

LLM Ministry in a Vacancy

Information for Licensed Lay Ministers going into, or currently in, a parish vacancy

This document is for Licensed Lay Ministers (LLMs) whose parish is going into a vacancy or is already in one. It draws together the key information shared with parishes in vacancy and is intended to be a practical, pastorally grounded guide rather than a full legal handbook.

Vacancies can be demanding, but they are also times when the opportunity for shared ministry deepens. LLMs are not there to fill the gap left by the incumbent, but to exercise their own ministry faithfully as part of the wider body of Christ.

The one take-home message

Your ministry matters, but you are not here to carry the parish alone.

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1. Understanding a vacancy

A vacancy is the period when a parish is without an incumbent or priest-in-charge. Parish life does not stop during this period. Worship, mission, pastoral care, safeguarding, communication and governance all continue, although they may need to be carried out in a different way.

Chester guidance suggests that the likely length of a vacancy is around nine months, though some are shorter and others longer. A vacancy has two broad parts: the search and appointment process, and the time between appointment and the new priest beginning their ministry.

- Regular worship and seasonal services continue.
- Pastoral care, welcome and communication continue.
- Safeguarding and safer church responsibilities continue.
- PCC meetings and parish governance continue.
- The parish begins the process of discerning the next appointment.

Where this comes from: Running a Parish in a Vacancy, pp. 3-4; Vacancy Pack, p. 1.

2. Who holds responsibility

Responsibility shifts; it does not disappear. During a vacancy, the churchwardens work with the Rural Dean. Together, they are described in Chester guidance as the sequestrators. The Rural Dean acts in oversight, helps the churchwardens discharge their duties, offers advice and provides helpful contacts.

Important distinction

LLMs do not take on the tasks or role of the incumbent. The Churchwardens and the Rural Dean hold responsibility for the life and work of the church during the vacancy, but they should not be left to carry the full burden alone. A healthy vacancy depends on collaboration and shared ministry.

Where this comes from: Running a Parish in a Vacancy, pp. 3 and 5.

3. Where LLMs fit

Readers and other lay ministers are explicitly envisaged as part of ministry during a vacancy. This may include worship, preaching, pastoral care, welcome, communication and continuity; all according to local role, gifting, authorisation, availability and capacity.

What this means for LLMs

- Your licensed lay ministry continues during the vacancy.
- You may be invited to help with service cover, preaching, pastoral care or continuity.
- You should be included in relevant planning where your ministry is affected.
- You are part of shared ministry, not an emergency substitute incumbent.

Where this comes from: Running a Parish in a Vacancy says Readers should be included in the early service-cover planning meeting where applicable, p. 5, and that support for people in leadership roles should be considered, p. 8.

4. Good practice during the vacancy

The most important practical principle is that arrangements should be planned, communicated and reviewed collaboratively, with churchwardens taking the lead, supported by LLMs and others.

Before or at the start of the vacancy

- Take part in conversations about service cover, which will be led by churchwardens, ideally as soon as possible after vacancy is announced.
- This will include, where relevant, the outgoing priest, Rural Dean, churchwardens, assistant clergy or curate, and Readers in the parish.
- Co-operate with churchwardens as they plan service cover for the first few months.
- Clarify with churchwardens how visiting clergy and Readers will be briefed: readings, hymns, service type, expectations and practical details.
- Agree with churchwardens how pastoral care, welcome, home communions and occasional offices will be coordinated.
- Agree how members of the church with leadership or ministry roles will be supported.

During the vacancy

- With churchwardens, review arrangements with the Rural Dean as required.
- Ask whether the pattern of worship, pastoral care and overall parish activity is sustainable.
- Notice whether people feel over-used or under-used.
- With churchwardens, consult the Rural Dean or Archdeacon before major changes.
- Use outside help where needed, including the Ministry Team and others at Church House.

Where this comes from: Running a Parish in a Vacancy, pp. 5-9; Vacancy Support leaflet, pp. 2-6.

Please note that communion by extension is not authorised as a means of providing regular Sunday communion during a vacancy and should not be used.

5. Healthy boundaries and sustainability

Boundaries are not selfish. They protect ministry, relationships and wellbeing. A vacancy can expose where ministry has not been sufficiently shared, and where too much depends on too few people.

Good practice

- Additional responsibility is discussed and agreed.
- Roles are clear and realistic.
- Support is named at the start.
- Arrangements are reviewed if they stop working.
- It is possible to say when a pattern is not sustainable.

Poor practice

- LLMs are assumed to run the parish.
- Workload quietly falls onto a few people.
- Clergy-shaped responsibility is carried without clarity, accountability or support.
- People are over-used or under-used and no review happens.
- Employment, governance or safeguarding matters are improvised or ignored.

If work with paid staff arises

Do not improvise employment arrangements. Parishes should identify who will take responsibility for employees, and the Vacancy Support leaflet points to HR advice on PCC employees. LLMs should not be left to carry unclear management responsibilities by drift or assumption.

Where this comes from: Running a Parish in a Vacancy, pp. 4 and 8-9; Vacancy Support leaflet, p. 6.

6. The appointment process and Parish Profile

The appointment of a new incumbent or priest-in-charge is a prayerful, consultative and legally framed process. Three parties are involved: the Bishop (who delegates some responsibilities to the Archdeacon), the Patron and the Parish Representatives, who act on behalf of the PCC.

The Parish Profile is one of the main places where the reality of ministry in the parish is named. It should give a realistic picture of the parish, including leadership, traditions, current life and future hopes. If LLM ministry is significant in the parish, good practice is to describe it honestly and clearly.

- The PCC appoints two lay PCC members as Parish Representatives.
- They act on behalf of the PCC in the appointment process.
- They do not have to be churchwardens.
- They must complete the required safeguarding training modules.
- The parish has a real voice but does not control the whole process.

Can an LLM be a Parish Representative?

This depends on the type of licensed lay ministry involved.

Section 11(3)(b) of the Patronage (Benefices) Measure 1986 states that a deaconess or lay worker licensed to the parish cannot be appointed as a Parish Representative. This will apply to licensed as lay workers under Canon E7, including Pastoral Workers.

The Measure does not contain the same exclusion for Readers. A Reader who is a lay member of the PCC may therefore be eligible to serve as a Parish Representative, provided the PCC considers them able to represent the wider parish and to observe the necessary confidentiality.

Where there is any uncertainty about an individual's legal status or eligibility, advice should be sought from the Archdeacon.

Where this comes from: Vacancy Pack, pp. 1 and 4-6; Parish Vacancy Process Checklist, pp. 1-2; Section 11 PCC Agenda.

Meeting candidates

Meeting candidates can be helpful where appropriate, but it is not automatic or guaranteed. The Vacancy Pack says that if there are assistant clergy and/or lay workers, the Bishop or Archdeacon, Patron and Parish Representatives will decide if and how to involve them. If ministry team members are invited to speak informally with candidates, this is not part of the interview process.

Confidentiality matters

- Candidates may not have told their own churchwardens or colleagues that they are applying.
- Informal involvement is not part of the interview process.
- Boundaries protect candidates, parishes and ministry teams.

Where this comes from: Vacancy Pack, p. 12.

7. Transition to a new incumbent

A line to hold

A new incumbent is not a return to what was; it is the beginning of a new shared ministry.

There may be a gap between an appointment being made and the new priest arriving. Further legal and safeguarding processes may still be needed, announcements must be coordinated carefully, and a priest may need three or four months before taking up the post.

This period can feel slow, but it matters. It is a time to prepare well, communicate carefully, support churchwardens and parish officers, and think about what needs to be handed on when the new incumbent arrives.

Where this comes from: Vacancy Pack, pp. 14-15; Running a Parish in a Vacancy, p. 15.

The induction or licensing service

The induction or licensing service is a visible moment of welcome, continuity and beginning. Local custom matters, and there will be variation. Chester guidance includes Readers in the deanery among those invited to robe where appropriate and includes assistant clergy and Readers of the parish in some practical arrangements, such as rehearsal, seating and procession depending on local practice and agreement.

Where this comes from: Running a Parish in a Vacancy, pp. 18-20.

The first months

There is no formal Chester six-month LLM review process in the vacancy materials used for the training. However, the first few months are critical because trust, expectations, communication and patterns of ministry are being formed.

What helps

- Be honest about what has been held during the vacancy.
- Give the new incumbent space to learn and lead.
- Keep communication regular and specific.
- Use support early if expectations become unclear.
- Find somewhere away from the parish to process your own feelings about the transition: a spiritual director or similarly supportive relationship.
- Revise your Ministry Agreement in conversation with the new incumbent... and be ready to revise it again as things evolve!

What to avoid

- Dropping everything immediately.
- Holding onto every temporary responsibility indefinitely.
- Assuming the new incumbent already understands the parish's LLM ministry.
- Letting disappointment harden into resentment.
- Letting anxiety lead to gossip or conflict.

Where this comes from: Running a Parish in a Vacancy, p. 15; Vacancy Support leaflet, pp. 2-6.

8. If things feel difficult

It is normal for transition to feel uncomfortable and uncertain. However, if things feel unusually difficult, then do not sit on concerns and hope they resolve by themselves. Ask for a conversation early where that is possible and safe. Start with the person or local structure closest to the issue and use wider support when needed.

Use support early if:

- you feel over-used, under-used, unclear or unsupported
- you are being asked to carry responsibilities that feel beyond your role or capacity
- communication with churchwardens, the Rural Dean, ministry colleagues or the new incumbent is becoming strained
- there are concerns about safeguarding, HR, finance, property or governance
- the vacancy has exposed unhealthy culture or conflict

Safeguarding

If a concern involves safeguarding, use safeguarding routes immediately. Do not wait for a vacancy review meeting or an informal conversation if immediate safeguarding action is needed.

Where this comes from: Vacancy Support leaflet, pp. 2-6; Running a Parish in a Vacancy, pp. 8-9 and p. 15.

9. Support routes

Who	What they can help with	When to use
Churchwardens	Local coordination and parish arrangements	Practical questions about services, rotas, communication, governance
Rural Dean	Oversight during the vacancy and advice to Churchwardens	Role clarity, sustainability, major changes, concerns beyond the local level
LLM Hub Facilitator	Peer support and LLM perspective	When you need someone who knows you, and understands Licensed Lay Ministry
Bishop's Adviser for LLMs	Diocesan support for LLM ministry	More serious or unresolved issues, questions about licensing or role
Archdeacon / Church House	HR, Safeguarding, Finance, DAC, Registry, Outreach,	Where specialist advice or escalation is needed

teams	Ministry	
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Where this comes from: Vacancy Support leaflet, pp. 2-6; Running a Parish in a Vacancy, p. 4.

10. Questions to ask early

When the vacancy begins

- What is my existing ministry agreement or usual pattern of ministry?
- What, if anything, am I being asked to do differently during the vacancy?
- Is this realistic and sustainable for me?
- Who is coordinating worship, pastoral care, communication and occasional offices?
- Who do I speak to if the arrangement stops working?
- When will we review this?

When the new incumbent arrives

- What have I been holding during the vacancy?
- What needs to be handed on, continued, paused or reshaped?
- What does the new incumbent need to understand about LLM ministry here?
- What do I need to understand about the new incumbent's hopes and priorities?
- When will we check in again?
- How and when will we review my Ministry Agreement?

11. Key terms and formal process points

Sequestrators

The churchwardens working with the Rural Dean during the vacancy. They take responsibility for the life and work of the church during this period.

Pre-Section 11 Meeting

The Archdeacon will meet with the PCC to explain the appointment process, advise on the Parish Profile and explain in detail the requirements of the Section 11 meeting.

Section 11 meeting

A special PCC meeting to appoint Parish Representatives and make formal decisions about the vacancy process, including the Parish Profile and whether to request advertising.

Parish Representatives

Two lay PCC members appointed to act on behalf of the PCC in the appointment process. They do not have to be churchwardens.

Parish Profile

The parish's realistic description of its life, needs, traditions, hopes and role description for the next incumbent.

Where this comes from: Vacancy Pack, pp. 4-10 and Section 11 Agenda; Parish Vacancy Process Checklist, pp. 1-4; Running a Parish in a Vacancy, pp. 16-17.

12. Source reference list

The following local sources were used to prepare this document. They are included so that LLMs and parish leaders can see where the guidance is grounded. These documents are available on the diocesan website [here](#).

- **Vacancies can bring insecurity and tension, but also opportunity:** Running a Parish in a Vacancy, pp. 3-4; Vacancy Support leaflet, p. 2
- **Likely length of vacancy around nine months:** Running a Parish in a Vacancy, pp. 3 and 16
- **Churchwardens and Rural Dean are sequestrators:** Running a Parish in a Vacancy, p. 3
- **Rural Dean has oversight and advises churchwardens:** Running a Parish in a Vacancy, p. 5
- **Readers should be included in early service-cover planning where applicable:** Running a Parish in a Vacancy, p. 5
- **Support for leaders, pastoral care, communication and employees should be planned:** Running a Parish in a Vacancy, pp. 6-8
- **Arrangements should be reviewed during the vacancy:** Running a Parish in a Vacancy, pp. 8-9
- **Vacancy Resource Group and Church House support available:** Vacancy Support leaflet, pp. 2-6
- **Appointment process involves Bishop, Patron and Parish Representatives:** Vacancy Pack, p. 1
- **Parish Profile describes the parish and future ministry needs:** Vacancy Pack, pp. 4-5
- **Parish Representatives are two lay PCC members and need not be churchwardens:** Vacancy Pack, p. 5; Parish Vacancy Process Checklist, p. 1
- **Parish representatives require safeguarding modules:** Vacancy Pack, p. 6; Running a Parish in a Vacancy, pp. 16-17
- **Assistant clergy and lay ministers may be involved in candidate visits if agreed:** Vacancy Pack, p. 12
- **New priest will be different and needs support, sensitivity and space for prayer, study and reflection:** Running a Parish in a Vacancy, p. 15
- **Readers may be included in induction/licensing arrangements depending on space, custom and agreement:** Running a Parish in a Vacancy, pp. 18-20
- **Fees must not be paid to Readers; expenses should be offered:** Running a Parish in a Vacancy, pp. 23-24

Closing reminder

Vacancies do not suspend ministry; they reveal how shared our ministry really is. LLMs have a significant part to play, but you are not expected to carry the parish alone.

If in doubt, email ministry@chester.anglican.org and we'll signpost you to the right place.