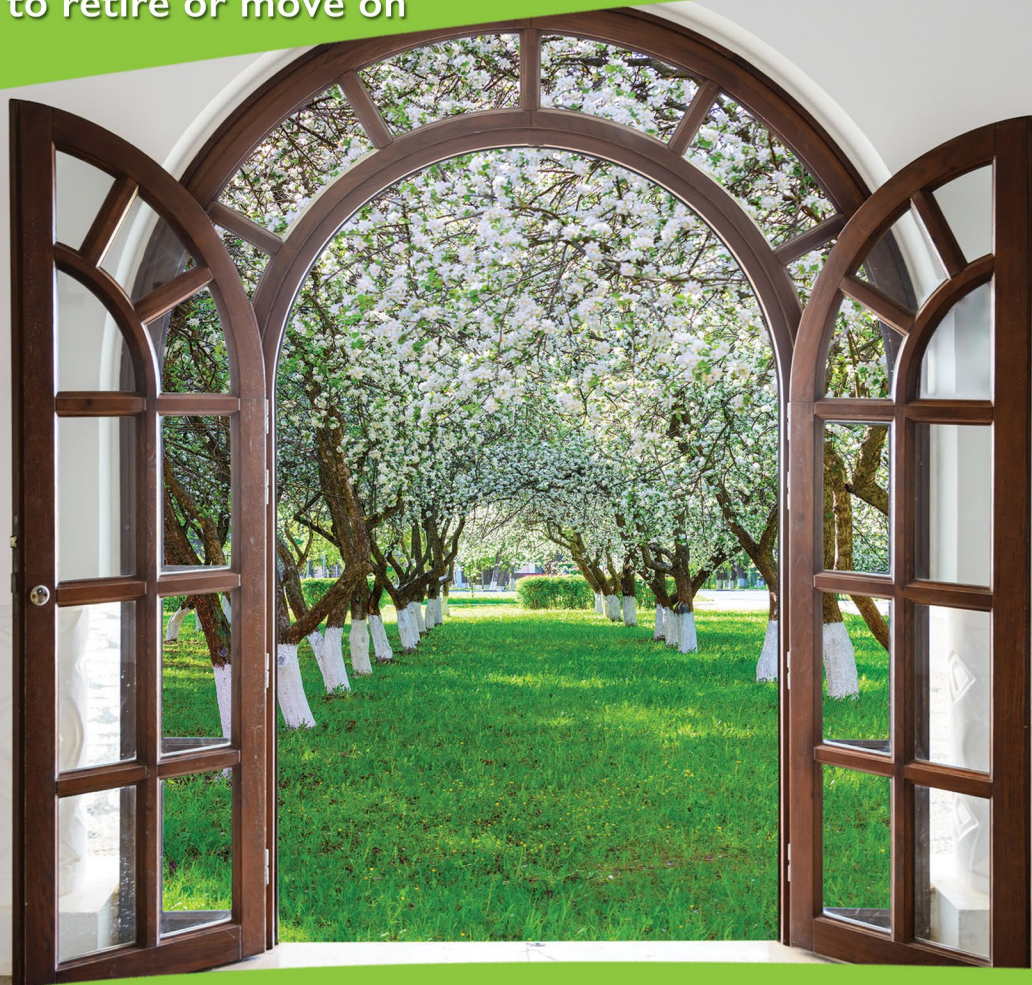


# Preparing for a Vacancy



Guidance for those situations where a minister  
or pastor of a Congregational Church is preparing  
to retire or move on



**Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find;  
knock and the door will be opened to you.  
(Matthew 7:7)  
(NIV)**

This pamphlet is offered as a resource for supporting ministers\*, churches and Areas. We understand that this is a complex topic, and that the contents of this pamphlet are insufficient to address the issue completely. However, it is important that no minister, church or Area affected by such a crisis should try to address it in isolation. Help and support are available from within the Congregational Federation (CF).



## Introduction

2 Ministers leave churches for a variety of reasons, having served them for varying numbers of years. They may be retiring after a lifetime of work both within and without the church, they may be called to move on to another church or to another type of ministry altogether.

Some ministers are full time and an increasing number are part time, either because they are also employed elsewhere, or because they have actually retired. Even among part time ministers there can be a range of percentages of a full time role. As well as this, some ministers are employed by their churches, with a salary, whereas others serve in a purely voluntary capacity.

All of the above means that the impact of a minister stepping down from her/his role as minister of a church may differ from church to church. However, there will always be an impact, and our hope is that this pamphlet can help churches to manage the process of discerning God's will for the next stage in the church's life.

Although the focus here is on the implications and possibilities for the church, we shall also consider some good practice for Areas to consider.

## Being without a Minister

Of course, to state the obvious, your church will be without a minister during the vacancy period. Various legitimate needs of the church, usually provided by the minister, will now need to be met in other ways.

There may also be some useful advice and suggestions that could be applied to your vacancy context in our sister pamphlet entitled, 'A Crisis for the Minister'.

\* For the sake of brevity the pamphlet refers only to 'ministers'. However, it includes locally recognised 'pastors' every bit as much.

## Be Realistic

It is vital to be realistic about the church's needs and what it can provide. We encourage you to be honest about your expectations, both as you place them on yourself, and also as you may feel they are placed on you by circumstances and by others who are not members of the church, but who are part of the community where you worship and serve.

Take time to think and pray through the process that we outline in this pamphlet; clarify what you want the minister to do in and for your church; what is a realistic time frame for you to carry out this process effectively.

NB You are not on your own in all this. There are human and other resources available for you. These include the CF General Secretary, the Area Chair, the Area Pastoral Care Coordinator, and the CF Learning & Development Manager. Ideally, you should ensure that the Area Chair is informed when you have a vacancy coming, as she/he can help with a range of support within the Area.

We also have a detailed flow chart which you can use as you move through this process, and we will mention that again later. There is also a good CPAS Booklet which we recommend to you.

Give yourselves sufficient time to digest the situation and its consequences before allowing anyone to make decisions. Rushing in with ideas which might later prove unrealistic is not helpful.

## Decisions for the Church – what should you do at first?

Once the vacancy has been confirmed, the church officers will need time to digest the situation before making any decisions. We recommend that you take a week or two to think and pray about the situation, before beginning to make decisions.

Prayer is vital from the very start and all through the process; keep this as a priority. Invite two or three committed and faithful people to form a prayer group who will pray specifically for and through this process. But encourage the whole church to be praying regularly as well.

The church is likely to have legal, moral and spiritual responsibilities towards its ministers, including both the one who is leaving and the one who will hopefully be coming to the church. Each of these elements needs to be explored.

In addressing the legal responsibilities, we strongly advise consulting the CF's General Secretary for guidance at a very early stage.

## Decisions for the church – what should you consider next?

Exploring the broader dimensions of what is required, expected or hoped for in a new minister is something a church should be able to manage. However, inviting an experienced CF minister to act as a facilitator might help, not least in being able to act as a critical friend regarding your expectations of a minister and what expectations a new minister may have of you. It is generally advisable not to have the retiring minister involved in this process.

4 In this time of reflection it is good to think proactively about real life situations that may arise for the church, rather than waiting to react if something arises. (e.g. what would your church response be to a request for a same sex marriage?)

You will be considering matters around leading regular and special worship services, preaching and teaching, pastoral commitment to church members and adherents, local and global mission involvement, ecumenical involvement, youth and children's work, etc.

There will be considerations about practical, legal and financial matters such as whether you want a full time or a part time minister; will this be a paid or unpaid post, would you prefer a minister with a family, is there a manse available, are there local amenities for a family, are you ready to arrange the required DBS / PVG approval?

Would you be interested in the possibility of sharing a minister with another, relatively close church, if that applies?

Responding well as a church to a vacancy situation is also an opportunity for spiritual growth and development within the church. How could God develop the church in this situation? Consider using the process to include training and equipping people from within the church for new responsibilities, recognising their gifts and commitment.

Again, be realistic - and caring. Consider carefully not only your expectations of a new minister but also the willingness and capacity of your church members to be involved in service and worship in the whole life of the church.

## Decisions for the church – what should you do as you move forward?

There is a process that most churches go through, at least in broad outline. While there may well be aspects of this that wouldn't fit perfectly in your own situation, the general process is well worth considering as you make plans for what you are going to do as you move forward.

A full process chart that leads you through this general process is available from the CF General Secretary. It is called, 'The Vacancy Process'. The main stages of this general process are outlined here for you to consider before you look at any other material.



- ➡ Form a specific prayer group
- ➡ Call a Church Meeting to appoint an Interim Process Team to lead in the very early stages
  - Among other things, this team will be considering how the church will function and be cared for during the vacancy (e.g. the deacons and/or elders, an interim retired minister, oversight by the Area Pastoral Care Coordinator)
- \* The team will also be working towards proposing a permanent Process Team to the Church Meeting. The permanent team will oversee what follows.

- ➡ Prepare a Church Profile
- ➡ Arrange a Vision Day / Half Day for coming together as a church to pray through, discuss and either create (if there is none) or revisit the church's Vision Statement.
- ➡ Create a Job Description (based, in large part, on the Church Profile and Vision Statement)
- ➡ Create a Person Specification (based on the Church Profile, the Vision Statement and the Job Description)



- ➡ Arrange a special Church Meeting to discuss and approve the documents above, and to consider the process to date
- ➡ Create an application form
  - Decide if you want documents other than the form itself
- ➡ Establish an interview process
  - This needs to include the administration of telephone, email and postal enquiries
- ➡ Create an advert
- ➡ Advertise the post

- ➡ Short list the applicants
- ➡ Conduct the interviews
  - Will it include a presentation of some sort?
  - Preaching?
  - Leading a Bible study session?
  - Leading a session with children or teenagers?
  - Addressing a special Church Meeting?
- ➡ Invite one applicant to preach with a view
  - Write to all those who were interviewed
- ➡ Arrange a special Church Meeting to decide on the person who preached with a view

## What will happen next?

Depending on the outcome of the special Church Meeting, you will either be inviting the person to become your minister, or you will be approaching another of the applicants or starting the process again.

If you have decided to invite the person to become your minister, then the following process will follow.

- ➡ Draw up an employment contract for both the church and the person to consider and agree on.
  - It may be prudent to seek advice from the CF General Secretary about this.
- ➡ In due course, arrange an Induction (and Ordination?) Service



# Useful Resources

- The Church Support department of the CF has produced a sister pamphlet entitled, A Crisis for the Minister. Although this deals with the issues when a minister is not able to fulfil her/his responsibilities, some of the general matters may also be helpful to a church in the case of a vacancy situation.
- The Church Pastoral Aid Society has produced a very helpful and readable handbook entitled, Growing Through a Vacancy. This handbook, written by Bob Jackson, was published in 2013.
- The Church Support department of the CF has produced a Flow Chart which can act as a useful checklist of things to keep in mind and can also provide guidance on helpful ways to sequence the various tasks and responsibilities involved in a vacancy situation.
- The Church Support department of the CF has produced a Profile for Ministerial Candidates which can be sent to candidates by a church as a complement to their CVs. It can be adapted by each church.

# Keep in Touch

Keep in touch with the opportunities for ongoing support and development that are provided through the church support department of the Congregational Federation.

If you have any questions or comments regarding this, please contact:

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