

Applying for a Post in the Church of England

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Introduction

When it comes to writing about getting appointed to a ministry position in the Church of England, I am, without doubt one of the best and worst qualified people alive. I have been vicar of an inner-city church in south-east London for twenty-one years, and during the last ten years I have applied for over twenty posts, and was short-listed for at least ten, mostly leading local churches. This means that I have read scores of parish profiles, and have had to think my way into each church I have applied to. However, I feel extremely unqualified, for the simple reason that I have failed to move! In some places, I really wanted the post, but it was never offered; in others, closer examination revealed it wasn't for me, and the parish never got as far as turning me down. This may suggest a degree of incompetence on my part, but as I look back I can see that other factors were at work, which I suspect are more common than we realise.

The first factor concerns why we wanted to move. This was principally because of burn out with the inner-city and fear about our children's education. In other words our desire to move was not motivated by faith but by fear. Why do you want to move?

Secondly, I knew deep down that I was running away from what God had called me to. I had had a call to the poor since the early days of my Christian life, so whenever I went to look at a parish, I was always asking about the local council estate. I think that sub-consciously I was trying to con God that I could fulfil this call in some green and pleasant place. He wasn't having any of it! When it came to the job I most wanted and seemed best qualified for, He abandoned me in the interview. Not an experience I would recommend! Since submitting to the Lord's will and deciding to stay in Peckham, I have experienced a hugely increased sense of joy, peace and fruitfulness in ministry, and the Lord has wonderfully provided great schools for our children.

The lesson of all this is, trust God, and do not imagine that means we have to send our kids to terrible schools. He is our Father, He knows our needs and will give good things to those who ask Him (Matt 7: 7-12). I think this is one of

the biggest battles we face, but once we learn to trust our Heavenly Father life becomes much simpler. The second lesson is that we are not professionals. The church is not a career path where we start in a small church, perhaps in the inner-city, before progressing on to a large suburban evangelical church. We are called to preach the gospel of the Kingdom. Nowhere does the New Testament command us to build churches; Jesus will do that. We have to be faithful to the ministry to which He called us, which will lead to suffering and persecution with great joy. Again if we have not got this clear we are likely to make bad choices, experience much heartache, and possibly make a shipwreck of our ministry.

Having said this, evangelicals are sometimes finding it difficult to get appointed because of issues like the ordination of women, and the Church of England's confusion over sexual ethics. There is a cost associated with faithfulness to the gospel, and not getting appointed may be part of it. What we have to avoid is being turned down because we have been unwise in the application or interview, and then assuming that is suffering for the gospel! The aim of this booklet is to provide practical help so that evangelical candidates have the best chance of being appointed.

Know Yourself

In the whole process of applying for a new post, possibly the most vital part is to understand yourself as God has made you. The problem is that many of us have expectations placed on us from family, school, our peers or the church, with the result that we think we ought to be something that God has not designed us for.

Understanding yourself can be a challenging process. It may mean facing up to deep hurts, insecurities and fears, but if we have never begun this process, then the dangers of becoming a "ministry casualty" are much greater. But once we have gained some understanding of ourselves, the task of finding the place that God has for you becomes much easier.

There are several areas that should be covered.

a) The influence of your childhood and family. Bill Hybels says that when he interviews people he always asks about this, and if the candidate thinks it is irrelevant they never get offered a job. For good or ill our formative years have exerted a huge influence on us. It is vital to have some understanding of this.

- b) Your personality. Systems like the Myers-Briggs Personality Type Indicator can be very helpful. Remember there is no right or wrong personality type. God has made us all different for good reason, and it will help you to understand how He has wired you up. It will also give you a bit more insight into those who are different from you.
- c) Your gifts. Get to know what you are good at and what you love doing. If you are a gifted men's evangelist or discipler, you will probably be deeply frustrated in many local churches. So look for jobs like chaplaincies or churches that have a strong men's work.
- d) Your passions. This is similar to knowing your gifts, and it is about doing what you love doing. Many leaders burn out from doing what they are not passionate about and are not good at.
- e) Your experience. What have you enjoyed and what have you hated in the past: not a bad guide to the future.
- f) Your calling. What has God laid on your heart? Is there a people group, a part of the world, a type of ministry that you have a deep yearning for? From an early stage in my Christian life ministry to the poor was part of my spiritual DNA. Many times I have tried to run away from it, because it is not very comfortable. But once I embraced it fully, it has led to a wonderful liberty, and increased fruitfulness in my personal life and ministry. It is probably worth saying that some people's calling is quite general; perhaps nothing more specific than to be a pastor-teacher in a local church. But it's interesting how God will often then lead people into a more specific calling. For example twenty years ago Chris Guinness was the vicar of St Stephens South Lambeth, an inner-city church in south London, when he was called on to take a number of funerals of homosexual men who had died of AIDS. As he started to minister more and more to people in the gay community, he and his wife Lisa developed the Living Waters ministry which today is doing amazing work healing people from sexual dysfunction.
- g) Your ministry values. What is really important to you and can you express it succinctly?
- h) How co-dependent are you? For many this may not be familiar territory, but it is of great and growing importance. Too many church leaders are ministering subconsciously to meet their own needs. This can be disastrous. I have seen good men and great churches destroyed because of failure in this area. If this is new to you, I would strongly urge you to buy and read Love is

a Choice by Frank Minirth and Paul Meier (Monarch Books). They are two godly Christian psychologists, and their book is full of Biblical wisdom on this.

Know The Post

a) Find out as much as you can about the church. This is obviously important. First, because it will help you make a good decision. I once met a very disillusioned vicar who complained to me that he had been misled about the true nature of the church he was leading. It had a great reputation but when he got there he discovered smaller numbers, financial struggles and low morale. I am afraid I was not very sympathetic. If you are looking at a parish it is your job to get an accurate picture. Caveat emptor applies.

Secondly, it will help you a great deal in an interview. A friend of mine who, as a rural dean, does quite a lot of interviewing, told of one candidate who stood out a mile, because he was the only one who had really taken the trouble to understand the parish.

b) Your first contact. Typically this will be through an advert in the church press or through word of mouth. It is possible that you will be contacted by a patron directly, or by the Clergy Appointments Adviser. With regard to the latter I never received anything directly from him but their website is quite useful (www.cofe.anglican.org/info/caa/).

c) The Parish Profile. If you are interested in a post then you will be sent a parish profile. Read this carefully, asking yourself what this tells you about the church? Equally important, what does it not tell you? For example, the presence of a robed choir and a contemporary music group may signal considerable tensions, unless there is something about how they work together.

What does the profile tell you about the recent history of the church? One large church I looked at had had a four vicars in the space of about 15 years. This rang alarm bells and further investigations revealed that there was a difficult power structure in the church. Finding out about such strongholds, which are stopping growth, need not necessarily mean you do not go for it, but you must go with your eyes open.

It is worth asking whether the church will love you and your family, if you have one. To this end I looked at what they said about the accommodation. Some churches give a good description of the vicarage with photos, others tell you almost nothing (“a modern four bedroom house”). How they care at

this level may be an indication of how they will care in more important matters.

Finally, what does the profile say about their values? If they are clear do you agree with them? If you go to a church where you disagree with their clearly stated values (e.g. on women's ministry or the charismatic movement), you are cruising for a bruising. However, it is often the case that either nothing much is said about values or it is pretty vague. This does not mean that the church is a blank canvas, but that they haven't thought that much about it, or there are conflicting values.

d) Parish facts. When I was looking at my present ministry, a wise incumbent said to me that there were three things I must see: the accounts, the last quinquennial survey, and a copy of the Electoral Roll. The accounts will tell you whether they are solvent, what the quota is and how generous they are. The Quinquennial should tell you of any looming building problems they may have "forgotten" about, and the ER will tell you how local the congregation is. It is also worth knowing the number of occasional offices.

e) The Website. Increasingly churches have a website, and this can tell you as much or more than the profile. One key indicator: who is it aimed at? A website is a tool par excellence for communicating with outsiders, yet many churches use it as a sort of in-house magazine. This can often reveal how mission focused the church is. One church I looked at even had a very different set of values on their website to those in the profile!

f) Personal contacts. It is well worth trying to talk to anyone who knows you and the parish, or talk to a contact who knows something about the church. This will often fill out the profile, give you more of the history, and put you in a much better position to know whether this might be right for you.

Writing an Application

a) This can be quite a time consuming process. Even after having done it a dozen or more times, I still found it to be the best part of a day's work.

b) Think about who will be reading it, and seek to be as clear as possible. To that end type it unless you have very good handwriting. Take care over layout - use bullet points etc, and be concise. A busy patron or parish rep will not be impressed by having to wade through a dozen closely typed pages; the chances are they will not bother, if they have other good candidates.

c) A CV is a good way of giving the background information. Generally keep it to about two sides of A4. Avoid trying to appear impressive by putting down every POT course you have ever attended, but make sure you include the basic information. Patrons have told me that, amazingly, some clergy have forgotten to start with the key information: name, address, telephone/e-mail, date of birth or age, marital status and details of spouse and children. Make sure you include A Levels, higher qualifications or university details and your theological training. List your employment prior to ordination, and your ministry experience both before and after ordination, with a brief outline of the experience you may have gained. Put something in about your gifts, calling and passions in ministry, and something about your other interests: gardening, knitting, base jumping or whatever.

d) Aim to write something clear and succinct about your spiritual life, how you came to Christ, and what your core ministry values are. If you are applying for a non-evangelical church, then you will have to exercise some care in the language you use. The trick is to be honest, without frightening or confusing people from a different tradition. Make sure you also write about what you have done and ways in which God has used you, rather than what you hope to do in the future. I think churches have a right to know that we have practical experience and not just theory.

e) Show that you have some understanding of their situation. It is helpful to reference key parts of the Profile, especially when they mention areas where you have particular gifts or for which you have a real passion. You need to show the representatives and the Patron that you can meet what they think they need. If you cannot do that honestly then it may not be the right place.

f) Think carefully about whom you ask as referees. If neither the patron, nor the Bishop nor the representatives know you, it is worth trying to find someone who knows you well enough and has some link with the patron, parish or Bishop. If they are unsure about short-listing you, a phone call to someone they know is always easier.

g) It is probably worth making some reference to any areas of weakness or to things that you find difficult. In my case administration and committees spring to mind. If you have major weaknesses in areas such as preaching prayer or people skills, then you may be in the wrong job!

Applying To A Non-Evangelical Parish

- a) One of the marvellous things about the Church of England is the opportunities that are provided to preach the gospel, and bring spiritual life to churches that have had no experience of Biblical ministry. This is made possible under God by the existence of the freehold. An incumbent is neither employed by the congregation, nor by the bishop. This means we cannot be sacked or moved for preaching the gospel. And this is the reason why Anglican churches can be transformed in a way that is much harder among free churches.
- b) In writing an application avoid jargon, and be aware that parish representatives may have some funny ideas about evangelicals.
- c) Stress the importance of visiting, taking services really well and preaching really well. Many lay people are keen to learn the Bible, although they would be very worried by the thought of a sermon lasting more than ten minutes. Be sensitive how you talk about that.
- d) Decide in advance what you are going to do about churchmanship issues like robes/vestments, reserved sacrament etc. A softly softly approach to changing these things is probably advisable.
- e) Many evangelicals have been in this position in the last thirty years; for example Richard Coombes in Burford, David Cook in Newbury or Ken Moulder in Walkergate, Newcastle. Richard has said to me that he would be very happy to talk to anyone who is thinking about applying for a non-evangelical living.

Visiting The Parish

If you are thinking seriously about applying for a post, it is very helpful to visit the parish informally. Although it is difficult, visiting a service will give you a good idea of the “feel” of the church. Whenever I did this, I tended to be fairly open about who I was and why I was there, and people are very glad to see you, and generally encouraged that there are potential candidates looking. My wife and I went to an evening service at one church in which we were very interested, where we had a long and frank discussion with a senior lay leader. This resulted in us not applying and saved much time and heartache.

It is quite likely that you will not be able to visit a service, but it is still very useful to visit the area, look at things like schools, the vicarage etc.

Occasionally a church will invite a prospective candidate for an informal visit. This is very helpful but not very common.

Attending The Interview

The way interviews are organised varies enormously. The Church Patronage Trust has one of the best organised systems. This usually involves spending 24 hours in the parish. The candidates arrive at lunchtime, with tours of the parish and opportunities to meet key people in the afternoon and evening. Interviews then happen the next day. These are usually in two parts: patron and reps together, and a separate interview with the bishop/archdeacon. Quite often there is just one interview with five or six interviewers. The most I have been interviewed by was eight people! You should definitely be told in advance how the interviews are to be organised.

In general, there are two main mistakes that we are tempted to make. The first is to be too good to be true, and not admit to any mistakes or weaknesses. The second is to be too humble for your own good. Aim to be honest about weaknesses and mistakes if you are asked, but also confident in the gifts, abilities and calling God has given you. In all of this process we need to trust in the sovereignty of God and do the very best we can. This is sometimes easier said than done, especially if you get turned down for a post you felt strongly was right for you. Having been through this, I can testify that God does not make mistakes. Nevertheless, unbelieving people can oppose His will; at such times we need to remember that He promises never to fail us or forsake us, and that He always provides for those who seek, though not always in ways that we expect! At the time it can be incredibly painful, but I am now grateful to Him that I was turned down for two or three posts I was very keen to get.

Giving A Presentation

In many interviews today you will be asked to give a short presentation, usually on something like “Leadership in the Local Church”. Normally this will be 8 - 10 minutes long. There are several points to note.

1. Make sure you are clear and concise in what you say. Waffle is a waste of time.
2. Only use power point if you can set it up without fail in under thirty seconds. Generally it is better to use a handout. Interview days run to a very tight timetable, and if you waste five minutes fiddling with a laptop, you

might as well have stayed at home.

3. If you are passionate about something, be passionate. If you can touch the hearts of the interviewers so much the better. Even if the post is not right, you can always bless the interviewers with a clear passionate biblical presentation.

4. If you are talking about your failures or mistakes (whether in the presentation or in the interview itself), remember they do not want to know the gruesome details. They are more interested in how you solved the problem, or overcame the challenge and what you learnt from the difficulty.

5. It is worth stressing the importance of visiting, pastoral care and hospitality. Some people are tempted to write off evangelicals as people who are only interested in teaching and preaching. They need to be clear that our goal is to make disciples, and that teaching and preaching are a means to that end (albeit an essential means).

Handling The Interview

There are a number of questions that keep coming up, and it is important to be prepared for them, but make sure you do not read your answers. • What are your gifts?

- How do you handle decision making in the church?
- How do you handle conflict? You may be asked to give an example.
- What have been some of your biggest challenges or failures?
- What is your position on the ministry of women? If you have reservations about women's ordination, try to be as positive as possible about women's ministry. This is one area where many parish representatives will leap to an assumption of chauvinism/sexism as soon as you voice a reservation. Aim to disarm them. If the question does not arise, there is no need to raise it.
- In practice, how would you handle the pastoral implications of an issue arising from your theological position? Women's ministry is an obvious issue here, but there are many others that come up: healing, the gift of tongues, hell and judgement, the supremacy of Scripture etc.
- What is the gospel?
- How did you become a Christian?
- What is your position on the gifts of the Spirit/the charismatic movement?
- What is your policy on baptism?

It is important that you work out beforehand what you want to get across in

the interview. I always had a list of those things in front of me, so that I could ensure I worked them into my answers.

Conclusion

The Church of England's appointments process may seem pretty arcane, and while it is sometimes badly conducted, it is probably one of the best systems we will find in a fallen world. In the current climate of uncertainty over the future of the Anglican Communion, and whether the Church of England will hold together, it may be that churches will increasingly attempt to pass on leadership to an existing member of staff. I know of at least three large churches that have done this successfully in recent years (Holy Trinity Brompton, St Helens Bishopsgate, St Barnabas Finchley). This may be a route that we need to explore for smaller churches as well.

Jesus is committed to sending out labourers into the harvest, and with many churches and dioceses increasingly desperate in the face of falling numbers, I believe God is giving a great day of opportunity for godly preachers of the good news of the Kingdom.

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