

Completing Application Forms

(with particular reference to Senior Appointments)

These guidelines were prepared by the Dean of Bradford following his experience as part of a selection panel for a Cathedral Dean. Both the Archbishops' Secretary for Appointments and Church House HR department thought that they were such a useful summary that they should be shared with applicants to assist them in completing application forms.

A note on completing Application Forms with particular reference to senior posts

Application forms are a necessity: they provide a fair way of allowing open access to consideration for a post by people who are not known to those making an appointment. For that reason they need to be used well by applicants and by those making appointments.

An appointment process in the Church is a spiritual and vocational exercise, not a matter of ticking boxes. The appointing group are charged with discerning whom God may be calling to a post, and will go through a prayerful process which is looking for people whom God has been preparing for the work needing to be done. The application form is part of the whole package. There may well have been personal contact or interview with the Archbishops' Secretary for Appointments, and some contacts with others involved in a particular process of appointment, as well as references and other commendations. But there needs to be room for applicants who are not known personally to have a fair hearing, and application forms are the gateway to that process. They also provide an objective way of assessing applicants; when someone is known to one member of the appointing group and not to others, their form provides vital evidence to assess more widely their suitability for the post in question. Appointment is not a question of whether someone is known or liked, or even whether they have done a good job in their present and previous posts. The question is whether the application form provides evidence that they may be called to this particular post: the interview process then tests out this potential call further.

Each post can be described in terms of a job description and a personal specification. Some qualities and experience are essential: others desirable. There can be flexibility for applicants who have transferable skills or potential, although this has to be exercised with care: for example, someone with an outstanding parish ministry applying to be a dean might not have had much cathedral experience, but their track record indicates that they are likely to learn quickly and adapt appropriately, and they will have colleagues who can compensate for their lack of experience.

Experience suggests that there are different approaches to filling in application forms for senior posts, not all of which are helpful. The ideal application form clearly and concisely indicates the experience and abilities of the applicant, and provides evidence that as far as possible the applicant meets the requirements of the job description and personal specification, with an honest awareness of less strong areas and how these may be compensated for. No applicant fully fulfils all the requirements for a post, and this can be acknowledged; but a lack of 'fit' between the post and the applicant is an indication that this is not the person with this particular calling. The evidence is vital: interviewers will want to explore evidence given in greater depth; aspirations are no substitute for evidence of ability and what has been achieved. For example, an applicant whose ministry was to revive a suburban church which had gone through a difficult period might be able to point to a doubling of the electoral roll from 300 to 600; the same person might have been in a difficult inner-urban parish where the work of God in them was no less powerful but had a different outcome, such as community engagement or physical regeneration.

So what are the pitfalls to avoid? How can an applicant help the appointing group in their task of discernment?

- All paperwork must be completed with the assumption that the panel know nothing of the applicant's background. Some busy clergy may find it difficult to get the time to fill in the form fully, and assume that their work record will speak for itself. This will not be the case.

The fact that the applicant has undertaken the work of a vicar, rural dean, archdeacon, canon etc does not tell the group exactly what the role entailed because jobs vary widely according to a number of different factors. Points to consider when completing the application form should include:

- What were the main features of the roles undertaken to date?
 - How does the information that is being provided on the form give evidence for the applicant's abilities regarding, for example, leadership, inspiring people, or managing difficult budgets and hard situations?
 - The applicant will have done good work wherever they have been; the question is whether it has prepared them for the demands of this particular post at this time. If the applicant doesn't give the appointing group the required evidence then they won't know that it is there, and can't make assumptions.
- The application form is not a confessional or a valedictory statement. The applicant is not writing a biography. Whilst for the applicant this is a work of art, for the group, it is one of perhaps 40 or more application forms which have to be evaluated. The applicant may want to tell the appointing group about all the books they have written, the great responsibilities they have carried, the good things that people have said to them, but this is not what the application form is for. When filling in the form, the key topics in the specifications for the post should be addressed. The applicant should not over-emphasise an impressive achievement (although the group might need to know that it was impressive in its context). Members of the group will be looking carefully at the overall shape of the applicant: they will take note of all the evidence on the form, whether highlighted or not. The group's attention is on the applicant while they read the form, and they will be doing it prayerfully and conscientiously. The group will be interested in the simple fact that the applicant may speak several languages or has a particular hobby, but do not need to know more detail than that.
 - An exhaustive ticking of boxes from the job description and person specification in great detail is off-putting. It may be tempting to put in a lot of detailed evidence, but it makes the task of the appointing group that much harder as they have to sift through the material to find what is relevant. One of the qualities required for any post of responsibility is the ability to prioritise, to discriminate between what is essential and what is interesting but not necessary for now. The applicant will need to show that they possess the ability to discriminate. Undue length in a form may be a way of trying to be shortlisted by proving beyond doubt that you fit the specifications; but the appointing group is interested in finding people who are the right person for the post, rather than the people who are good at getting interviews.
 - It's not just what the applicant has done: it's also the way that they did it. For instance, the applicant may have revitalised a moribund parish or enabled a major project to take place: but how did they do that? How did they handle difficult situations and people, or go about raising a million pounds? The situations that the applicant has dealt with will be different from those in the post for which they're applying, but the ways that they approach them are likely to be similar: how did the applicant do it and what did the experience teach them?
 - Be clear and honest. There are times when the appointing group are unclear as to the reality behind a statement. For example, if the specification requires evidence of ability to do strategic planning, and the applicant says that they have produced a vision and strategy for a corporate body (like a cathedral chapter or a college), does that mean that the applicant has been solely responsible for leading that process, or that they have been part of a small group doing it, or that they have voted for it in a meeting when others have taken

the lead? Poor clarity about evidence will sow doubts in the minds of people making appointments, as will unexplained elision between 'I' and 'we' doing something. Do not over-egg the pudding.

- Vision yes, but not a wish-list. The application form will need to have an indication of why the prospect of the post excites the applicant. This will however be explored more in interview. On the form there needs to be enough to show how the applicant sees the fit between their passion for the gospel and the needs of the post concerned, in the light of what they know about it from the information provided. It's important that the applicant feels a sense of excitement about it. But a statement of how the applicant might approach the task is not sufficient evidence to show that they are qualified for the post. The applicant will need to give evidence of what they have become and done in their ministry, because what the applicant has done indicates who they are, and – in line with incarnational theology – what will happen in the future will depend on the interaction of God in the applicant with what God is doing already and the people who are there. Enough vision, yes; but not a long list of what the applicant will do when they are given the job.

It may well be helpful to have a critical friend who reads the draft of the application form alongside the job and person specifications, with a view to seeing how the appointing group will read it and whether it contains the right balance of evidence. Does it show that the applicant is a credible candidate for this post?

The process of appointment is not easy, and for senior posts it can be particularly difficult, given the relatively small number of posts available compared to the large number of clergy who could do them. Many of those who apply for these posts will not make a short-list for interview. But that is no criticism of them or their ministry and abilities or their personal worth. It was simply that at this particular time for this particular post, there were other applicants whom the appointing group discerned to be those who should be called for interview, on the basis of the application forms submitted. Do help the appointing group in their task of discernment by giving them what they need in your application form; and pray for them, as they will pray for you.

David Ison
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