

Called to be a churchwarden in the Diocese in Europe

Are you considering whether to stand as a churchwarden in this diocese? Perhaps other people are encouraging you to do so? Perhaps you yourself feel that this is an important way in which you can exercise your Christian discipleship? Perhaps you are aware of a specific need in your chaplaincy for someone to be willing to undertake this role?

Or, perhaps, have you recently been elected a 'churchwarden' and feel that you are still finding your feet? Not quite sure of the extent and limits of your role? Want to know more so that you can better exercise this vital lay ministry of helping with the life and well-being of your chaplaincy?

This booklet has been written by Clare Amos, the Diocesan Director of Lay Discipleship for the Diocese in Europe, to inform and encourage churchwardens, both potential and current, and to encourage them to see this role as an expression of their Christian discipleship. Clare is grateful to colleagues in the diocese with whom she has consulted in putting together this resource, and for their input. She particularly wants to note the comment made to her that those, like herself, who undertake key roles in the church's life on a voluntary basis should enjoy their tasks. We – you and I – should experience a genuine sense of joy in what we do. Bishop Nick Baines of Leeds once offered the following definition of joy: 'Joy comes when faith is alive, curiosity is inflamed and the mind is stretched.' The role of churchwarden offers all of these challenges!

What's in a name?

The name and office of 'churchwarden' is an ancient one—the name itself dates back to the 15th century, although descriptions of the kind of role exercised by churchwardens can be found at least as far back as St Augustine in the 4th century. Since the Reformation in the 16th century, churchwardens have been a vital

feature of the working life and ministry of the Church of England.

Below we set out formally and explore the official description of what it is to be a churchwarden, but it may be helpful first to offer two short, pithy and fundamental descriptions of their role, taken from a modern published guide. (Practical Church Management by James Behrens):

The role of the churchwarden is extremely varied but generally involves management, maintenance and mission

The churchwarden's task involves leadership, labour and love.

You might like to reflect on these two descriptions for a few moments. How do they match up with your expectations?

The 'history' of churchwardens in the Church of England is fascinating. One of the early manuals produced to aid churchwardens was written near the end of the 19th century by George Henry Sumner, later Bishop of Guildford and the husband of the founder of the Mothers' Union. Among the tidbits shared by Bishop Sumner was the fact that up till that time most people (there were some exceptions) could be compulsorily elected as churchwarden even against their will. Sumner also refers to the 1603 Church of England canon which deals with churchwardens and which notes that alternative names for 'Churchwardens' were 'Seekers' and 'Questmen'. These names derive from 'the fact that [in the 17th century] they were empowered and instructed to search for cases of heresy, or open sin, in their several parishes, and report them to their Ecclesiastical Superiors.' Things have certainly changed since those days: in fact in this respect they had already changed even when Sumner was writing!

But perhaps something of that original disciplinary 'vibe' still links unfairly in some people's mind around the term 'churchwarden'. Maybe it is partly due to other resonances of the terms 'warden' and 'warder'! In this case perhaps it is helpful to think of the expression 'guardian'. Interestingly the words 'warden' and 'guardian' come ultimately from the same Old English word. In current English usage the word 'guardian' includes a sense of 'loving care' which is perhaps not so obvious in the term 'warden'. Importantly the Psalms sometimes refer to God's role as the 'guardian' of his people. So too those who are churchwardens are being called to exercise loving care for the church, in terms of its life, its people and its property.

In our Diocese in Europe

There are a number of helpful books which set out more or less formally what are the roles of churchwardens. Many other Church of England dioceses also have information about the 'role' on their website. We list some books and websites at the end of this leaflet. It is important to note in this guide to the role of churchwarden that there are some differences in the role in this diocese, when compared with other dioceses of the Church of England.

The primary reason for this is that because the Church of England is the established church in England, the Church's rules about churchwardens have a formal legal status in England. They are part of UK law! That of course is not quite the case in our diocese, where rules about the role of churchwardens (and of chaplaincy councils) need to adapt to take account of local contexts and legislation, although as far as possible they do align with the 'canons' (rules) of the wider Church of England, and we have our own diocesan 'canon' which refers to churchwardens.

These are some of the differences that may affect the role of churchwarden and how it is carried out in the Diocese in Europe:

- The legal status of churchwardens, and of church councils, differs as compared with England, and varies from country to country.
- In England every adult living in the geographical area of the parish who is on the register of electors (those who can vote in a local government election) has the right to participate in the election of a churchwarden. In the Diocese in Europe churchwardens are elected by people whose names are on the chaplaincy electoral roll present at the annual meeting unless the chaplaincy has previously agreed to postal voting.

- The geographical distances in the diocese, and even in archdeaconries, have practical implications for those who undertake the role of churchwarden.
- Unlike in England, most chaplaincies are directly responsible for paying their priest.
- Clergy are frequently more isolated in our diocese and depend more on the support and care of lay officers.
- In chaplaincies where the community worships in borrowed buildings, this affects the responsibility of churchwardens regarding issues such as buildings and fabric. There are also only comparatively few chaplaincies which own the accommodation where the chaplain lives.

The official documents

In our diocese the formal statement about the roles and responsibilities of churchwardens (including the process by which they are elected) is found at paragraph 31 of the Diocesan Constitution 1995, which was originally promulgated in 1995, and most recently revised in February 2020. A copy of the Constitution can be found at [Diocese in Europe Constitution Feb 2020](#). The Constitution in turn refers to relevant Church of England canons and English statute law relating to churchwardens, in particular:

[Canon E1 CW Canon E1](#)

[The Churchwardens Measure 2001 CW Measure](#)

However, it is also important for churchwardens in the Diocese in Europe to be aware of the legal framework under which the chaplaincy/church operates in the country concerned. Often the church (or its council) has the status of a 'voluntary or charitable association'. There will be rules, which differ from country to country, regarding the responsibilities and the liabilities of the 'association', both corporately, and for those, such as the individual members of the council who are involved in its running. Churchwardens will bring their own knowledge and experience of national and regional laws and customs into their advice and support to chaplains regarding what is permissible and what is considered best practice. They may also need to work with other chaplaincy members who have knowledge of these matters.

The heart of the matter

The heart of what the Diocesan Constitution says about what churchwardens are to be and do echoes Canon E1 and is as follows:

“The churchwardens are officers of the diocesan Bishop and shall assume office immediately on conclusion of the annual meeting. They shall discharge such duties as are by law and custom assigned to them; they shall be foremost in representing the laity and in co-operating with the chaplain; they shall use their best endeavours by example and precept to encourage the members of the congregation in the practice of true religion and to promote unity and peace among them. They shall also maintain order and decency in the churches of the chaplaincy, especially during the time of divine service.” (paragraph 31 (b)(i))

We will explore this paragraph clause by clause:

Officers of the Diocesan Bishop

Churchwardens are officers of the diocesan bishop and their primary accountability for their ministry is to the bishop – not to either the chaplain or the chaplaincy council. The primary accountability of chaplains is also to the bishop, with whom they share ‘the cure of souls’. Given the diffuse nature and the vast geographical size of the Diocese in Europe it is even more important to emphasise the fundamental relationship of both churchwardens and chaplains to the bishop, which is an important reminder that the relationship of diocese to chaplaincies is not a ‘us and them’ situation. Of course churchwardens need to work as constructively as possible both with chaplains and church councils – but ultimately their duty and accountability is to the bishop, not the structures of the chaplaincy. Normally the bishop is represented by the relevant archdeacon, and building a good relationship between archdeacon and churchwardens is therefore important. (The churchwarden always has both the special opportunity and the responsibility, to be in direct contact with the bishop if necessary.) Bishops, archdeacons, priests, churchwardens and all others in the congregation need to work together to support the life of the Body of Christ.

Assume office immediately on conclusion of the annual meeting

It is the annual meeting of the chaplaincy which chooses the two churchwardens each year, holding a formal election if required. The term of office for a churchwarden is one year, though it is possible for a person to be elected annually up to a total of six years. The six-year limit can be suspended by a vote at an annual church meeting with immediate effect. Churchwardens will want to work with the priest in spotting the gifts of others in the chaplaincy, to ‘talent spot’ who might be successor as churchwarden, and encourage them to explore this possibility. This is a chance to think about the range of skills available across the full diversity of the community alongside the requirements of the role.

In the Diocese in Europe currently a churchwarden normally assumes office immediately following the annual meeting when he or she makes and subscribes the required declaration, and is admitted to office by the chaplain on behalf of the bishop. This differs from the normal practice in other dioceses of the Church of England where those chosen by the annual meeting must wait until the admission of churchwardens (usually by the archdeacon) takes place, often at one or more large gatherings in a cathedral or central church, to which all the recently chosen churchwardens from the area are summoned. Covid has encouraged dioceses in England to begin to adopt the Diocese in Europe practice in recent months. Up till now the geographical distances in the Diocese in Europe have meant that admission of churchwardens has been done locally by a chaplain, but there is currently discussion about supplementing this by a wider gathering, taking advantage of technological possibilities. Whether admitted locally by a chaplain or perhaps in a group by an archdeacon, all are acting specifically as



representatives of the bishop.

The procedure used in the Diocese in Europe for the admission of churchwardens is set out to the right:

Unless it has already been read at the annual meeting, the chaplain reads paragraph 31 (b)(i) of the Diocesan Constitution which sets out the duties of churchwardens.

The chaplain then says:

Name and Name, you have been duly chosen as churchwardens of this chaplaincy /congregation for the coming year. Before you can be admitted to that office you must make the appropriate declaration.

The churchwardens say:

I, Name / I, Name,
having been chosen to the office of churchwarden for the chaplaincy /congregation of N, do declare that I will faithfully and diligently perform the duties of my office. So help me God.

The chaplain says:

As the duly appointed substitute for the Bishop in Europe, I hereby admit you, AB and CD, as churchwardens of this chaplaincy for the next year, in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Discharge such duties as are by law and custom assigned to them

A key role of churchwardens is to be stewards of the physical and monetary aspects of the church's life: buildings, moveable objects and finances. Precisely how this responsibility is carried out inevitably depends on the specific circumstances of the chaplaincy.

Where a church building is owned by the chaplaincy (or another entity in the diocese) the churchwardens, working with chaplain and chaplaincy council, have responsibility for the care and preservation of the fabric of the building, and its contents. In exercising this duty they need to give due attention to both civil and religious rules and requirements, such as matters of health and safety. A 1909 guide for churchwardens recommends them to install electric lighting in the church – so that they are not held responsible if people fall over and injure

themselves in a dark building! The 21st century equivalent would certainly include ensuring that precautions are taken to fulfil all legal safety and other requirements e.g. disability access, as mandated by the civil authorities, both relating directly to the fabric of the building – and to the welfare of those who use it. This includes protocols for dealing with emergency situations such as fire or an attack. As an important aspect of their care for the building and the community churchwardens need to ensure that the church is adequately insured.

If a church wants to make changes to the building or certain of its contents, then under church law, the churchwardens (working with a chaplain, if in post) have the responsibility for seeking a 'faculty' from the diocese to allow this process to take place, prior to any work being started, or before the church has committed itself to it. The archdeacon is available for guidance on faculties, and it is through the archdeacon that faculties are applied for. (The procedure is different from, and simpler than, the statutory Faculty process in other Church of England dioceses.)

In the case of church communities which use buildings owned by others, the ultimate responsibility normally rests with the chaplaincy council, working with both chaplain and churchwardens, for any formal arrangements made to use or rent such premises. Since precise legal responsibility may differ from country to country, it is important to be absolutely clear who has the right to sign agreements on behalf of the chaplaincy with external bodies. However, churchwardens need to be sure that any agreements made with others are legal and viable, and that the church is able to meet any financial obligations which it undertakes.

The churchwardens also carry the responsibility for the security of the 'moveable goods' of the church – for example the communion vessels. They need to hold (and update as necessary) an 'inventory' of what the church owns. This is part of the ministry of churchwardens to ensure the transmission of the 'inheritance' for the benefit of the continuing life of the church. (see the Church of England Canon E1) The churchwardens will take a close interest in the financial well-being of the church and will work closely with the chaplaincy's treasurer in relation to this. This responsibility is of course usually shared with the chaplaincy council, of which the treasurer is an officer. In circumstances where it is not possible to find one or more individuals willing and competent to act as treasurer, that role formally

devolves on the churchwardens, acting together. During a vacancy, between the departure of one chaplain and the arrival of their successor, a period which can last a year or more, the responsibilities of the churchwardens in leading the chaplaincy council in sustaining the life and worship of the chaplaincy to flourish hold particular challenges. Not only is it important to sustain the ongoing life of the church (using whatever ministerial support may be available) but the actual process of appointment of a successor, if done well, requires considerable time, attention and care. Although the actual responsibility for the appointment process rests with the bishop, archdeacon, (and patron if any), churchwardens have a vital role in helping the congregation and chaplaincy council to articulate their needs in the church profile.

Depending on the circumstances, churchwardens may be formally appointed by the council as the representatives of the laity for these purposes, though that role may also be undertaken by other members of the council or a combination of wardens and council members.

Foremost in representing the laity

By virtue of their office churchwardens are automatically members of the chaplaincy council. They work collaboratively and closely with other officers of the council. Their leadership role in the council is vital to ensure that the council keeps before its eyes the breadth of vision of its mandate to work with 'the chaplain, in promoting in the chaplaincy the whole mission of the Church.'

Churchwardens can helpfully support new members of council, as well as encouraging others who might be suitable to stand for election to it.

In representing the voice of lay people in the life of the chaplaincy, the churchwardens must be available to hear the views and possible concerns of the laity and relay these to the chaplain. There may be times when the responsibility of churchwardens is to speak honestly to the chaplain about difficulties in the church congregation. In the Diocese in Europe, where in most cases stipendiary chaplains are paid direct from chaplaincy funds, churchwardens should seek to ensure that this arrangement does not affect the dynamic between the congregation and the chaplain. Given the primary responsibility of the chaplain to the bishop by whom they are licensed, the relationship of chaplain to the chaplaincy is not a normal employee/employer relationship. It is

important that churchwardens understand and acknowledge this and encourage other members of the congregation to do so as well.

Cooperating with the chaplain

The 'bridge' role of the churchwarden also extends to being a critical friend of the chaplain (and perhaps also of other ministers in the chaplaincy) and making sure that they are aware of both positive and negative currents in the life of the chaplaincy. It is important that churchwardens have regular scheduled time to meet with the chaplain; ideally such meetings should also involve a time of prayer.

Churchwardens have a duty of care for the chaplain, and need to take an interest in the chaplain's welfare, and the welfare of their family. They ensure that the routine administrative burden borne by the chaplain is not excessive, and is shared with others, especially members of the chaplaincy council. Churchwardens have a responsibility to ensure that the chaplain takes adequate time off, as well as time for retreat, and, of course, annual leave. There is useful guidance about this in the chaplaincy guides on the diocesan website, and the principles as they relate to clergy well-being are contained in the Church of England's Clergy Covenant/ DiE Chaplaincy Guides. Although it is normally the chaplain's responsibility to find 'holiday cover', it falls to churchwardens (or to those to whom they have delegated the task) to welcome and assist visiting clergy, and to ensure that any necessary expenses are met. In emergency situations, such as a chaplain being taken suddenly ill, it may fall to the churchwarden to find 'cover', and on occasion even lead non-eucharistic worship.

Churchwardens and other lay people are more likely than chaplains to be 'long-standing residents' or nationals of the country where the church is based, and they may have particular experience or knowledge about local legislation and customs that will assist the chaplain in his or her ministry. Churchwardens should also be well apprised of the statutes and constitution of their chaplaincy, the Diocesan Constitution and the Church Representation Rules so as to enable them to play a key role, with the chaplain and chaplaincy council in ensuring good governance in an ordered church.

Use their best endeavours by
example and precept to encourage
the members of the congregation in
the practice of true religion

This phrase underlines the importance of churchwardens seeing their role as an expression of their Christian discipleship, modelling the likeness of 'Christ the servant'. In addition to being faithful in public worship and private prayer, part of the 'example' of 'true religion' that churchwardens might be encouraged to offer to other lay members of the congregation is to display a willing and constructive engagement with contemporary pressing issues that the Church faces in its mission, such as our Christian responsibility to reduce our church's environmental footprint, and issues of racial justice. Churchwardens need to play a key role in implementing the diocesan strategy on racial justice, 'Breathing Life'.

The churchwardens ensure that the church is a place of welcome and safety for all, and work with the chaplaincy safeguarding officer in particular to ensure that all aspects of the diocesan safeguarding policy are adhered to. They need to show leadership in this area by completing their personal DBS checks in co-operation with the diocesan safeguarding team and undertaking any required modules of training themselves.

Promote unity and peace among the
congregation

In the Gospel of John, Jesus prays for his disciples 'that they may be one... so that the world may believe' (John 17.21). There is a deep connection between the unity of a Christian community and the efficacy of its witness to the wider world. Nothing can be more off-putting than gossiping, a spirit of cliquishness or complaint or regular arguments among its members. It is both the responsibility and the privilege of a churchwarden to promote unity and peace in the life of the church.

That means assisting a variety of voices to be heard, and enabling people holding different views to work together constructively. Unity does not mean the same as uniformity. 'Collaborative working' is not a modern concept; it is actually grounded in St Paul's vision of the unity of the Body of Christ, and collaboration between laity and clergy is deeply embedded within the Anglican tradition.

The office of churchwarden will give expression to such collaboration.

[Of course, the churchwardens in a chaplaincy also need to 'model' unity and peace by a sense of common purpose and constructive partnership between the two of them, offering each other the opportunity to play to their particular strengths and interests, and caring for the other's well-being (which includes ensuring that they both take adequate time 'off' away their duties!)]

Maintain order and decency...
especially during the time of divine
service

This is one of the fundamental historic roles of churchwardens, and their 'wands' as a sign of office are linked to it. Ideally one of the churchwardens should be present at least at each main Sunday service held by the church. This should be seen as part of the vital contemporary ministry of 'welcome'. Churchwardens have the overall responsibility for ensuring that worshippers and visitors are welcomed, know where to sit, how to behave, and are provided with service sheets etc. Doing this in a friendly rather than officious manner is of the essence, remembering that it may have taken considerable courage for a newcomer to cross the threshold. This ministry is normally shared with and largely delegated to 'sidesmen' and 'sideswomen', but it is the churchwarden's responsibility to ensure that the sidespeople's rota is drawn up efficiently, and that the individuals on it know what their duties are.

Changes in technology have brought many benefits to church life – but have also created some hazards. Although they will normally delegate immediate care to people with particular technical skill in the congregation, it is important that churchwardens are confident that equipment such as microphones and projectors is working well. Churchwardens should also be ready to respond to any minor 'hiccups' in the service – for example finding an alternative scripture reader (or reading the passage themselves) if the person on the rota does not appear.

Although assisted by the 'sidespeople', formally, churchwardens are – in co-operation with the council treasurer – responsible for ensuring any collections of money during a service happen

appropriately, and that the money is properly counted, noted in the church's register, and kept secure until it can be banked.

It is thankfully quite rare (these days!) but if there is a physical disturbance during the course of a service it is the responsibility of the churchwarden to deal with it – as discreetly and sensitively as possible.

The spiritual life of the churchwarden

'Let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven.' (Matthew 5.16)

There is no biblical text of course that exactly relates to the position of churchwardens, although both in the Old Testament and the New it is made clear that the ministries of door-keeping and of administration are vital to the life of the community of faith. Churchwardens today have to exercise both these ministries!

But the text above, from the Gospel of Matthew, which comes near the beginning of the Sermon in the Mount, can offer helpful guidance – and perhaps inspiration. The verse comes shortly after the Beatitudes – the stellar opening verses of the Sermon. They set the bar high! The Beatitudes offer a vision of what the Christian community, and Christian individuals need to aim towards, even if we need to acknowledge that we often fall short in so many respects.

Following on the Beatitudes is the injunction to Christians to be both 'salt' and 'light'. Again I think this is addressed both to individuals and to the Christian community. But perhaps they apply in a particular way to those who undertake the office of churchwarden.

Those who undertake this office need to celebrate realistically that they do have something vital to offer the church. False modesty is not a Christian virtue. Those tasks and roles that we listed at the beginning of this guide: management, maintenance, mission, leadership, labour and love, are essential



Wardens and Wands

'Traditionally' when a churchwarden takes up their office, they are handed a 'wand' or 'staff' as part of the admission ceremony, although this practice is now no longer universal. Carrying such a 'wand' was at one time a mark of a person's importance and authority. It also had practical purposes, being used by the warden to break up disturbances and keep the peace during services if behaviour got a bit boisterous. Apparently a still further use of the wand was to reach over and tap the shoulder of any member of the congregation who fell asleep during the sermon! 18th century sermons were longer than those of the present day!

for the church's life. The image of 'light' is itself a clear reminder that churchwardens have something to share with others. The challenge – the vision – the spiritual imperative, that those who are churchwardens have to hold before their own eyes is to seek to ensure that their work, their gifts and talents are exercised not for their own glory, but to 'glorify our Father who is in heaven'. And don't forget the 'joy' which we referred to in the introduction, 'For the kingdom of God is ... righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit' (Romans 14.17).

Prayers

God of power, through your Spirit you promote peace and reconciliation, partnership and encouragement. In our work together: may the boldness of your Spirit transform us, the gentleness of your Spirit lead us, the gifts of your Spirit equip us, to serve and worship you now and always. Amen.

Almighty and eternal God, to whom we must all give account: guide with your Spirit our chaplaincy and this Diocese in Europe, that we may be faithful to the mind of Christ and seek in all our purposes to enrich our common life; through Jesus Christ your Son our Lord, who is alive and reigns with you, in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. Amen.

Further resources

The following three books focus specifically on the role of a churchwarden, exploring different aspects. Obviously, they are written primarily for an English context:

Martin Dudley and Virginia Rounding, *Churchwardens, A Survival Guide* (SPCK, Revised edition, 2009). This has more of an 'official' feel.

Matthew Clements, *Rotas, Rules and Rectors* (Matador, 2018). This has more of a 'personal' feel drawing on the experience of the author as a churchwarden.

James Behrens, *Practical Church Management: A Guide for Every Parish* (Gracewing, 3rd edition, 2014) has a good chapter on the role of churchwardens, as well as exploring other aspects of church management.

Some official documents that it is important for churchwardens to be familiar with:

- The [Church Representation Rules](#) of the Church of England Church
- The Diocese in Europe Constitution
- The Church of England [Canon E1](#) that relates to churchwardens
- The [Churchwardens Measure 2001](#)

Churchwarden publications produce an annual Churchwardens' Yearbook which 'is specifically designed to assist churchwardens ... with their duties throughout the church year. It includes

reference material, contact details, and a comprehensive church diary useful for those who care for churches, parish buildings or other places of worship.'

Among information about the role of churchwardens available on the websites of other Church of England dioceses, that produced by the following dioceses seemed particularly useful, either from a practical or a spiritual perspective, though bearing in mind the differences that apply in England compared with the Diocese in Europe.

- [Hereford](#)
- [Lichfield](#)
- [Coventry](#)
- [Durham](#)
- [St Peter's College](#), run by the Diocese of Sheffield, offers a two-hour online course called 'The Churchwarden toolkit'.