



ARCHDEACONRY OF OAKHAM

**THE ARCHDEACON'S CHARGE
TO
CHURCHWARDENS**

2026

As you know, if you have been to one of these before, admitting of Churchwardens is one of my favourite parts of being an Archdeacon!

As usual I make no apology for always beginning the same way.... THANK YOU! Thank you to all of you who have served as Churchwarden in this last year and those of you who have been willing to do so again this year. It is a vital role within the church and we are very grateful.

The office of Churchwarden is one which is high in accountability, and with good reason, Churchwardens often represent their congregations to the Archdeacon and the Bishop. Churchwardens represent the church to the wider community. Churchwardens are key members of the Christian family in each of our places.

Having heard our Bible reading you might wonder why we have chosen that reading from Acts... you will be glad to know it is not a warning about violent hands aimed at Churchwardens – although some of you will know that in representing church you have found yourself the object of upset and complaint about 'the church'.

It is not this part of the reading I want to focus on but instead the members of the early church and their experience of God at work.... What might this say to us? How might it help us as we work together in 2026 and beyond?

We hear the story of Peter, who has been imprisoned for his faith, he is facing a very unpleasant day, I am therefore amazed that verse 6 says he was sleeping!

Peter manages to sleep despite what he faces. It's no wonder that when he's woken by an angel, his chains fell off and he walks out of the prison, he thinks it is a dream!

Yet when he finds himself outside the city Peter realises that it is real, God has rescued him and so he heads straight to church.

Peter goes to Mary's house (Mark's mum). Rhoda, the servant girl, comes to the outer gate and is so amazed and delighted to see Peter she runs off to tell the others (without letting him in) it takes Peter quite a lot more knocking before he finally is let in and can tell his story.

I love this, it is a little slice of ordinary life, how many of you have been known as 'so and so's Mum, or Dad' or the 'daughter' or 'son' of so and so. As human beings we are often known and referred to in relation to others.

In church that is no different, we are a family, we belong together whether that is human relations or parishes relating to others in the benefice, we are not isolated individuals and it is often the churchwardens who hold those connections strongly.

As Churchwardens you have responsibility for the family home, the spiritual home, the church.

It is part of a Churchwarden's role to open those gates and let in people who are returning or those who have never before stepped foot in a church.

The responsibilities of churchwardens are often expressed practically in the provision of bread and wine, the responsibility to ensure the furniture of the church is in place, to hold the financial responsibility in a vacancy (although not necessarily to do it) Churchwardens are those who hold together the church community, calling all to gather in worship.

Churchwardens have a responsibility to hold a safe space for others.

There is a practical and physical safety requirement which finds its expression in the care of the building, the Quinquennial inspection, the inventory of property the repair of the building. Your care in this keeps the building itself well maintained and safe so that people can come to 'seek the lord' as our first reading from Isaiah put it, without fear of a collapsing roof or floor. The gutters and downpipes might seem uninteresting, even boring, yet they are part of the architecture that keeps this building safe and standing.

There is a communal safety requirement which finds its expression in what we commonly call safeguarding. Churchwardens have a key role in helping to create and maintain a healthy culture in the church community.

A community that holds a space for questions to be asked, that listens to the voices of all. Churchwardens are, as this service reminds us every year, in a key role. For some of you that will have a spiritual focus, for others it will be more about the buildings, for all of us safety is at the heart of what we do.

It is a position of leadership, even if you never lead a service, this is why Churchwardens undertake safeguarding training to leadership level as well as training in the practicalities of building and churchyard care.

When we hold together the safety of our places of worship, in every sense, we have the possibility of seeing what Isaiah points to at the end of that section we heard read.

The thorn is replaced by the cypress. The brier is replaced by the myrtle. Life given by God's word. Joy and peace for us as God's church and for the whole of creation. For every person and place.

When we feel inadequate or standing in a role we are not fully prepared for, we can recall the words of that Isaiah reading where God speaks and says "my thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways my ways...for as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts"

We do not have to be everything, we do not have to know everything, we can rely on God who will abundantly pardon when we return, the Lord who is always more ready to be found than we are to seek.

The picture I have when I think about this is that in this game of hide and seek where we are seeking God it is as though God is a small child. Have you ever played hide and seek with a small child? They are not really interested in hiding, they want to be found, they delight in being found, the seeking is really not difficult.

I can remember wandering around my house when my children were all under six saying "I wonder where they are..." only to find one or other of them stood up from behind the sofa yelling "I'm here" that is the kind of effort it takes to seek God! We set off into the room and God is putting all the effort into being found rather than remaining hidden.

I am delighted that as you gather to be admitted into the office of Churchwarden, that ancient and vital office in our church, you are not here alone.

We gather today as many who come to make that commitment, some for the first time and some for the... so many times you have lost count!

We gather not only Churchwardens but family and friends of Churchwardens, clergy, lay ministers and wider congregation members.

Here we are a little slice of the church community. Here we seek God. Here we long for peace and joy. Here we work together to create safer communities.

On your way in you will have had a card which gives you the details of safeguarding support, those who provide advice, those who walk alongside, those who train us. Our diocesan safeguarding team are part of the support structures. Like the drains and gutters protect the building so their work means together we protect the community. For those of you who are concerned I have already confessed to saying the safeguarding team are like drains and gutters!

Churchwardens will work with parish safeguarding officers, with clergy and lay ministers (for those of you in vacancy I do recognise how difficult it is and how much you are carrying) we are the people who gather together, like those in Mark's mum's house, we pray, we open the gates and we rejoice in what God is doing.

Churchwardens you have been elected for this year, I don't know what the year will bring, I cannot tell whether this will be your last year, your only year, another year in more than you can count or the first of very many years to come. However, just as we often take things one step at a time so we take each year as it comes.

What are you called to do this year?

It might be there is a parish priest to appoint, it might be that there is work to be done on new structures for parish life, it might be that there is a benefice wardens team to be built afresh, renewed or invested in.

Churchwardens are never alone.

If you are the only warden in your parish you may have others in the benefice.

If you are a single parish benefice and there is only you, still you belong to the diocesan family of churchwardens, all officers of the same Bishop.

Bishop Debbie I know values the service that you as Churchwardens offer, the difference you make across our diocesan family is significant.

So whether it is safeguarding training, the appointment of a new parish priest or a new church architect there will be something which will be your focus in this coming year.

In this service you will all declare your commitment to the service of Christ and the church (locally and globally) this will mean each of us expressing that commitment in a variety of ways...

Gathering together, receiving communion and praying with and for one another.

Returning to God, repenting when we make mistakes.

By our words and the way we live declaring the good news of Jesus Christ.

Praying for those who lead in our church and in the world (whoever they are) defend the weak and seek justice and peace.

In all this we are seeking Christ who dwells in our hearts through faith.

We want to be Churchwardens rooted and grounded in love, bringing forth the fruit of the Spirit... love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, gentleness, faithfulness and self-control.

These are the characteristics of all God's children but these are especially important as you discharge your Churchwardens duty.

Your patience and self control may well be tested in this office.

You may need to dig deep for kindness, goodness and gentleness amidst difficulties.

But know that in your role as Churchwarden, through your role, not despite it, you will know the love, joy and peace of God.

Trusting in God's goodness we are able to serve in faithfulness the churches where we are wardens.

It is to that vision of faith that you come this evening to make your declaration before everyone here and to hear the words that admit you to this office for the year ahead.

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....