

HANDLING EXPECTATIONS

AN EXERCISE

Great Expectations

Expectations are inevitable. They are the result of hopes and longings we all have, and a sign of healthy engagement with people around us. Of course, some expectations we have are completely unrealistic, and others are good, but just not appropriate for this time.

In leadership the main problem is undisclosed expectations. They sit 'under the table', no one aware that they exist, and can easily scupper things.

If I have an undisclosed expectation of you and you don't know about it, you have no basis on which to decide whether to fulfil that expectation or challenge it. If you don't fulfil it, I may become frustrated, possibly disillusioned, and it may erode my trust in you. Whereas if you know my expectation of you, you can either willingly accept that it is an appropriate expectation and try to live up to it, or you could decide that it is an inappropriate expectation and have a conversation with me about why you are not going to meet my expectation of you, or perhaps even change your mind on how you see that expectation.

So one of the responsibilities of those in leadership is to get undisclosed expectations onto the table, so everyone knows they exist and can begin to process what to do about them. The exercise described below is one way to do this.

When might an expectation management conversation be helpful?

- Between two colleagues.
- Within a leadership body, for example a PCC, a staff team.

- Between an incumbent and church wardens.
- Within a congregation.
- Between a congregation and a leadership body like a PCC.
- Between a community and a church.
- Between a church and an oversight body or person, for example Archdeacon, diocese.

Lockdown Church

As lockdown eases there are a whole variety of expectations flying around. Some people in your church may want nothing to change, and for everything to go back to normal. Others may want everything to change, for there to be a new normal.

There are the expectations of your community, and your diocese. Then there are the expectations within the group you share leadership with, be that the Church Wardens, the Standing Committee, the PCC, a staff team.

We can't possibly meet all these expectations, so managing them is a leadership task, with the aim of **clarifying** what expectations are around (getting them out from under the table), **discerning** which ones are appropriate and which ones aren't, and **communicating** what is going to happen and what isn't.

STAGE 1 – CLARIFYING

Ask those you share leadership with to write down every expectation they think is around. If you are physically meeting together, ask them to do this using post-it notes, one expectation per post-it note,



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perhaps using different colour post-it for each category of group. For example:

- Within the group – yellow.
- Congregation – pink.
- Community – orange.
- Diocese – green.

If you are meeting online use a tool like Padlet (www.padlet.com) to gather all your expectations, again one expectation per post on your Padlet board.

You are going to end up with lots of post-its! When people start to run out of ideas, look at all the post-its, and where there are duplications or close similarities in any category batch them.

You now have loads of expectations in four colour groups. What you don't know at this stage is whether these expectations are accurate when it comes to the expectations of others. You only have what you think are other people's expectations. One way to find out whether you are accurate is to ask.

- Many churches are using questionnaires, surveys, at this time to find out people's views and expectations. For sample questionnaires go to our [Padlet board](#) and take a look at the right hand column.
- Another simple way to clarify expectations is to have conversations with people, and simply ask.
- A third way it to tap into the wider surveys that are being done nationally and internationally as they reveal where people are at.

So, you may want to pause the process at this point amongst those you lead with and check whether your summary of expectations is accurate before you move on to the next stage.

STAGE 2 – DISCERNING

As you look at all the expectations you have gathered, it is now time to work out which ones you think are appropriate and which ones you think are inappropriate. A simple way to do this is to create three piles

- Appropriate.
- Inappropriate.
- Can't agree.

Take each expectation and discuss whether you think it is an appropriate expectation or not. For example, the congregation expects us to have our normal three services on Sundays. You may decide this is an inappropriate expectation because you don't have the resources to appropriately clean the church between three services.

Or, the community expects the church building to be open for private prayer everyday, and you agree because you want to provide a space for people to reflect, mourn, pray.

Or the diocese expect you to re-open your church building for corporate worship on Sunday straightaway, but you disagree, because you have had a significant increase in people engaging with your online worship who haven't attended church before, and you want to prioritise your connection with them so are going to take some time to work out how to continue to keep them engaged when you do return to your building.



Inevitably there will be some expectations you can't agree on in the group because people have different opinions. These are often the ones where rich and helpful conversations can occur, but you may need to have these conversations over several meetings. Some will then be able to be moved to either the appropriate or inappropriate piles, others may have to stay in the can't agree pile. That is ok, because it is better to have them on the table and be clear that you can't agree, than have them under the table with no one knowing that they exist.

STAGE 3 – COMMUNICATION

You are now clear about where the expectations sit in the three piles. The next stage is critical. Without it, people will continue to be frustrated. Decide how you are going to help people understand what they can and can't expect. This is all about careful, clear, creative communication.

Some things can be done very simply. For example, if you decide your church building is going to be open for an hour a day for private prayer you can put an attractive sign outside the church communicating this, send an email to all the congregation (remembering to drop a note through the door of those who aren't on email) explaining what you are doing and why, post something on your community Facebook group, drop a leaflet through everyone's door and so on.



Others are more complex. Explaining why you are not going to reopen your building for public worship until September may require a Zoom meeting with the congregation to explain why and how the decision has been made, allowing people to ask questions. Then a clear sign outside the church saying the church is open online whilst the building is closed, and so on.

There are several concerns people have about doing such an exercise.

- If we ask people their expectations won't they expect them to be met? Not if we are careful about how we ask. For example, if we decide to do a survey, we can communicate from the outset that we want to hear people's views and opinions to help the group who are making the decision to be as informed as they can be on

what people think, and that inevitably there will be many contradictory views and it is the job of the leadership group to work out the wisest way forward. People are generally happy for things to go a different way than they would have preferred if they know their views have been genuinely taken into consideration.

- Aren't we in danger of a lowest common denominator approach to decision making? Again, not if this approach is done carefully. It is the responsibility of those in leadership to prayerfully discern God's way forward, and consulting with others is part of that process, but not all of it. They will also need to prayerfully seek God for his way forward, study the Scriptures and be shaped by what Jesus wants for his church. They will want to take into account the current priorities for the church in this season of its life, and define carefully the realities the church faces (for example the new online fringe, or new connections made through caring in the community, or financial difficulties as a result of the crisis). The big advantage of involving others is that it increases the likelihood of ownership of the discerned way forward, but it is only one part of the discernment process.
- Doesn't this type of approach encourage a consumerist approach to church? Again, only if we suggest that want people want is what people will get. The expectations people have will be there whether we listen to them or not. It is much better to get them on the table and then be able to shape them in an appropriate way to increasingly reflect the priorities of the kingdom and the person of Jesus than leave them unidentified, undisclosed, and unexplored.

Settling Expectations

A PCC functions better when expectations are clear about how it will operate (for more on this see [PCC Tonight](#), which explores how to set up a code of conduct on a PCC to help clarify expectations). A congregation functions better when expectations about leadership and membership are clear, enabling people to work well together, minimising frustrations. Colleagues function better when they are clear about their expectations of one another, everything from how they will handle conflict, to how they respect each other's time off.

And in this time of Pandemic, churches will function better if they have had honest conversations about what is going on and what can be expected in the next few weeks as we seek to work out how best to serve God and serve others at this time.

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