

Preparing for a pastoral vacancy - some guidelines for churches



These notes have been prepared to accompany a presentation by one of the Regional Team. If you have obtained them by other means, we strongly recommend that you do not proceed without contacting one of the Regional Ministers.

Introduction

A pastoral vacancy can be considered to consist of three distinct phases:

Phase 1 - bringing the present ministry to a close

Phase 2 - enabling the church to operate without a full-time minister

Phase 3 - appointing a new minister

These notes largely focus on the first two of these. Further guidance on phase 3 will be offered when you enter the settlement system. There is an inevitable tendency to begin to think about finding a new minister as soon as the church receives news that their present one is leaving. **It is vital** that the first two phases are properly addressed before you enter the third.

Phase 1 - Bringing the present ministry to a close

The immediate task is to:

Celebrate in an appropriate way what has been done. You will want to arrange some sort of event to recognise the present minister's service to the church. This may well involve other community organisations with whom the minister has been involved. You may also want to arrange leaving gifts etc.

Verbalise feelings and fears and provide space and opportunity for church and congregational members to express and concerns they have about the forthcoming vacancy. Church leaders should offer reassurance that support is available and that this church is not the first to experience a pastoral vacancy. It can also be helpful to communicate arrangements for the vacancy as they are put in place.

Listen to present minister's views about the future, but **DO NOT** be bound by them

Wait until this ministry is ended until you start to think about a new one

De-brief the present minister and find out what tasks need to be done. Particularly recognise that not everything the minister has done will automatically be continued. For example they may be a governor at a local school. The church may or may not want to offer to find someone else (and of course that offer may or may not be accepted!)

Practical issues will need to be addressed. In particular you will need to identify a mutually agreed finishing date and ensure that stipend and expenses are paid accordingly. There may also be housing issues, relocation, outstanding holiday etc. Remember that when most people move jobs, they will be anticipating a higher salary - this is seldom the case for ministers, so generosity of spirit is welcome!

Plan for how the various tasks of the church will be continued during the vacancy

Release those things that are personal to the minister - you don't have to continue everything

Phase 2 - Vacancy

NWBA "Help I'm a deacon" identifies three Leadership "circles" - PASTORAL, STRATEGIC, ORGANISATIONAL. This can be a useful framework for reviewing the operations of the church during the vacancy. Remember that considerably more work is likely to fall upon the church secretary, so look for ways that support can be given or whether certain aspects of their responsibility can be shared out. Some ideas for this are:

MEMBERSHIP - can someone else look after members role, applications etc.
PULPIT SUPPLY - can someone else book Sunday speakers etc.

Experience has taught us that it is important to get the church used to functioning without a minister before you start looking for a new one. THIS HAS OFTEN BEEN SHOWN TO ALSO SPEED UP THE SEARCH PROCESS.

PLAN FOR AT LEAST 12 MONTHS - It may be that you settle a new minister sooner, but it is easier to cancel plans than make them at the last minute. Think particularly about events like Christmas when it can be difficult to find outside speakers - make arrangements well in advance.

THINGS TO CONSIDER:

These are the roles that your minister is likely to have been fulfilling; you will now need to identify someone else to be responsible for them:

- Preaching and leading of services
- "Infant dedications, weddings and funerals"
- Chairing of meetings
- Relating to outside bodies:
 - Community groups
 - Ecumenical partners
 - BUGB, NWBA & Local network
- Relationships with staff and key team members
- Pastoral Care:
 - Housebound, long term needs etc.
 - Crisis
 - General
 - Records and information
- Preparation for Baptism, discipleship etc.
- Special events - Christmas, Easter, Anniversary etc.
- Manse - practical upkeep and security
- Role of Spouse/Family

One of the key roles of a minister is often to be a "point of contact" - even if they don't always do the job, they can often be the one people go to share anything from a leaky pipe in the ladies toilet to informing them of illness and bereavement. It is vital to the ongoing cohesion of the fellowship that church and congregation members know who to go to in various circumstances. Remember - it is not just a matter of appointing someone to each job, you must also make that sure everyone knows who they are!

A pastoral vacancy can be a very creative time in the life of a church. Those who are willing to rise to the challenges that it presents can often discover new gifts or see their present abilities being significantly developed. This is not a time for simply "keeping things ticking over" but to continue moving forward in mission and ministry.

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