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leading well in a vacancy

I spend a lot of time in my job visiting churches that are in vacancy. The previous incumbent has moved on and it is time to think ahead with the church and plan for appointing a new key leader.

Much help is given to churches to think about this new ministry and the kind of leadership they need for the future. Much help is also given to think about the practicalities of maintaining services and keeping the show on the road. The archdeacon and area dean will always be on hand to give advice.

However, the reality is that the average incumbency in the Church of England lasts around eight years and the average vacancy lasts about a year or more. Sadly, simple maths shows that for nearly 10% of the life cycle of the average church there will be no vicar, or key leader in post. Also, research shows that churches are very vulnerable to decline in a period of vacancy. Keeping things going is important, but can more be done to actually grow in a vacancy, or at the very least not lose membership and decline? The answer is yes!

Vacancy periods have huge potential to be really positive periods in the life of any church, or group of churches. This article points towards some of the key principles to work on that ensure a vacancy period is a positive, dynamic and good experience.

Prepare well

It may sound obvious but preparation is key. Usually a church will receive over three months of notice when a vicar is to leave. Sometimes it can be less if sudden illness or disaster strikes. As soon as a vacancy period is announced it is

essential for the PCC and churchwardens to think intentionally about handling the vacancy. Know what the outgoing leader did and ask their advice before they depart. Make a list of responsibilities and think carefully about how to manage all aspects of the leadership. Being very clear at this stage takes a lot of uncertainty away and gives confidence to the wider congregation.



Communicate really well

Good communication cannot be overstated, especially in a group of churches. Communicate who is doing what, who to go to for help, and what the leadership is seeking to achieve during the vacancy. Consult members of the congregation in formal ways if needed and communicate a prayerful togetherness in all publications. Build a sense of team in your communications and set a tone of generous service to Christ in the way people behave. Communication is something which needs care and work but it is worth doing it well.



Delegate well

The art of delegation comes into its own during a vacancy. Wardens cannot do everything and usually lots of people will volunteer to help for the good of the church. Intentionally use this goodwill and think carefully about who can help and who has the right gifts, skills and capacity to accomplish any task. Sometimes being asked to help is a real confidence booster for newer members and the leadership should not underestimate their influence in bringing forward new talent!

Grow new leaders well

Delegation is important, but it assumes people are ready to help. A vacancy can be a significant period in drawing out new talent and training new leaders to develop different skills. New talent will emerge and can be used in the future life of the church. Support is the key here. If you do delegate and grow new leaders, systems of support must be in place, so there is someone people can go to for help and advice over a coffee. Do not leave leaders unsupported – the ministry of encouragement is really important.

Change well

It is more usual these days for churches to have vision statements, or mission action plans in place. However, it is not so usual to see these aspirations delivered in reality! A vacancy is a good time to work on some new things. Continue the development of the church and don't stop this process just because a vicar is not in place. The important thing is to be realistic and set an achievable target. If just one project is done, but done well, it is better than nothing. So don't stop developing in a vacancy. Be strategic, wise and careful about this, as it has great potential to build your team and grow the church.

Welcome well

The day-to-day life of the church will continue in a vacancy. It is an obvious statement, but it is really important that baptism, marriage and funeral requests are handled professionally and administered carefully. Newcomers to services and other visitors must be viewed as a priority and not a nuisance! Newer members of the church are more likely to drift away in a vacancy, so keep a strong eye on who is overseeing

welcome and the shop windows of church life. Doing this well ensures you retain members and grow goodwill in the community.

Review regularly and well

A vacancy is by its nature a challenging period. It places a lot of pressure on certain people who carry heavy loads. One way of mitigating this is to review regularly. Take an hour or so, as necessary, to ask what is working well and what needs support. For example, who is under pressure and needs to do less, or who can manage a bit more? For a leadership team to meet in this way builds unity, nips problems in the bud and helps more than one person make decisions. Maybe it will be the PCC that will need to meet more often, but my hunch is it will be a smaller group.

Use advice well

There is enormous goodwill to support churches in vacancy. The archdeacon and area dean are local and can provide day-to-day support and advice. Retired clergy can help and some dioceses encourage the idea of an interim minister to help provide continuity in a period of change. Wider still, other agencies like CPAS can provide access to support and training. CPAS is publishing a major resource this month titled *Growing Through A Vacancy*, see www.grow-vacancy.org.uk for further details. If you need training or advice seek it out and intentionally use it well.

Land well

Finally a new incumbent will arrive! Sometimes vacancies can last a long time (the longest in my experience is just over three years!). There can be an enormous collective sigh of relief when a new leader begins, but actually this is just the time to resist the temptation to step back and let them get on with it. Instead, helping a new leader land into post well, hitting the ground running will be enormously important. Most leaders would much rather join an energised, happy team that is up for change and growth, rather than a downbeat, rather flat team that is energyless. Build on the achievements of the vacancy work and keep the team focus going. This will pay dividends in the long term.

John Fisher

For reflection

- What insights can you draw from previous experiences of vacancies?
- What could you do now to set yourself up well for a future vacancy?
- Where would it be good to talk about this in the leadership of the church(es)?

