

Is the Church of England still wedded to the vision of the omnicompetent vicar?

The Church of England has a ‘responsibility to deploy licensed ministers with the care of souls over every part of the country’¹. Traditionally, this has been provided through a parochial system whereby one vicar has the responsibility of each parish. However, a number of changes in the nation and the church itself have meant many clergy are faced with an ever-increasing population in their parishes, a greater amount of administration and challenging financial situations, putting the structure under strain. In a large number of cases these demands are to be balanced by one person alongside the usual expectations of clergy to lead vibrant worship, expound the Word of God attractively and be present and visible in the community offering something for everybody. Additionally, there is a backdrop of a fall in the number of active clergy due to retirement and some are away from their duties because of long-term illness, thus reducing resources. In response to these changes some parishes and dioceses have introduced alternative models for ministry such as team-ministries, the training of non-stipendiary clergy and the introduction of pioneer ministers. Nevertheless, it remains that many clergy are deployed under the sole omnicompetent vicar model and also that many parishes continue to actively advertise for clergy to work within this structure, asking them to fulfil a broad range of expectations.

This research will begin with a literature review of publications which discuss the different models of ministry which can be seen in the Church of England today. As part of this literature review, particular attention will be given to the critique made of the sole omnicompetent vicar model and how other forms of ministry may offer solutions to the issues raised. The subsequent gathering of recent parish profiles from across the spectrum of churchmanship and geography of the Church of England, compiled by lay church representatives in their search for a new vicar, will highlight the model of ministry which is most popular amongst parishes as well as the expectations made of the individual appointed to the position. Consideration of these profiles in light of the questions raised in the literature review will then illuminate the model of ministry which remains widely present in Anglican parishes despite the information available rejecting this model.

Under the leadership of the Archbishop of York, the Church of England is currently in the process of developing a vision for the next decade. Although this is still being formed, the outline has been published and is hoping to grow a church which is ‘Christ centred and Jesus shaped. Simpler, humbler, bolder’², an endeavour which suggests change that is likely to require more of clergy and most probably involve new parochial initiatives which clergy will be expected to lead. If the Church of England wish to move forward with the development of a vision such as this, then it may need to consider who will be required to realise it in the parishes and whether this is possible with the model of ministry illuminated as being present in a large portion of these places. Therefore, this research will test the claim that a model for ministry which is widely understood to be unfit for implementing such a strategy remains deeply embedded in the Church of England.

The report compiled as part of this research will be seen by the National Ministry Team in Church House, Westminster who are responsible for administration relating to the selection and training of those who wish to enter public ministry. The research may therefore have a direct impact on deliberations by this team and could prove useful for those who are forming the vision for the Church of England discussed above. Should the research support the hypothesis that the widely critiqued sole

¹ The Church Commissioners for England, *From Anecdote to Evidence: Findings from the Church Growth Research Programme 2011-2013* (Research Report) <https://www.churchofengland.org/sites/default/files/2019-06/from_anecdote_to_evidence_-_the_report.pdf> (accessed 7 January 2021).

² Cottrell, Stephen, *A Vision for the Church of England in the 2020s, ‘Christ centred and Jesus Shaped. Simpler, humbler, bolder’* (The Church of England, 2020) <<https://www.churchofengland.org/sites/default/files/2020-12/A%20vision%20for%20the%20church%20of%20England%20in%20the%202020s%20-%20commentary%20by%20Stephen%20Cottrell.pdf>> (accessed 12 January 2021)

omnicompetent vicar model remains widespread in the Church of England and that more effective models for ministry have been developed which could be implemented in parishes, then some possible ways forward for vacant parishes could be suggested. These resources could be made available to both parishes and dioceses, offering information to those on all levels of the Church structure. There are also opportunities for further research from the basis of this study which could look at how the implementation of the alternative models of ministry may work in practice and how a move away from the sole, omnicompetent vicar model could lead to more fruitful growth.