



ARCHDEACONRY OF OAKHAM

THE ARCHDEACON'S CHARGE

TO

CHURCHWARDENS

2024

I have to confess, 3 years into being an Archdeacon and the admitting of Churchwardens is one of my favourite parts of the role!

I get to say Thank you.

Thank you on behalf of the Bishop, you are her officers. Thank you on behalf of the Clergy you work alongside and have a key role in supporting.

Thank you on behalf of the congregations you serve.

Thank you on behalf of the wider community.

Thank you (especially) if you are or have been in Vacancy, as Archdeacons particularly, we really value what you do in a Vacancy both as part of the appointment process often and in stepping into that local leadership role alongside the Rural Dean.

That's 6 times but in the Bible the number 7 is better one – so finally, and genuinely, Thank you!

Churchwardens are, as anyone who is at an admitting for the first time will now have gathered, key to our Church communities.

You as Churchwardens alongside the Clergy, Lay ministers, PCC and Congregation members seek to serve our wider communities in our mission to be the Light of Christ in the places we find ourselves.

What does that look like though? What does it mean to be the Light of Christ in our place? How is that relevant to being a Churchwarden?

Our readings today give us a way of exploring that a little more.

Psalm 84 begins with a focus on the dwelling place of God, in the Old Testament that might be the Ark of the Covenant, a Tent or the Temple, for us as we follow Christ we think about the dwelling place of God as being among us, either as individuals where we may speak of God in our hearts or as a community where we think of our Churches, the people and the building, as being the place where God dwells, where we gather and know we are in the presence of God.

As the psalmist says in verse 4 "Happy are those who live in your house, ever singing your praise" – there is a purpose to our care for the building, our Church building is the home of God's people, the House of God, the place we cherish – in much the same way our own house is more than just a building, it is a home, shaped by the people who belong there and it in turn shapes them.

Our churches are houses of prayer, Churchwardens are often like the 'doorkeeper' of verse 10 and that might feel unimportant but as it notes a single day in God's presence 'is better than a thousand elsewhere' you as Churchwardens not only know this for yourselves but are key in holding the space for others to know this. Caring for the Church building and the Church community is an important part of the role of a Churchwarden, it is a responsibility to be the person people encounter and who embodies the presence of God, the Light of Christ, in that place.

Churchwardens carry this responsibility but they do not carry it alone, Churchwardens work with the Incumbent but also with the PCC, often with Deputy Wardens or a Fabric committee, the work of God's kingdom is a work undertaken in community and the reading from Acts, the story of the early church, holds a picture of what that might look like for us.

We are a community who break bread and pray together. This can take many forms, the obvious is of course Holy Communion, the breaking of bread, and this is really important Churchwardens are responsible for making sure that the bread and wine is there for the Priest to preside (it doesn't mean they have to do it all) as with many ministries the role of Churchwarden is often to be the key person in a team of people who undertake what is needed.

As a church community we pray together, Churchwardens are, by virtue of their office, able to lead Morning or Evening Prayer, you may have done this many times or it may be something completely new to you, but again your Incumbent or if you are in vacancy your Rural Dean are there to support you and help with training in this.

Prayer isn't only the public services though, as part of the responsibility of being a Churchwarden I encourage you to pray daily for your church community, for the wider benefice community, for your Rural Dean and Lay Chair, your Archdeacon and our Bishops, just as we pray for you as Churchwardens.

I have to say that although this picture of the early church in Acts is wonderful it is also challenging! The most challenging part is, I believe, verse 44 and 45. Luke paints for us a picture of a community who 'had all things in common' who would 'sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds' it is not something that remained a part of every church community through history. Those who belong to religious orders, particularly those like the Franciscans continue to do this literally, small communities of people have, over the years, followed this example literally, but in our parish churches where you as Churchwardens have particular responsibility it is not literally our practice.

Does that mean we can ignore these two verses? Tempting though that might be I would suggest not, we may not sell all the possessions we individually own and give them away, but we can take seriously this idea of sharing financial resources.

As a village vicar, with a Benefice of 5, I was involved in those conversations, each parish had its own financial resources but as a Benefice we paid the share, we noticed when the building in one place was becoming a financial burden and over time, through strong relationships, and in no small part down to the commitment of the Churchwardens, to one another across the Benefice, we shared the resources we had by giving to those in particular need at a particular time.

Sometimes PCC's could give financially by contributing a little more of the share, sometimes they gave in terms of people resources, always we prayed for one another because we were one particular part of the family (that stretches out beyond the Benefice to Deanery, Diocese and beyond) it grew over time but it was a privilege to be the Vicar in a team of people who had 'glad and generous hearts' just as it is now a privilege to be the Archdeacon among Churchwardens and Clergy of the Peterborough Diocese who also have those 'glad and generous hearts'.

The last verse of the reading we heard from Acts tonight sums everything up beautifully, together we are a community which needs to:

Praise God

Have the goodwill of the people.

See others come to know the love of God in Jesus.

As we work together in our Parish and Benefice teams, with your Incumbent (or the hope of an Incumbent if you are in Vacancy) and your Rural Dean we are also part of a wider Diocesan family.

You may not be surprised to know that I am often in conversation with someone when they say 'The Diocese' of course I know what they mean in the context of that conversation and it can be many different things, but it is also true that 'The Diocese' includes all of us.

The Diocese is led by the Bishop and she in turn delegates or shares responsibility to others including sharing the Cure of Souls to Incumbents and entrusting to her officers, including Churchwardens, their particular responsibilities.

This is not something anyone does alone. As well as those based in parishes and benefices there are individuals whose role is to serve the whole Diocese. We are blessed with a team of people who resource our parishes, Pete, Charlotte and Chad support work with Children and Young People particularly the Growing Faith adventure that seeks to link Church, School and Home. Charlie, Roger and Dave who support parishes in developing mission. Paul and Pete working with parishes on generous giving and Haydon whose team are responsible for helping those considering ministry of any kind and for the training of lay ministers and curates.

We have a DAC whose role is to work with parishes on the development of their buildings, I know this can be an endeavour which is fraught with difficulty and frustration but it is worth it when we can see development of our buildings that help in our mission. Sally is retiring and so will no longer be DAC secretary, you will have noticed that Emily is now communicating with parishes after the DAC meetings and we will be seeking to appoint a new DAC secretary (as you know this is a work that needs two people in order to get you the information out in a timely and helpful manner) please pray for that very important appointment.

We have a Diocesan Safeguarding Officer, this year we appointed a new DSO Victoria Kellett who supports Incumbents and Safeguarding officers in parishes but she is there for Churchwardens too, I'm aware that, particularly in vacancy, it can often be Churchwardens who deal with some of this tricky situations.

We know how important our buildings are in the mission of the church, in having the goodwill of the people of our wider parishes (even those who don't come weekly or even monthly to worship) and I would say that taking Safeguarding seriously and making sure we have the contact details of someone that people can talk to either PSO or DSO is also part of being a community that has the goodwill of the people.

Caring for our community, keeping everyone safe is vital if we are to communicate the love of God to others, many people need to know, and see, that this is a safe space so that they can explore that love of God for themselves.

So often this has been seen as a 'tick box' exercise and although it is important to have the posters up and the policies in place that is not enough on its own.

Churchwardens, as key leaders in the church community, are responsible with others for creating a culture that allows those safe spaces to exist.

A culture which values every person, that demonstrates that value by listening, encouraging questions, making decisions collaboratively and being willing to change. This way of being the church community reflects what we see in the Gospels, Jesus welcomed the least and the lost, Jesus listened to those that others avoided, those regarded as 'unclean' or who behaved in ways considered 'not proper' or 'different' and spoke God's love into those situations so lives were turned around and generosity flourished.

This is the work of God's realm. This is what we mean when we pray 'thy Kingdom come' and this is something we do together. Amen.

It is once more a privilege to be with you at this very special service, we gather to admit to office those highly valued individuals who offer themselves for service, perhaps for the first time or yet again for so many years, or again after a break, whatever the situation for you, as Bishops officers you are called to work with one another, Incumbents and Rural Dean in this important ministry.

So if I can now ask all of the Churchwardens to stand....

Together please will you make the declaration as it is in our service sheet....