

**ST ALBANS DIOCESAN SYNOD**

**16 JUNE 2018**

**ST ALBANS DEANERY MOTION**  
**PROPOSAL FOR SHORTER PARISH VACANCIES**

St Albans Deanery Synod voted unanimously on 25 April 2018 to:

Request the Diocesan Synod to request the General Synod to debate the motion:

That this Synod:

- (i) recognise the disruption caused to a parish and its mission during a vacancy;
- (ii) request the Archbishops' Council to review within 12 months the Patronage (Benefices) Measure 1986 with a view to ensuring that:
  - a) the process for filling a vacancy in a benefice is begun as soon as practicable after the bishop becomes aware that the benefice is to become vacant;
  - b) all concerned in the process of filling vacancies, including patrons, bishops, and parochial church councils, co-operate so that vacancies are filled as soon as reasonably practicable.

**Introduction and Background**

At St Albans Deanery Synod in November 2017, Andy Sharp highlighted the problems associated with long vacancies when a vicar moves on. He asked if the Deanery might put forward a motion seeking to change the ways things are done in a way that will put PCCs more in control of the timetable and process for finding a new incumbent. It is recognised that "to change the ways" things are done may well mean changing the existing legislation.

Since November a number of conversations have taken place with people familiar, indeed expert in, parish vacancies. After careful research, reflection and consideration the motion was drafted and put to St Albans Deanery Synod for debate on 25 April 2018. The motion was passed unanimously with no votes against and no abstentions. The motion now comes before St Albans Diocesan Synod for debate.

**Current situation**

Currently, when a vicar moves on it is the Diocese (Bishop, Archdeacon and Rural Dean) which drives the process and timetable for finding a new incumbent. The PCC has little influence on the sequence or timing of events. Tasks are usually undertaken in a set sequence disregarding any thought that it should be possible to do some in parallel. Churchwardens are often frustrated at the lack of control; one warden was informed (rather than consulted) that the vicarage was to be let whilst he was waiting for a plane at an American airport – there was nothing he could do.

This motion is not about changing "who" chooses the next incumbent. The Patron, Bishop and Diocesan senior staff are responsible for that, it is about seeking how the process might be improved. We recognise that some changes have begun to happen but not everywhere.

The current system does not always serve parishes well:

- PCCs find that vacancies are too long and outside their control.

- Delays in finding and installing a new incumbent are simply excessive. In St Albans Diocese it is quite normal for a year or more to elapse between the notice of resignation from one incumbent and the installation of the next one - 3 months should be feasible.
- The pressures on committed congregation members can be very great.

Some of the delays are due to antiquated legislation; others are due to responsibility resting with people who are too busy or less than motivated to find a new incumbent quickly.

It has been convention that nothing is done to progress finding a new incumbent until after the departing incumbent has taken up their new post or started on their retirement. In any other walk of life, management will start to look to fill a post as soon as a post-holder has tendered their resignation. Not so in the Church of England. It is normal for a vicar to tender 3 months' notice that they are leaving or retiring followed by a month's leave prior to their installation in a new post – this delay alone can lead to 4 months being taken up before any action is taken to find a successor.

In many dioceses, including St Albans, it is standard practice for the Diocesan Board of Finance (DBF) to let the vicarage on a "short term assured tenancy" of 6 months soon after the vicar leaves. This in itself means that an incoming vicar can't arrive until the vicarage is free of its tenants. Convention is to have the vicarage redecorated before the incumbent moves in, adding a number of extra weeks after a tenant has left before vacant possession is possible.

### **The damage caused**

Long vacancies are not good. There is much anecdotal evidence that congregations decline without an incumbent; the longer the vacancy the greater the decline. Given that the Church of England is in the business of spiritual and numerical growth any means of addressing decline is to be encouraged.

During a vacancy much work falls to the Church Wardens and Rural Dean. This is a burden which can be considerable, particularly as it will fall to people who are already busy and weren't expecting it.

Responsibility for Church Services inevitably falls to self-supporting ministers (SSMs), retired ministers and lay readers, assisted by other local clergy in neighbouring parishes. All these people are required to take on more work, often without being asked and certainly without being paid, when they are already busy. This additional workload is not acceptable – it is not what they anticipated or signed up to and can be the last straw.

In one recent parish vacancy, two SSMs and two retired ministers were left to hold the fort and run services at the two churches. As well as the normal Sunday services, these priests took the load for all the occasional offices of funerals, weddings and baptisms. In parishes which don't have a ready supply of SSMs or retired clergy the problem is more acute.

### **False economies**

It is often said that a Diocese (and/or Parish) saves money during a vacancy. We suggest this is a false economy. The Church should not be about saving money, or raising money through letting vacant vicarages. The priority for the Church is its mission which is best served when there is an incumbent in post and by minimising disruption from a vacancy.

St Albans Diocese has long had a policy of not artificially extending vacancies to improve finances. The DBF regularly asserts that vacancies are not artificially lengthened to save money, or vacant vicarages let to raise money. Recognising this assertion, it is also important

to record that a vicar costs the Diocese around £60k pa in stipend, national insurance, pension and housing (stipend £25k, overheads at £5k and the benefit of free housing at a further £30k). Sizeable as they are, the potential savings on expenditure and additional income may look attractive to help balance the books. For the DBF it should be case of “... *Lead us not into temptation...*”. We gather that some dioceses do deliberately extend vacancies with a view to improving finances – we disapprove of this.

### **Myths and Legends**

In preparing this note a number of anecdotal myths and legends have come to light. One is that a parish mourns the passing of its vicar who is seen as ‘part of the family’. The parish needs time to handle its bereavement before setting out to find a new incumbent. Whilst this may be the case in some places it may well be the case that the best way to mourn is to get on with life and work hard to find a new incumbent. The motion being proposed gives the opportunity to review this and related points. Freedom for the parish to grieve... or to move on, seems sensible.

Another myth is that it is ‘good for the parish’ to have a vacancy so it has time to take stock. Again, it may be good for some parishes but this cannot be assumed to be the case for all. The motion being proposed asks for a review without presupposing any particular outcome.

Amongst the myths and legends it is often difficult to see the difference between longstanding convention and tradition and what is actually required by the law. This is made more difficult because the *Patronage (Benefices) Measure 1986* is written not in language from 1986, but more like language from a different Elizabethan era. Fancy and old fashioned ecclesiastical language may suit some but it positively hinders PCC’s and Wardens who have to follow it. The language needs reform.

### **The way forward**

An early draft for the motion looked at responsibility for, and control of, the process of finding a new incumbent, believing this should rest with the body which has the greatest interest in securing a good appointment in a sensible timeframe. Many believe this will generally be the PCC rather than the Diocese and its officers.

PCCs are generally highly motivated to find an appropriate person to fill the post as soon as practicably possible. It follows that PCCs should be in the driving seat. Further, it follows that the Patron, Bishop, Archdeacon, Rural Dean and Diocesan officers should be required to give every support and assistance to filling a vacancy speedily and, furthermore, should be required to do nothing which obstructs the will of the PCC.

To give appropriate support to the process, it may be appropriate for the Diocese to establish a dedicated department to handle all aspects of clergy recruitment. Such a department, which could be clergy or laity led, would not be conflicted by other activities or diverted to other tasks. This is a suggestion which might be considered during a review.

This motion should not be regarded a panacea to solving all the problems resulting from long vacancies but it should help. There are things which can be done right away.

Two examples of good practice are:

- Every parish should keep its ‘Parish Profile’ up to date with the PCC reviewing the document at least annually. Once the PCC is aware of the forthcoming vacancy the Parish Profile can be checked, amended and issued without delay, something which is impossible if no one has given it consideration for many years.

- A priest announced his intended retirement two years before his expected departure and encouraged the PCC to start to think about the type of incumbent they would like in the future. The priest helped the parish prepare. He facilitated the discussion process by allowing time at PCC meetings whilst carefully ensuring he was not involved in any decision making, absenting himself so as not to influence the future.

### **The motion**

Why now? Because change is overdue! The *Patronage (Benefices) Measure 1986* has not been reviewed in 32 years and it is no longer fit for purpose.

We'd like the motion to be seen as an important response to the Archbishops' Council initiative on *Renewal and Reform* - it aims to highlight that long vacancies cause damage to the Church's Mission.

The motion seeks to review the *Patronage (Benefices) Measure 1986* with a view to bringing in changes that modernise an old broken system with the result that the process and timetable for finding and installing a new incumbent is improved and speeded up.

***Simon Baynes***