She stated that at one point she enquired about a post and was warned off it as they already had someone in mind. More than one of my colleagues was encouraged to apply for a post and then it was made clear later that another person was the 'preferred candidate'. Reputation, once again, seems to play a large role in these procedures. There is an old legend that a past bishop would have a list of vacant parishes in one pocket and a list of clergy who were due for a change in the other, but I don't know whether there is any truth in this story.

At times an archdeacon would 'sound someone out' about a post, and it is at this point that it is good to ask how long a parish has remained vacant. If it is a long time, then it would be helpful to ask why that is – though one has to bear in mind that many dioceses plan for vacancies to be a year or more as a matter of principle. Curates looking for a first post may be more susceptible to jumping in with both feet than those who have more experience. We trust the system more and naturally are looking for the next challenge. In our naivety and enthusiasm we may choose to overlook the fact that we're looking at a parish in decline that has been vacant for two years, has been through the process of advertising once and not appointed, or has a history of killing its clergy. There's challenge and then there's challenge!

Unless we have spent time managing a vacancy or been an associate vicar, we won't have properly flexed our muscles and fully discovered our strengths and weaknesses. Even managing a vacancy doesn't give the curate a sense of what it feels like being *properly* in charge. Therefore there can be a sense of wanting to prove ourselves, to get 'stuck in' and show we can be a leader. This also adds to a myopic view of any post offered. My contemporaries can cite a number of questions that they would ask now, that they didn't ask at their interview for their first post. It could be our inexperience that prevented us from asking the questions that we would ask now. We didn't want to come across as cocky and full of ourselves, as if we were God's gifts to the Church of England – which of course, along with everyone else, we are!

If we don't wait to get a call from an archdeacon, we can make our own moves towards a first post. The search seems more urgent when our peers begin to look too, especially if they are successful in finding a new post before us. Suddenly there is an avalanche of interest as anxiety, competition and a desire to move on spurs curates into action. Sometimes it seems as if the window of opportunity is very short; you are not allowed to start looking too early, but then there is a deadline looming: someone else is moving into your house, or your contract is up and you won't be paid or have anywhere to live. It's not helpful to take a job just because you feel pressurised into it; we trust that God knows all about our situation. If the diocese offers us somewhere and we feel it's really not right, we need the courage to say no, giving good reasons why, and keep looking. Usually dioceses are sympathetic if we keep them well informed.

Looking around starts with what vacancies there are, what our preferences are and most importantly where we think God might be calling us. There are many factors to take into consideration. I don't think that I was ready for the difference that I would experience from town churches to suburban to rural churches. For some the difference has been even greater as they have moved from urban priority areas to multi-parish benefices in the countryside. It's not just the size and population of the parish and its geographical location that's significant; there are other differences between the 'types' of context we minister in. John Clarke from the Arthur Rank Centre researched the differences between the rural church and the urban and incomer church, looking at primary creed, behaviour, motivation, liturgical preference and other factors (see *The Vicar's Guide*, p 141). His work shows how our context shapes the nature of ministry expressed in

each place. Although this was a broad guide to looking at the basic differences of each context, I found working with two churches in a rural context still exhibited enough individuality to prove that these 'types' are not monochrome. This is where finding out about the history of the parish is so important. The parish story is hugely significant in shaping the congregation's attitudes and expectations. It is time well spent to research the history of the parish, finding out the background of why, when and how, parishes have been put together into a benefice and what significant events there have been in their community life together.

If one looks at a multi-parish benefice, it is important to consider how this grouping together is done, or has been done. The 'one church, one vicar' model has long gone, but some congregations still expect to have 'their' vicar, as perhaps they had in years gone by. Collaborative ministry, using the gifts of NSMs, OLMs, retired clergy, Readers and other lay people, is both a more biblical model than the old one-man-band, but congregations may need to be educated into a new way of operating, and as clergy we may find we will do less ministry and more leadership, acting more as a resource than as the person who does everything.

Parish Profiles and what to make of them

When a curate has applied for the details of an advertised post, they are sent a parish profile – or, increasingly, download it from a website. The profile has been constructed by the people of the parish and like every good CV it may well present the place in glorious light. If we want to find who has the power in the parish, the answer may be, whoever contributed most to the parish profile, and that does not necessarily mean the churchwardens. Like every CV, much can be made of not much! If we did a Taizé meditation service once; we do it. If we took soup to the homeless once, it's included in the 'outreach' section. It isn't meant to be misleading; it's just putting our best foot forward. It may be helpful to liken parish profiles to the blurb offered by estate agents trying to sell a house. Just as potential house buyers tend to recognise the real meaning of the words 'in need of some modernisation' and steer clear, parish profiles have their own set of meanings that need to be discerned. If we are able to translate the underlying message we can make an informed choice, and like house buyers who are builders, 'in need of some modernisation' could present an opportunity rather than a headache.

One of the difficulties facing a prospective first incumbent is that they may not necessarily be well-versed in discerning from the literature what is really going on in the parish and what the language in the profile actually means. There is virtue in finding a more experienced cleric or churchwarden to discuss it with, preferably one who is already well-practiced in *profile-speak*. That way we can learn to spot certain euphemistic phrases and decide whether they are hindrances to an application. An experienced priest who I liked and respected sent away for the profile of the post I had looked at. He read it, and dismissed it because he was versed in reading profiles and he could envisage some of the battles he might have to engage in as soon as he arrived.

In one parish profile I deliberated over what the parish stated their congregation could offer its new priest. It included the phrase '*an openness to experimental worship*', but buried in another section of the profile this was linked with the word '*occasionally*'. This put a different perspective on the subject, which is why it's important to read very carefully, with a discerning eye. Despite their shortcomings, parish profiles are not usually written in a cynical bid to dupe the candidates. Much prayer, time and energy has gone into producing it, and we have to trust that the document has integrity. If we are not versed in deciphering some of its language, then if we are shortlisted and can visit the parish we have a chance to make up our own mind and ask the questions that we want to. Here is the time to explore the reality of the parish and decide whether only 'occasionally' being open to experimental worship (or whatever it is) is a real issue or not.

A friend of mine looked at a profile that wanted the new incumbent to '*bring unity to different spiritualities within the parish*'. This phrase revealed some of the history of the parish and this was further compounded by a conversation with a parishioner at an initial meeting with a select few.

The anger and bitterness expressed gave away the true extent of the problem and put the applicant off for good.

There are a variety of situations from which it may be difficult to see, or easy to overlook, certain discrepancies or warning signs in the parish profile. We might be

- Those who have had a problematic curacy and have got to the 'Get me out of here' stage.
- Those who have served a four-year curacy and are feeling the pressure of finding somewhere to go as another curate is waiting in the wings.
- Those who are worried that if they ask too many 'awkward' questions they will be seen by their interviewers as not really wanting the post.
- Those who feel that if the bishop or archdeacon has suggested it, it must be right for them. Those with a real sense of calling to a place regardless of the difficulties.

No parish is perfect and each wants to attract good candidates, so profiles become very important. They want to maximise what they do well and minimize their less endearing characteristics. Most want to convey to their next would-be vicar that their parish is an exciting place to minister with great opportunities and a supportive team in place. In a bid to convey this message, parish profiles can exhibit a predilection for gobbledegook; words that fill out the space and may even sound good but don't really mean anything. What do *'cutting edge ministry'* or *'value-added skills'* really mean? And how does *'the opportunity to grow spiritually with the congregation'* differ from what could be offered in any other parish?

A sense of being called to a place does not mean that it is going to be easy. It can be quite the reverse. I have heard of vacant parishes where those in the know have whispered to prospective candidates not to touch it with a barge pole, and yet that vacancy has been filled – perhaps by someone from outside the home diocese who hadn't heard the whispering beforehand! Whatever the case, we know that there are no perfect parishes just as there are no perfect priests to fill them, but whether we can live with the imperfections depends largely on whether we can hold onto a sense of being called to minister in that place. It also depends on the other side of the coin: do the people of the parish and the church hierarchy think we are the right people for them?

A match made in heaven?

In an American joke book I read the following:

'Good news! After hundreds of years of ministers, a model pastor has been found – one who will please every church member. He is twenty-six years old and has been preaching for thirty years...He has a burning desire to work with teenagers and spends all his time with older folks. He smiles all the time with a straight face because he has a sense of humor that keeps him seriously dedicated to his work. He makes fifteen calls a day on church members, spends all his time evangelizing the lost, and never leaves his office.'

Some of the advertisements in the Church press almost resemble this description. It's not just clergy who have high expectations for their parish; congregations set their sights high too. Some appear to be looking for the Archangel Gabriel in clerical form.

Cementing this match is similar to arranging a marriage. Each expresses a preference. A match is found. A meeting takes place and a 'contract' is made. It's only after the Induction, when the two start to live with each other, that they both find out all manner of shortcomings and half-truths.

The bottom line in matching cleric with parish is that we can't have everything we want; it's not possible. Some aspects are mutually exclusive. For example, in most adverts the church is looking for someone who can 'work with young families and bring children from the schools into the

church'. This sounds reasonable and forward thinking, but it can be the cause of problems in the parish. The desire to populate empty pews with the young can be accompanied by rose-tinted spectacles, and the implications may not have been fully thought through. If the priest is successful, the reality of a load of unchurched kids turning up to a traditional service may not be quite what the congregation had imagined. Like everyone else, the young bring their own preferences to the heart of the worshipping community and, if they are going to stay, they have to be listened to. Things will inevitably change and that wasn't necessarily part of the deal. The vicar may not have as much time for pastoral visits with the rest of the congregation; there may be new music played on different instruments; there may be less ritual and formality; and altogether more noise and less holy silence. The quote 'be careful what you wish for' is most appropriate here as children and families, if they stay in sufficient numbers for any length of time, will bring about a change in the church's landscape. For some, this will be something to celebrate, but for others in the parish, it will be a painful loss.

At a training session about church growth, the congregation of a well-heeled benefice was asked to call out values that they thought were important for their church and that would become the bedrock for the vision ahead. These were duly written down on flip-chart paper so everyone could see them. The group called out words like 'generosity, hospitality, accessibility', and 'being non-judgmental'. It was an impressive list. The trainer, tongue-in-cheek, said 'Oh, can I come to your church?' She admired the list and the congregation admired it too. It was a well-thought out set of values and crammed full of Christian virtues. Then the trainer said, 'And what if a camp of travellers made their home on a field next to the church, how would you do in terms of hospitality, generosity, accessibility and being non-judgmental? There was an awkward silence.

It's easy to come up with inspiring lists that tick boxes, but living up to the implications when God tests us on them can be quite different. When the honeymoon period is over, (if cleric and congregation experienced one) and the gleam of being new has dulled a little, the hard work of adjusting to each other, recognising and living with strengths and weaknesses and being honest with each other, really begins. This is the time when we may realise that instead of the word 'contract' we need to be holding onto the idea of 'covenant.' A contract seems legalistic, can be broken and is not indicative of an emotional commitment. 'Covenant', however, speaks of oneness, a growing together and bearing with one another. It involves sacrifice and forgiveness. It's a commitment that will keep us going even when our ideals have been shattered by the harsher realities of parish life. It will also keep us grounded in the disciplines we need to recognise that we are not the finished article, person or priest. Eugene H. Peterson in his excellent book *Under the Unpredictable Plant* states:

'Far too many pastors change parishes out of adolescent boredom, not as a consequence of mature wisdom.' (p 29)

When *covenant* replaces *contract*, we can start off by seeing that God's call to us isn't about big and shiny ideas of a 'successful' ministry, but about 'these people, at this time, under these conditions' (Peterson, *Under the Unpredictable Plant*, p 131).

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