Suspension of the right of presentation

Introduction

In the Church of England, priests are appointed to a benefice. This is the basic unit of ministry and may be a parish or a grouping of parishes.

In previous centuries, each parish or group of parishes had a Patron who appointed and paid for a priest. Patrons retain the legal right of presenting a priest to the Bishop for appointment.

Each benefice has a Patron or Patrons. A Patron (who may be an individual or a body such as a university college) owns the right to present a priest to a vacant benefice. There are several variations of Patronage including sole Patronage (one person or body), joint, patronage by turns and special patronage boards.

The priest appointed to serve in a benefice may be either an incumbent or a priest in charge. Where the Patron’s right of presentation to a benefice is ‘suspended’, a priest in charge is appointed. Where the benefice is not ‘suspended’, an incumbent (either a vicar or a rector) is appointed.

What happens in a vacancy?

When an incumbent (vicar or rector) leaves, it is important for everyone involved to think carefully about the future. If a new priest is to be appointed on a basis which is essentially ‘like for like’, the PCC(s) compile a parish profile and appoint parish representatives. The Patron(s) consult with the parish representatives and then ‘present’ a candidate to the Bishop who would then appoint that person as incumbent: or if the Bishop is Patron s/he will make the appointment directly.

Usually, when a rector or vicar leaves, the Patron is primarily responsible for finding and presenting a new priest to the Bishop, although the Bishop, Archdeacon and PCC are also involved in various stages of the process.

What is “suspension” of presentation?

At times the Bishop may feel that additional flexibility is needed to look at the arrangements for a benefice, and this is achieved by putting the procedure described above on hold. The Bishop may decide to take the legal step to suspend temporarily the Patron’s rights and, instead, following consultation, appoint a priest to be in charge of the parish or parishes, thus they are licensed as priest in charge rather than vicar.

This gives the opportunity not only to look at the pastoral care arrangements but also to look at possible reorganisation.

Why is a Suspension of Presentation recommended?

The Bishop is likely to seek to suspend the rights of presentation to a benefice when for pastoral, missional or financial reasons pastoral reorganisation is under consideration. This might involve:

- To consider the allocation of stipendiary clergy resources, often in response to changes in population (such as new housing developments) in different parts of the diocese
- Pastoral reorganisation e.g. a union or re-grouping of the parishes.
- A change in the way the parish(es) are to be staffed.
- Replacement of a parsonage

The right of presentation to a benefice can be suspended by the Bishop for a period lasting no longer than five years. It is possible to renew the suspension, but again for no longer than five years.

The Bishop is required to obtain the consent of the Diocesan Mission and Pastoral Committee and to consult the Patron, the PCC(s), the Area/Rural Dean and Lay Chair of the Deanery Synod concerned before deciding to suspend a Patron’s right of presentation.
Proposals for any change are always subject to a separate process of consultation. If the proposals are found to be appropriate, they can be made permanent by a pastoral scheme or order. Otherwise, there is flexibility to try different arrangements.

**Why might suspension of presentation be extended?**

The Mission and Pastoral Measure 2011 only allows the Bishop to suspend presentation for a maximum of five years at a time. Arrangements for pastoral reorganisation can be agreed and put in place within a much shorter period and in those cases the suspension is lifted and then a process is followed to seek the appointment of the priest in charge as incumbent, with the approval of the Patron, Bishop and PCC.

Suspension of Presentation may be lifted at any time once the rationale for suspension can no longer be justified.

However, if at the end of five years the arrangements are not yet sorted out and more time is needed, the Bishop must consult the PCC, the Patron and deanery representatives (the Rural Dean and the Lay Chair) before s/he can extend the suspension for a further period. In cases where pastoral reorganisation is proposed but consultations are not yet underway, suspending the Patron’s right of presentation and appointing a priest in charge retains flexibility for pastoral reorganisation to be carried out subsequently.

**What does suspension of presentation mean in practice?**

All new appointments are made on Common Tenure. A suspension just means there is a technical difference in the appointment.

When the rights of presentation to a benefice are suspended, any new priest appointed to that benefice is licensed as a Priest-in-Charge operating under a Bishop’s Licence rather than being incumbent of the Benefice. Since any Priest-in-Charge would be appointed under Common Tenure there is very little practical difference between a Rector/Vicar and a Priest-in-Charge.

In both cases a priest is appointed to the parish, and in both cases the Patron and parish are involved in the selection process. The priest in charge normally looks after the benefice on a permanent basis under the provisions of Common Tenure, with a Statement of Particulars and provision for regular ministerial review. Occasionally the appointment may be on a time-limited or interim basis.

There are a number of other technical and legal areas in which the distinction between an incumbent and a priest in charge is relevant (e.g. legal ownership of benefice property), but by and large, a parish will notice no difference between a priest in charge on Common Tenure and an incumbent (vicar or rector) on Common Tenure.

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