

GENERAL SYNOD

Parochial fees and charges for vergers and heating

A Background Paper from the Worcester Diocesan Synod

Introduction

1. The parochial fees for funerals and weddings due to PCCs and DBFs are a matter of law. When coming to the arrangements that have operated since January 2013 there was debate in the General Synod about the merits of the costs of the provision of vergers and church heating being included in the statutory fee or being dealt with as “extras”. In the end it was decided they should be “extras”. The current fees table published on the Church of England website explains in a footnote:

“EXTRAS

The fees shown in this table are the statutory fees payable. It is stressed that the figures do not include charges for extras such as heating, the services of a verger, music (e.g. organist, choir), bells, and flowers, which are fixed by the Parochial Church Council.”

2. We are proposing that vergers and heating should not be extras but treated as integral to the statutory fees for funerals and weddings. The need for change has been very much driven by grass roots concerns from parochial clergy. So we see this as a matter of mission in the Church’s hospitable ministry to those for whom occasional offices are often their only contact. It is also consistent with furthering the “Simplification Agenda”. We stress that we are not looking for an overall increase in the cost of funerals and weddings but rather that those who ask what the cost will be should be quoted a simple and transparent statutory fee without essential elements being added as “extras” and avoid a “post code lottery” as to the parish of residence.

Correspondence in 2013 with the Archbishops’ Council

3. In 2013 the Archbishops’ Council took stock of the newly introduced arrangements. Its Remuneration and Conditions of Service Committee (RACSC) has terms of reference which include “to make recommendations about the scope, structure and level of parochial fees.” Our feedback to RACSC included that there should be change with regard to the way vergers and heating were dealt with. The points put on behalf of our Diocesan Mission, Pastoral & Resources Committee were:
 - “A verger should be included in the PCC fee for a church funeral as a matter of course. It’s a “legal fiction” to suggest that there’s anything optional about it, rather it is a necessity to enable the clergy to focus on their liturgical and pastoral ministries.”
 - “A better solution needs to be found for church heating costs. Again, regarding heating as optional is impractical (including us hearing of heating being needed in this year’s cold Spring when weddings had been arranged assuming no heating would be required) and pastorally inept. While we appreciate that those PCCs with huge buildings to heat may not like it, our suggestion would be to increase the level of the PCC fee so that on average over the year it would cover the heating costs of an average sized church. That way will avoid a “post code lottery” as to heating costs. It is also the case that while there may be choice as to the timing of weddings to avoid the heating season that does not apply to funerals.”

4. RACSC's response in September 2013 was,

“Verger and heating costs

The Committee had some sympathy with the concerns raised in the email, but, it was at the instigation of members of the General Synod that these elements have been excluded, and the Committee did not feel it was appropriate now to recommend this change without a further debate in the General Synod on Synod's fees policy. When Synod was asked to approve the 2012 Fees Order it had before it the report Draft Fees Order: Explanation of proposed fees GSMisc 1015 paragraph 17 has the following wording ‘...Unlike the draft Order that was before the Synod in July 2011, the cost of vergers and heating has not been included in any of the prescribed fees and are left for local decision, allowing each PCC the flexibility to charge a fee that it feels able to justify on the basis of the cost of providing these elements.’ In the debate members who spoke on this specific issue spoke in favour of the change.

The General Synod did not approve the draft 2011 Fees Order (in which the draft fees included elements for heating and vergers) because it felt that the proposed fees were too high. If the heating and vergers elements had been included in the fees in the 2012 Order the fee for a marriage service would be (in 2013) about £456 (rather than £381 as was agreed), and a funeral service in church about £272 (rather than £230 as above). The fee for a funeral service in a cemetery or crematorium would not have been affected, at £160, and if it had been the Council's policy to keep the fee for a funeral service in church down to the same level as in a crematorium or cemetery, this would be the fee charged for a funeral service in church.

RACSC did agree that the Council should be advised of the concerns about excluding an element for excluding the cost of vergers, but it remains the case that parishes can deploy vergers and not charge for them, if the parish does not feel able to justify the additional cost of deploying a verger.

RACSC did not feel it could suggest reopening the debate about parochial fees policy, because the General Synod has only recently decided it. The diocese could table a diocesan synod motion to the General Synod, if it wished to reopen the debate about parochial fees policy.”

Support for change

5. During 2013 we were also taking stock of the arrangements we had put in place with regard to the handling of PCC and DBF fees and payments to ministers not in receipt of a stipend. We took the opportunity to add to an electronic questionnaire on such matters additional questions about vergers and heating being optional extras. The propositions we put were:

- The cost of a verger at funerals held in church should be part of the PCC fee (which would increase as a consequence), not an “optional extra”.
- The cost of a verger at weddings should be part of the PCC fee (which would increase as a consequence), not an “optional extra”.
- The cost of heating a church should be part of the PCC fee for weddings and funerals, not an “optional extra”.
- The cost of heating a church for weddings and funerals should be covered by increasing the level of the PCC fee so that on average over the year it would cover the heating

costs of an average sized church where an average number of such services are conducted.

The analysis of those questions is attached showing strong overall support for change to the statutory fee to include a nationally determined element for a verger and heating.

Other considerations

6. We are aware that in the General Synod's debates to establish the current fees arrangements concerns were expressed about the level of fees becoming too high. We have two observations with the benefit of subsequent experience. Firstly our own consultations with Funeral Directors have not suggested that this is a key issue as to whether a Church of England funeral is chosen. In the context of this diocese containing areas of severe deprivation, we know of only a handful of occasions in total over 2013 to 2015 that fees have been waived when annually there are some 4,250 funerals and weddings. Secondly the steady decline in numbers of weddings and funerals in the Church of England illustrated at Figure E on page 8 of Statistics for Mission 2014 does not suggest that 2013 and 2014 have been other than part of consistent trends over the period shown since 2004.
7. Initiatives such as the "Weddings Project" in seeking to reverse such trends have rightly stressed the importance of the quality of pastoral response. Our concerns about vergers and heating being extras are consistent with improving that experience. What other venue would ask whether people wished to have the heating on, or essential staff on duty, and if so charge extra?
8. In terms of timing, we are aware that the current Parochial Fees Order runs up to 31st December 2019. Given the legislative processes involved we are not necessarily seeking the changes to be implemented before 2020 unless the General Synod or Archbishops' Council thought it desirable.

Conclusions

For a significant section of our population, marriage and funeral services are the only contact they have with their parish church. As we serve our communities in this way, providing opportunities for them to engage with church representatives and encounter the living and loving God at times of both joy and grief, we should prioritise a ministry of hospitality and pastoral care. Having fees which are simple, transparent, fair and requiring minimal explanation will enable a focus on that which makes a service in church different. This will free clergy from the outset to do what they are called to do, and mostly do very well, rather than setting up initial enquiries to be commercial negotiations, no different in tone from those with secular providers. Those families who look to the church to play a part in their key life events deserve the very best we can give. We are not 'competing for business', rather we have something unique to offer. Let's simplify our systems so that in all our relating to and communicating with those who seek our ministry we can emphasise the difference inviting the presence of God will make to these occasions.

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Published by the General Synod of the Church of England © The Archbishops' Council 2016