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SAFEGUARDING THE PARISH – The Appointment System Following a Vacancy By Canon Michael Walters

Introduction

It is true of any institution that it takes its tone from the leader or leaders. When, as in the case of a local Church, the leader is also the principal teacher - and the spiritual health, not to mention the eternal welfare of the membership, depends to a large extent on the teaching given - there needs to be prayer, vigilance and prudent action whenever there is a vacancy.

I want you to imagine that your vicar or Rector is leaving. What happens? What should you do - what can you do - in order to secure the continuation or establishment of an evangelical ministry?

It is quite possible for the whole character of a local Church to change when there is a change of Incumbent. The concern of Church Society, and of its Patronage Board, is that where there is wholesome biblical teaching at the heart of a Church this should continue, and where there is not such a teaching ministry, it should be established.

What happens when there is a vacancy is controlled by the framework of two pieces of legislation: The Patronage (Benefices) Measure 1986, and The Pastoral Measure 1983.

A Straightforward Appointment

Let us consider first, a 'straight-forward' appointment. That is a situation where a Vicar retires, moves to another post, or dies in office and it is proposed to appoint another Incumbent. An Incumbent has what is known as a 'freehold'; that is, he is able to remain in office until he is 70 years old if he so desires. He cannot be dismissed or moved against his will unless he commits a very serious offence.

This is not just a safeguard for the Incumbent himself - it is a safeguard for the parish against sudden, unexpected and unwelcome reorganization. It means that planning can be more than short-term; initiatives can be seen through to their conclusion.

When a vacancy occurs the so-called 'Designated Officer', who may be the Diocesan Secretary or the Diocesan Registrar informs the three parties who will be involved in the appointment officially: the Parish (via the PCC Secretary), the Patron and the Bishop. Of course, in many cases the Bishop is also the Patron so there are only two parties involved.

The PCC Secretary has to convene a special meeting of the Council at which neither the outgoing Incumbent nor any member of his family can be present. This special meeting has the following tasks:

1. To draw up a statement about the nature of the Parish and the kind of person desired as the next Incumbent. In some Dioceses a questionnaire is supplied covering many aspects of parish life and concerns. When completed, copies are sent to the Registered Patron and the Bishop.
2. The second task is to elect two members of the PCC (who need not necessarily be the Churchwardens) to act as its Representatives - they will liaise with the Patron, meet potential Incumbents and seek to discern whether the right person is before them.

3. The PCC also has to decide whether or not to request the Patron to advertise the vacancy. The final decision as to whether to advertise rests with the Patron though it is usually the Parish which pays for such advertisement.

4. A fourth matter which the PCC must decide is whether or not to ask for a formal meeting with the Bishop and Patron under Section 12 of the Measure. This is specifically for the purpose of talking through the PCC statement. One thing which is causing the Church Society Trust some concern is the way in which some Bishops are arranging for informal meetings of this kind, which, though they afford an opportunity for a useful discussion about the existing position in the Parish, often exclude the Patron and can be open to some manipulation by a Bishop who wants to appoint a particular person to the post. I think it is clear that the special meeting of the Council is absolutely crucial. Several points need to be stressed:

- There needs to be evangelical input into the Parish's statement. It is not sufficient to describe the churchmanship as 'low church' or even 'evangelical'. The latter term has come to have a very broad meaning embracing both those who might be described as 'classical evangelicals' with a high doctrine of Scripture and an emphasis on the necessity of the new birth - people who, like members of Church Society, subscribe to the distinctive teachings of the Reformation - and at the same time 'evangelical' embraces those who confuse being evangelical with being evangelistic or merely enthusiastic.
- Some reference in the statement to doctrinal standards, the place of preaching and attitudes to those who are not Christians is vital.
- Then, of course, it is important to elect the best possible people as the Parish's Representatives. They need to be people who are not afraid to ask doctrinal questions, who are spiritually discerning and will be able to mirror the Parish accurately to those they meet. It is a difficult task carrying significant spiritual responsibility. If the Parish has chosen its Churchwardens well, they will be the obvious folk to do this but there may be reasons to choose someone else for the task of Parish Representative during a vacancy. If your Vicar announced tomorrow that he was leaving, do you know whom you would choose? If you want to safeguard the future, now is the time to think about it.

The PCC's statement is sent to the Patron and the Bishop. Do you know who your Patron is? It may be the Bishop; it may be the Vicar of a nearby Parish; it may be a local individual; it may be a Patronage Trust such as the Church Society Trust. About one tenth of the parishes in England have as their Patron one of the evangelical Trusts. These operate a confidential register of clergy who are seeking a move; currently there are about 180 names on that list. Of course, the Patron can go to someone who has not indicated a desire to move if it is felt that that person may be the one of God's choice for a particular appointment. The Measure is silent about the way in which the Patron should select whom to ask to consider a particular post. Practices vary.

Some Patrons draw up a list and then send one person at a time to meet the Parish Representatives, inviting them to explore together whether this is the right man for this particular vacancy. That is the method adopted by the Church Society Trust for what I believe to be a good reason: it concentrates minds on the essentials of what we are about. 'Is this God's man?' 'Is this the right person?' One is spared the temptation to choose on any other basis. If you interview several at the same time, you could, even sub-consciously, allow something which is not essential, even not relevant, to sway you. Which one is the best looking? Who has the nicest wife? This system may not be what you are used to in secular life but we are dealing with a particular calling to a particular task for which, according to the Scriptures, the qualifications are principally moral and spiritual.

Some Patrons automatically advertise, shortlist and set up an interview day which may involve the Bishop, Parish Representatives and Patron all at the same time. Others offer the Parish Representatives the opportunity to see a number of candidates, then express a preference or use their veto.

However it is done, the Parish Representatives are the ones who will be asking questions on behalf of the Parish. It is always good to ask open questions, that is, not questions which invite the answer 'yes' or 'no'. Far more information will be gained if the question is asked, 'Tell us about how you have approached Baptism preparation' rather than, 'Do you have a Baptism policy in your present parish?' It is far better to ask, 'Please tell us something about how you set about sermon preparation' than to ask, 'Is preaching a priority to you?' Instead of asking, 'Are you a conservative evangelical?', try instead, 'The word *evangelical* seems to have a very wide meaning today - how do you understand it?'

An offer of the Living can only be made when all three parties, the Parish Representatives, the Patron and the Bishop, are agreed. By the time that stage is reached it will be fairly obvious whether the candidate is likely to accept.

So far I have dealt with the appointment of an Incumbent to a single parish. Where there is more than one parish involved, each parish can have a separate meeting to appoint Representatives and draw up a statement. There can be a joint statement if that is preferred but each Council elects its own Representatives. The Code of Practice which accompanies the Measure recommends that where there are two parishes involved, each should have two Representatives, where there are three parishes the largest should elect two and the others one each, where there are more than three parishes involved, each should elect only one Representative. In terms of securing an evangelical appointment, judgement needs to be made as to whether separate meetings will produce such conflicting statements that less than satisfactory candidates will be sent. On the other hand, will a joint statement be so bland as to produce the same result?

Suspension

But what about when there is not to be the appointment of an Incumbent? In an increasing number of cases Bishops are 'suspending presentation' under the provisions of the Pastoral Measure. The effect of this is that the Patron does not have a right to present a candidate and the Parish does not legally have a say in whom the Minister shall be. What happens is that the Bishop appoints a clergyman to be the Priest-in-Charge of the Parish. In some cases this will be the Vicar of a neighbouring parish who thus takes on additional responsibilities, in other cases the Priest-in-charge will fulfil the same tasks as would fall to an Incumbent but without the security of tenure afforded by the 'freehold'. In this situation he can be removed from office whenever the Bishop decides. Obviously there is less security for the man himself and for the parish.

To be precise, we are dealing with two things here: Suspension of Presentation, which is governed by the provision of the Pastoral Measure, and the appointment of a Priest-in-Charge which is at the Bishop's discretion. Let us look briefly at both.

Suspension of Presentation can only properly be undertaken for *pastoral* reasons; that is, when there are plans to re-organize the parishes in a locality, so that various parish units share an Incumbent. Sometimes there are general plans which cannot be put into operation until all the parishes concerned are vacant. When presentation is suspended the parish is technically vacant even if there is a Priest-in-Charge. If suspension is proposed the PCC and the Patron must be consulted. Questions need to be asked at that point - especially about what plans there are for the pastoral care of the people of the parish. If the plan is that a neighbouring Incumbent who is not an evangelical should take care of the parish, this needs to be resisted wherever possible. The most likely scenario

is that the Bishop will, on the advice of the Diocesan Pastoral Committee, want to suspend presentation and appoint a Priest-in-charge. Sometimes this is done with the full involvement of the Patron, even though it is not an Incumbent who is to be appointed; often the Patron is asked to suggest names; usually the parish is asked to elect Representatives in the same way as for the appointment of an Incumbent. It is wise to press for this course of action since it creates goodwill all round and can avoid embarrassment at a later stage. The parish's Representatives will need to ask the same kind of questions but do not have the same right of veto. If they are not happy with the candidate offered, they will have to say so very clearly indeed.

Conclusion

The title of this talk is 'Safeguarding the Parish'. I cannot emphasize too strongly that though I have concentrated on the time of a vacancy, for that was my brief, there needs to be a constant concern that the 'pure milk' of the Word of God should be proclaimed from the pulpit and be the inspiration of our pastoral and evangelistic programmes. Brothers and sisters, pray for your clergy - the pressures on them are enormous - pressures to be 'nice' and blunt the cutting edge of the Gospel, pressures to re-shape the Gospel so that it is less of a challenge to the pride of men and women, pressures to be less and less concerned with doctrine and more and more concerned with experience. Pray for them, encourage them and be prepared for the day when there is a vacancy in your parish; elect good people to the PCC and seek to disseminate in every possible way good teaching, so that at the centre of our Churches and the centre of our ministries may be the Lord Jesus Christ and him crucified.

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