

The Diocese of Bristol has extended its response to vacancies through a programme of Interim Ministry. Bristol first started developing its approach to vacancy leadership in 2009, and developed its vacancy strategy in 2012 with a view to harnessing vacancies as a *'a fruitful time for examining assumptions, creating a context for change and developing lay leadership'*. The aim of the strategy was to stimulate collaborative leadership during a vacancy; the objectives, to:

- help with transition management
- address underlying dysfunctions in a parish.
- challenge any inappropriate dependency on stipendiary clergy
- help ensure that better appointments are made on the basis of a clearer understanding of the local context.

The strategy allowed for a 'deliberate pause' in the clergy appointments process, during which a 'stage 1' vacancy preview was undertaken by an external reviewer, involving a data gathering, a clergy exit interview and interviews with lay leaders to establish what approach to take. At stage 2, well-ordered benefices were offered a six-month leadership initiative to discern and develop lay gifts; those benefices with difficulties were offered a vacancy leadership process to explore options for the future, led by a team of experienced lay and ordained people.

Six years' on the process today has been adapted but has similar aims:

- The Stage 1 review has become even more extensive and engages the parish to a greater degree.
- At Stage 2, greater emphasis has been placed on the development of the parish and the creation of the Role Description for the new priest. Bristol's Transition Manager works over 6 months with the new incumbent and PCC in the implementation of the plans outlined in the parish profile.
- A grid has been developed for Area Deans to support Deanery Leadership teams in the process, which shows how all the parties interact during a vacancy.
- Additionally, Bristol started drawing on Interim Ministry in 2017 as a means of helping parishes in transition.

Transition Manager, George Rendell writes of the evolution of IM: 'Having advertised unsuccessfully early in 2017 for two short-term stipendiary appointments in parishes which needed transitioning, we have not tried this again. However we have used a range of alternative ways of providing temporary priestly leadership in parishes (due to vacancy or long term uncertainty).' These include:

1. A multi-parish (10) benefice which had been vacant for 6 months when the SSM Associate Minister moved on leaving a part time OLM curate as the only ordained minister: A Vacancy Support Group was formed consisting of the OLM, the Area Dean, Assistant Area Dean and two third year curates from neighbouring parishes, one full time and one two days a week. The full time curate was made the lead of the group. An appointment was made in Feb this year.
2. A three church parish which had been in vacancy for two years and the Pioneer Minister was about to move on leaving a part time SSM Associate Minister who had finished her curacy in the parish one year previously. The Associate became half time stipendiary Priest in Charge on the understanding that it would be for one year. An appointment has just been made. The Associate was allocated a retired Archdeacon who acted as her Mentor.
3. A large parish church became vacant following a difficult 6 month period and the curate came to the end of his time shortly afterwards. Several Associates were left in the parish but they were a dysfunctional team. A retired Archdeacon (not the one in 2) was appointed to provide oversight to the team for six months. An appointment has just been made.
4. A retired SSM is just about to be licensed as Associate Minister of one church and deanery Interim Minister. This SSM has carried out an interim role during two vacancies over the past five years. In the first he stayed on after his curacy to perform the role. In the second he was an Associate who stayed on after the Vicar left.
5. In a single parish the curate in her third year stepped up into a leadership role in the small team of clergy and LLMs until an appointment was made. She has now moved to her own parish.
6. We have a further three parishes where the SSM Priests in Charge are over 70 and therefore on a renewable licence. The Diocese recognised that each, for different reasons, is performing a holding position. Each parish is likely to undergo major change within the near future.

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