



Church of Ireland – Parish Handbook

THE ROLE OF CHURCHWARDENS

Churchwardens have responsibilities relating to many aspects of church and graveyard. Every parish, group or union of parishes, for which there is a select vestry and a church, generally has two churchwardens.

The churchwardens are *ex officio* members of the select vestry, that is, members by virtue of holding the office of churchwarden. Chapter III of the *Church of Ireland Constitution* deals with many of the powers and duties of the role of churchwarden.

CHURCHWARDENS' APPOINTMENT

Churchwardens must be registered members of the general vestry. One churchwarden is appointed by the officiating member of the clergy in the parish (often known as the rector's or incumbent's churchwarden) and the other by the registered members of the general vestry at its Easter vestry meeting (known as the people's churchwarden).

If the office of rector's churchwarden becomes vacant then the rector appoints a replacement churchwarden. If the rector has not done so within one month, the select vestry itself may appoint someone to the position of rector's churchwarden. The select vestry appoints any replacement of people's churchwarden.

CHURCHWARDENS' DUTIES

Churchwardens must ensure proper use of church property and maintain peace and order during divine service. The Constitution of the Church of Ireland sets out that it is the duty of the churchwardens to ensure that *"the churches, chapels, church halls and churchyards under their care are not used for any common or profane purpose"* and that *"during the time of Divine Service, peace and order are maintained in the church, the church porch and churchyard, and to prevent any disturbance which may hinder the officiating member of the clergy or the congregation"*.

The specific duties of churchwardens will vary from church to church, depending on tradition and practice. Diocesan synods have the authority to define further powers and duties of churchwardens within the diocese.

RECTOR'S CHURCHWARDEN

Generally the churchwarden appointed by the officiating member of the clergy (and often known as the 'rector's churchwarden') is expected to assist in all practical matters to maintain good order during services. For example, duties may include preparing the table for communion services, assisting if anyone requests to receive the sacrament of Holy Communion in their seat, ensuring water is available at baptisms, recording the number of people present at services, ringing the bell, tidying up the church after services and so on.

PEOPLE'S CHURCHWARDEN

The churchwarden appointed by the general vestry (and often known as the 'people's churchwarden') is generally expected to assist the people attending services. For example, duties may include welcoming those arriving, ensuring visitors are shown to a seat, ensuring everyone has the right books for the service, preventing disturbances and so on.

CHURCH BUILDINGS AND GROUNDS

Practical matters which the churchwardens may look after include opening the church buildings in good time for services, arranging for heating, lights and audio visual systems to be turned on as required and updating hymn boards.

The churchwardens should regularly inspect the church buildings, grounds and graveyards and ensure, with the select vestry, that all necessary maintenance and repair work is undertaken, and that all health and safety requirements are adhered to.

Where the select vestry wishes to alter any buildings or land, they are required to gain approval of the diocese and, in the case of a protected structure or listed building, the agreement of the relevant State heritage or conservation body. A 'Consent to Alterations' form is required to be completed and is available from the RCB Property Department.

COLLECTIONS

Churchwardens usually take the collections or offering at services, or oversee the organisation and securing of the collection. It is good practice to ensure that at least two people are involved in the handling of money.

LEADING SERVICES

If no member of the clergy or reader turn up to take a service, one of the churchwardens may read Morning or Evening Prayer, as appropriate.

CIRCUMSTANCES REQUIRING CHURCHWARDENS' APPROVAL

Certain specific circumstances require the permission of the bishop and approval of the incumbent and the churchwardens. These include:

- the experimental use of services, lectionaries and catechisms which are recommended by the Liturgical Advisory Committee;
- preaching by visiting ministers of Churches not in communion with the Church of Ireland; and
- the use of churches by other Christian denominations.

Please refer to the *Constitution* Chapter I, 26 (3), and Chapter IX, 10 and 11 for full details.

SELECT VESTRY MEETING

If the incumbent or other officiating member of the clergy is unavailable to chair a select vestry meeting, then one of the churchwardens may chair the meeting in their place.

GENERAL VESTRY MEETING

If the public notice of a general vestry meeting is not signed by the incumbent or other officiating member of the clergy then it may be signed by a churchwarden (although a churchwarden has no power to call a meeting of the general vestry on his or her own authority). If the incumbent or other member of the clergy is absent from the general vestry meeting then one of the churchwardens may act as chairperson of the meeting.

STAFFS OR WANDS OF OFFICE

Churchwardens may have staffs or wands of office, and may carry these before the clergy in procession at the beginning and end of services.

CHURCH PLATE & PAROCHIAL DOCUMENTS

Although the Church Plate (all the precious metal objects used during Divine Service) and all parochial documents of the parish are in the custody of the incumbent of the parish, the churchwardens may be required to assist in the record-keeping, custody and care of Church Plate and parochial documents.