

When the Vicar leaves...

The Archdeacon of Wandsworth, the Ven. David Gerrard explains What happens next...

Fifteen years ago most parishes were filled by the Bishop or the Patrons (the individual or body legally responsible for finding a new vicar) on a fairly informal basis.

The parish prepared some information. Patrons scratched their heads, remembered some likely man who they had heard wanted a move, had a quiet word with him, told the churchwardens who he was, and if they did not object to him after a meeting, he was appointed.

I have heard of one vicar offered a job when he met the Bishop at a cattle market, and I was refused a job by a Bishop of Southwark because he said the parish would never accept a

vicar with a beard. He changed his mind, and on my visit I found a bearded churchwarden.

Today, the archdeacon meets with the PCC and explains the process to them. The PCC has to discuss whether or not they wish to bar women from being appointed, elects two members as their representatives, decides whether to ask for advertising, and draws up a full parish profile, many with photographs and colour printing, even a video. They also draw up a job description and person specification.

The Bishop's staff meeting, and the Area meetings of Bishop and Archdeacons discuss each vacancy on a monthly basis. If there is an

external patron, the Archdeacon usually meets or corresponds with them. The Archdeacon usually preaches and explains the process to the whole congregation.

Most posts, excluding those where the Queen is patron, (she is one of the largest patrons) are advertised. Parish websites are checked. Enquiries trickle or pour in - 80 is my largest number. They come from all over the world. Australia, Africa, Brazil, Canada.

Each enquirer has to be sent an application form, profile, and other information. Applicants apply. Short listing meetings are held with parish representatives and patrons. The four or so short listed

candidates are then invited to parish visits. They may be invited to make a presentation or submit sermons.

Each candidate's three references are requested, along with a confidential reference from their local bishop confirming that they are safe to receive.

Parish representatives, Patrons, Archdeacon, draw up lists of suitable questions for the interviews. Interviews are held, usually chaired by the Patron or Bishop. Everyone has to agree - no majority voting.

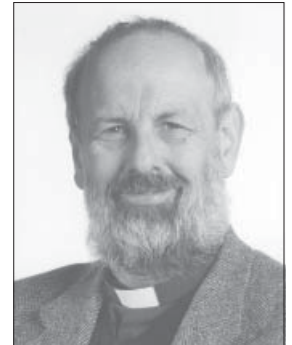
Interviews can be immensely encouraging with lively, keen, able clergy seeking the next stage of their ministry - or incredibly depressing with sad,

lost souls going through the motions. Usually an appointment is made. Again from anywhere. We have had vicars from France, Germany, Peru, Australia. The most recent is a Pole from Krakow, the Pope's home city.

If no appointment is made, we begin again.

The successful candidate and spouse are invited to meet the Archdeacon, surveyor and wardens at the vicarage and see what needs doing to the vicarage.

As this now takes five months from this meeting to the Induction of the new Vicar, we are changing this system to



begin putting the house in order before an appointment is made.

It is a lot of work. The system is ancient - and daft.

But we try to make it work as well as possible, so parishes get the best possible vicar for them.

A Churchwarden's 'Int

**Andy Hughes,
a former
churchwarden of
AllSaints, East Sheen
writes**

The realisation that you've just been elected a churchwarden comes as a bit of a shock. Yes, you knew you were standing for the post; and you also knew that, mysteriously, no one else was standing, and, of course you didn't volunteer for the role, at least not initially; you somehow got talked into it.

You'd spoken to plenty of ex-churchwardens who told you about the dedication, the time, the commitment that would be needed. But from the moment you start the job, your life changes much more than anyone really had predicted. Suddenly, if the church heating is too hot, it's your responsibility; if the collection is not counted, it's your problem; if there is a drunk trying to disrupt the service, you have to deal with it.

Meetings

Then there are the committee meetings taking up many of your evenings: managing the church finances, the church fabric, the church hall, the church choir. Suddenly, without any real preparation for it, you are shouldering responsibility for a pretty complex organisation with a financial turnover which would be the envy of many a small business.

But thankfully, you are not on your own. First there will be another warden with whom to share your panic attacks and there will be lots of understanding friends to give you moral support. But most of all there will be a vicar who can conveniently take the ultimate responsibility for final decision-making and, hopefully, keep you from making too many disastrous mistakes. After all the vicar is the 'professional', the full timer, the one who, presumably, has had at least some training in how to run a church. So you learn to depend on the vicar being there and of course the vicar comes to depend on you too. One of the potential rewards of being a warden is the closeness which develops between you and your priest as a result of spending so much time solving problems together, planning the future and putting the world to rights.

So when, one day, with no warning, he breaks the news to you that he is moving to another parish, the shock comes like a thunderbolt. Later it feels rather like a bereavement as you and your fellow warden come to terms with the realisation that you are very much on your own now. Suddenly you realise you are both going to have to steer the ship without the pilot. You are going to have to survive any stormy seas without the life-belt.

But now I'm getting somewhat carried away with self-pity because, actually, our church is fortunate in being part of a team parish with two other churches. This team ministry means there were at least two other priests to help us through our interregnum, two parish wardens who carry the ultimate legal responsibilities and, for us, the rector of the parish was there to offer much

encouragement, moral support and professional guidance.

However, even with this good will rallying around you, it is inevitable that the warden's role during the vacancy shifts a lot more 'centre-stage'. Your congregation needs you to show leadership in more ways than they expected of you before. It means you are chairing more committee meetings, following through more decisions, receiving more phone-calls, making more arrangements.

It happened for us that the vacancy occurred towards the end of a major reordering of the church building, with several large projects still to be steered through committees, faculty applications and implementation programmes. All this added to the level of our activity, not to mention our stress levels.

But uppermost in our minds was; who will be the next vicar and when will he/she be in post? You soon learn that patience is a virtue in this as it is unlikely that any C of E vacancy will be filled in less than a year to eighteen months. Whether this is financial prudence or an episcopal plot to test the moral fibre of the parish, was of little relevance to our plight.

Working together

However, we soon noticed that the congregation was beginning to work together more closely, to be more willing to take on responsibilities than before, to be a little more unified. Perhaps in the absence of our 'Father' and in the face of the possible threat to our continuity we began to grow up as a community and to accept ownership of our joint destiny.

As wardens we felt that it was important to use the opportunity provided by this extra sense of engagement to try to plan the recruitment and selection of the next priest with special care. After all it was the top issue of the day for our congregation and, if we were to get the wrong person for the job, the consequences would be too awful to contemplate! So, borrowing some of the modern wisdom of human resource management theories, we began to implement a thorough 'job analysis' as a preliminary to framing a job advertisement.

A job analysis in this context is not so much an attempt to find out what the last person in post did so you can replicate it for the next person; it is more an objective evaluation of where your church is now, where it wants to go next and what you

want a new vicar to do to help you get there. Along the way you will also discover what skills and personal qualities are necessary in your new leader in order to achieve your goals. This sort of review is not unfamiliar to parishes, but in the context of choosing a new priest, the communal mind focuses on opportunities for change and growth with an intensity which might otherwise be lacking.

Our 'job analysis' consisted of a fairly lengthy questionnaire, asking the congregation to describe their perceptions about our strengths and weaknesses in a variety of different areas such as worship, children, pastoral care, service to the community etc. It asked questions about the future direction of the church and finally asked what skills and qualities we would seek in someone who would lead us for the next seven or eight years.

We had a very encouraging response rate with well over 70% of the congregation having something to tell us. The results were carefully analysed and presented to a congregational meeting after a Sunday service. This of course stimulated further discussion and gave a chance for disagreements to be aired. From this exercise a 'profile' document was prepared which summarised our feelings about ourselves, our aspirations, our concerns and outlined what we expected from our next priest.

Presentation

We tried to present ourselves as honestly as we could. So it all went in, both the good and the bad. This, of course made for a document which must have seemed somewhat formidable to those enquirers we sent it to. But we didn't want anyone to apply who hadn't had a realistic preview of what they were

The interregnum over - the Rev. Chris Palmer (centre) is licensed as Team Vicar at All Saints, East Sheen in the Mortlake East Sheen Team Ministry.



We know all about 'interregnum'!

Honorary Curate, Victoria Hackett writes:

If there is one topic St Andrew, Earlsfield, could take as a specialist subject on Mastermind it would have to be 'The Interregnum - what it means to a Parish' - St Andrew's has had 5 in 29 years!

Each has undoubtedly been different and very much dependent on the Wardens and parishioners at the time. Few would disagree that the word 'interregnum' initially brings a feeling of dread as well as many unanswered and unanswerable questions: How long will it

last? Who, if anyone, will replace the outgoing incumbent? Who will take the services? etc, etc.

This present Interregnum is different from any of the previous four - but why?

Well for a start we knew eighteen months before it was due to begin that Colin Pritchard the Vicar would be having his farewell Service on Sunday 28 September 2003.

When Colin arrived at St. Andrew's, in September 1994, he inherited a Lay Ministry team and that was all; the stipendiary Curate had left the month before. Over nine years Colin systematically built up a ministerial team that on his departure included two Readers, one MSE and an ordained teacher waiting at the time to be given PTO - as well as the surviving members of the Lay Ministry team.

St. Andrews had been well prepared by all members of the Ministerial team and PCC to look forward with confidence to what lay ahead.

Members of the congregation had asked for an All Souls Day Service - something never embarked upon before. Anna Pratt, a member of the Lay Ministry team, and I started from scratch and were delighted to welcome 40 worshippers on 1 November (more than 25 of whom had rarely if ever, entered the doors of St. Andrews before). Encouraged by this first venture, the 2004 Service is well in hand.

Numbers have increased between 20 -25% since the autumn and encouragingly they are staying. More baptisms have taken place since January than we had in all of 2003, as well as two weddings booked. The

congregation has willingly taken on extra responsibilities and maintained existing commitments.

We are looking forward with awe to the fact that £50,000 needs to be raised within the year to match a £140,000 English Heritage Lottery Grant.

Not everything is being done though - we still desperately need a team to look after the Church garden and keep the grass down!

Here are the top tips for an Interregnum as identified by St Andrew's:

1. Plan thoroughly and with good time in hand.
2. Meet regularly as both a Ministry and Lay team.



St Andrews Ministry Team with Bishop Tom on Mothering Sunday 2004: (L-R) Denise Mumford, Michael Okoye, Bishop Tom, Richard Peers, Victoria Hackett

3. Keep the Parish well informed as to what is happening.
4. Utilise the strengths of all.
5. Don't be afraid to try something new.
6. See this time as a way of experiencing different ministries.
7. Regularly review what has

been achieved and acknowledge this to the wider congregation.

As a Parish we are looking forward to our new Vicar coming later in the year and are adamant that we are going to pass on a vibrant, committed congregation to see St. Andrew's go from strength to strength!

erregnum'

letting themselves in for. One of the expectations which came out of the review was that we wanted someone who would love us as we were. The profile tried to show the bits which it would be more difficult to love as well as the bits we were happy about.

So, having advertised and attracted a short-list of promising candidates, we set about planning a selection process which would give as many of the congregation as possible a chance to offer a constructive view of the candidates and also a wide range of situations in which they could show us their strengths. More than for most jobs, we were looking for a good 'fit' between the person and the community they would work with, so we felt it was important the selection exercise should be highly participative for both sides of the decision making process.

Open day

To achieve this, we planned an open day with a buffet lunch to meet representatives of various groups; a tour of the parish stopping off to meet people at the other churches; a presentation to be made by each of the candidates to representatives of the congregation and finally, we asked them to send us a tape recording of a recent sermon.

By the time we got to the interviews, (held on a separate day), we felt we knew each of the candidates pretty well. Which is important, as all the research shows that interviews alone are a notoriously inaccurate way of choosing the best person for any job.

Fortunately our interview panel, consisting of our bishop, our rector, both church wardens and a parish warden, lost no time in reaching a unanimous

conclusion which was also able to take account of the spectrum of views offered by those who had been involved at the open day. All our candidates were excellent, but our careful gathering of information throughout the recruitment process made us very confident that the priest we chose was right for the particular circumstances of our parish.

Relief

And so it has proved. As church wardens, we both breathed a particularly big sigh of relief when Chris finally arrived and, after a suitable settling in period hit the ground running. After about a year on our own we once more were part of a complete team which could share responsibilities and stimulate new ideas for the future.

But more than this we noticed that, as so many people in our congregation had contributed to the decision about who would become their new vicar, there was a positive atmosphere of acceptance and support which enabled Chris' ministry to get off to the best possible start.

Our 'interregnum' had challenged us to the limits as churchwardens and required us to pull out stops which we didn't know we had. Most of all though, for us and our congregation, it was an enriching time of renewal and growth.

The lengthy period in between vicars allows you to take stock and prepares you for setting off on a new course with renewed strength and enthusiasm. Although it may seem a long time to wait for normality to return to your parish, you never forget that the best things are always worth waiting for.



For Helen Sharp at Forest Hill, Christ Church & St Paul the interregnum was her 'baptism of fire'

I had only been Church Warden for 4 months when I found out the vicar was leaving. We knew it was on the cards but I think I was sceptical it would ever happen.

Anyway, ably guided by my fellow warden Simon (experience: 1 year and 4 months) we got stuck in. "After all" said Simon, "We can't do much damage, things can't get much worse!"

To put you in the picture - at the time we had just made the

very difficult decision of making our church building redundant. This was for a number of reasons; we needed to pay off our debts, we wanted a heated place to worship that wasn't infested with squirrels and pigeons; we also wanted a place we could hire out and generate a bit of income. The huge debt was a burden, the building was demoralising, we had no priest but the congregation was determined to see it through.

We had been lucky that Jenny (our departing priest) had set up the first 3 months of service cover. The congregation and visiting priests helped us out with the rest - it was due to their support and experience, making up for our lack of wardening experience, that fuelled our gung-ho approach to the year.

I think the worst bit for me was the lull in attendance around July - 6 months in to the

interregnum. In the last few months before Jenny left, we were getting around 50-60 people on a Sunday. This continued through to about June but then the numbers started to dip. Comforted by previous wardens who said this drop-off tends to happen in the summer anyway, I waited for September and the new school year to arrive. Not much happened. At our lowest ebb we saw the numbers drop to around 30, and naturally I took it personally. We, as wardens, were the ones in charge and could potentially do something about it, but maybe that's one reason why we have permanent priests? How ever much our pastoral work of encouraging our little band during the week worked, we still lacked the presence of a priest

seen around the community - in the pub, in the supermarket and on the streets. We held 3 funerals during the 13 month stint in comparison with 30-40 in usual years; 2 weddings and 4 baptisms.

Although interregna are useful times for the people of the church to find their gifts which might otherwise lay hidden, and time to adjust to a new direction with a new priest, I can't help thinking that the community suffers if the funerals are passed on to neighbouring parishes.

I guess not many would picture me and Simon as two graceful swans, gliding across the ponds of interregna, but we knew that a few pints in the pub were all that was needed to anaesthetise the frantic paddling below the surface.

Update....

Christ Church with St Paul has now merged with Perry Hill St George, as a single parish with an incumbent, John Ackland, but without a church between them!

The new St George's Church Perry Hill is now under construction (below) on what was once the Vicarage garden! At Christ Church with St Paul, a new chancel church is being created within the shell of the old building. The remainder of the building will be converted into 12 flats.

