

**Divine Appointments?**  
**Anticipating and Avoiding Problems in Curate Training Relationships**  
**Jon J. Marlow – St. John’s College, Durham University**

**Executive Summary**

The placement of curates is a complex process. Many clergy are able to cite anecdotal evidence of curacies which have been problematic or which have broken down completely. Although this is often blamed on incompatible personalities or relational difficulties which developed in the parish, problems which occur in the relationship between curate and training incumbent (TI) can often be anticipated before the start of the curacy.

This summary highlights the key findings from a study into problems in curate training relationships which was undertaken with current and recent Church of England curates. Data was gathered using an online survey and by conducting in-depth interviews.

Central to the initial survey were three questions about the curates’ experience of their training relationship. Of the 56 respondents, 35% could not say that they would recommend their incumbent to train other curates, and 30% were unable to describe the training relationship as positive. 33% of curates could not say that their curacy had been happy overall. This is a higher percentage of curates expressing dissatisfaction and unhappiness than the most recent research had predicted.

Among the themes which emerged from the qualitative responses to the survey was the idea that it is possible to be a good priest but a poor trainer. This was explored in interviews with eight curates. The data revealed a common theme, that clergy who are chosen to be training incumbents can have hidden flaws that are magnified by the lens of a curacy. Five indicators of potential problems were identified and are explored in the attached report. They are offered as a diagnostic tool for those responsible for placing and supervising curates. Problems can occur when:

- 1) TIs do not recognise that curacies are a process of *adult education* and that learners are highly trained and motivated to learn.
- 2) TIs are not already operating a collaborative model of ministry.
- 3) Clergy are chosen to be TIs, even though relational difficulties are evident to others or could be easily anticipated.
- 4) Diocesan officers and materials perpetuate the myth that problems are rare and difficulties are part of the sacrifice of ministry.
- 5) There is a lack of support due to confused lines of accountability.

By attending to these indicators, both at parish and diocesan level, it may be possible to avoid placing curates where problems are anticipated, or to ensure they are properly supported where such placements are unavoidable. Diocesan officers are encouraged to scrutinise potential placements and to place curates with TIs who already demonstrate collaborative ministry and espouse a collaborative model of training. Dioceses might also consider having an officer responsible for curates who both engages with curates ‘on the ground’ and is also able to influence decisions at a diocesan level.

## **Divine Appointments? Anticipating and Avoiding Problems in Curate Training Relationships**

### **Introduction**

Ordained ministers in the Church of England (CofE) are required to undertake *Initial Ministerial Education* (IME) before they are licensed to an *incumbent status post*. This training begins with *IME Phase 1*, in a *Theological Education Institution* (TEI), and is followed by a curacy (*IME Phase 2*) where the newly-ordained minister is licensed to a parish or team ministry and assigned a *Training Incumbent* (TI). This report looks at some of the issues surrounding the placement of curates and how problems in curacies can be anticipated, overcome or avoided altogether.

### **Methodology**

This study was undertaken as part of a research methods module on *the Doctor of Theology and Ministry* course at Durham University. As the scope of the project prevented undertaking a large-scale survey which would be generalizable across the whole Church of England, four dioceses were chosen to provide illustrative data. These were all in the Southern Province but outside London. Clergy were invited to participate if they were ordained between 2012 and 2015 and their contact details were publicly available. Participants were at least 18 months into their curacy and some had moved on to their next post.

Having undergone scrutiny from Faculty of Arts and Humanities Ethics Committee at the University of Durham, 107 curates were contacted and invited to participate in an online survey using the Bristol Online Survey platform. Curates were asked if they were willing to be interviewed but also had the opportunity to submit data anonymously. Data from 56 participants was collected and 35 offered to be interviewed. Eight individuals were selected for follow up interviews based on comments they had made relating to the idea that a good priest does not necessarily make a good trainer. Five interviewees were women and three were men. All were full-time curates and seven were stipendiary. Between them, interviewees had experience of both male and female TIs.

Interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed and coded using NVivo software. All identifying data has been removed from the transcripts, and participants have been given pseudonyms. To preserve the anonymity of participants, it was not possible to compare their narratives with those of their TI or diocesan officers. In order to triangulate the data, the initial findings of this study have been shared and refined during a training session for TIs and in conversation with the Directors of Mission in two dioceses.

### **Findings**

Central to the online survey were three questions, in which curates were asked whether they agreed or disagreed with the following statements:

1. I would recommend my TI to train other curates.
2. I would describe the relationship with my TI as positive.
3. I have been happy in my curacy overall.

Curates were also asked whether they wanted to expand on their answers or make additional comments about their training relationship. Of the 56 respondents, 35% could not say that they would recommend their incumbent to train other curates and 30% were unable to describe the training relationship as positive. 33% of curates could not say that their curacy had been happy overall. This is a higher percentage of curates expressing dissatisfaction and unhappiness than the most recent research had predicted (Smith 2015: 249; Perrin 2016: 27).

As the theme of a TI being a 'good priest but a poor trainer' was explored in the interviews, a further thread emerged which helped to explain this dichotomy. Clergy who were described by their curate as "a very able priest" or "a popular parish priest" were revealed to have flaws that were not visible in their ministry but which were magnified by the lens of a curacy.

The following five indicators, which emerged from the study, are offered as a diagnostic tool for those placing, training and supporting curates in the Church of England. By looking carefully at the placements themselves and at the diocesan support structures, it is hoped that potential problems can be anticipated so that curates are offered appropriate placements and adequate support.

***Problems can occur when TIs do not recognise that curacies are a process of adult education and that learners are highly trained and motivated to learn.***

This has a number of different manifestations, some explicitly articulated and others more subconscious. TIs can assume a training model which is best characterised as master/apprentice or even parent/child. This model does not recognise that the curate comes with a wealth of skills and experiences of their own, and that their IME1 training may even mean they are better equipped to minister in a collaborative way than their TI. Johnny reflected on the differences between his TEI and his curacy, saying:

I would suggest that my training at IME1 was geared towards a more collaborative model. Thus one of the potential struggles derived from the need to adjust my expectations after college.

Beverley found that diocesan expectations about models of ministry were not shared at a local level:

Our Bishop was saying [...] that there needed to be a joined-up process in placing us, both as curates and beyond and that we were not apprentices, we were preparing for an unknown future and a different way of doing ministry [...] The training was [...] for a different style of ministry, for collaborative ministry and trying to get us to look at what our strengths were. The Bishop was saying that, and then I didn't find it on the ground twice.

Curates also reported the ways their TIs' words had reinforced the old model. Beverley recalled her TI saying, "I say these things because they are the things that worked for me, so what you need to be is be an apprentice who watches what I do". Philip was told at the outset of his curacy that "you'll probably find there will be quite a lot of deskilling" as his TI perceived the unlearning of previous skills to be a necessary part of the training process. Chris was told "I'm trying to bring you down the level of a photocopier", and Lesley identified this as wider than simply a local problem, saying:

At no point in any of my two selection processes [...] did I feel that anything I had done before was of any value, or affirmed by the church. So I went in pretty undervalued.

There is also a need for TIs to be 'undefended' in their leadership, to welcome those whose presence offers a critique to their own ministry (Walker 2010), and to see that having a curate is an opportunity for mutual learning. If this doesn't happen then the training can become a power-play with the TI reinforcing the hierarchical nature of the relationship. Lesley reported that her TI called her "Curate" or addressed her "by my title, which ranked lower than hers". She reflected that, "you could say, 'oh, that's just being oversensitive', but the way in which it was used very much kept the pecking order". Philip had a similar experience:

I have lost count of the number of times when she said, in front of other people, to me 'don't forget I write your reference' [...] or if ever I did something, she would say, 'I taught you well'.

Instead of attempting to perpetuate a model of training that infantilises their curate (Smith 2015: 224), TIs need to recognise the training and expertise of their curate, find ways to use and develop their skills and be open to learning themselves through the relationship. A helpful paradigm here is the idea of *andragogy*, which seeks to separate the education of adults from traditional *pedagogy*, which is 'the art and science of teaching children' (Bennetts, et al. 2012: 541).

Andragogy makes a number of assumptions which are relevant to training curates, namely that adult learners take responsibility for their own lives and their own learning, have relevant previous experience and are motivated to learn where they see the real-world application of theory. TIs who are effective trainers will naturally espouse an andragogical approach to the training of curates.

Another area in which curates are disempowered and infantilised is that their church tradition is not respected as equally valid to that of their TI. In their responses to the survey, one curate complained that their spirituality was "unsupported" and also "rubbished" by their TI. Another said:

Central to my faith and churchmanship is the Eucharist which she has consistently 'played down'. She does not like the Daily Office or any other commitment to sharing Daily Prayer and so my efforts at this have been constantly thwarted.

Hannah remembered her TI saying, in front of parishioners, "I have never set foot in an evangelical church and never would, because I hate evangelicals". She went on to elaborate, saying:

I had made it very clear to him in that first interview, when we met before I'd accepted the curacy, that I was an evangelical and, if he had said to me at that point that he has never set foot in an evangelical church and never would, I would not have taken the curacy.

In addition to taking an andragogical approach, looking at biblical models offers a critique to the infantilising *parent/child* model of training and the hierarchical ecclesiology which underpins it. In their survey of biblical models of supervision, Keith Lamdin and David Tilley call TIs to a model that empowers and frees the curate. It can be directive but passes on responsibility (2007: 143-49). Biblical models also serve to critique the findings of this study by presenting leadership paradigms such as the shepherd, which are a reminder that curates sometimes need the guidance and directive

hand of their TI. The relationship is not one of complete equality, although collaboration should be a more obvious feature than direction.

***Problems can occur when TIs are not already operating a collaborative model of ministry.***

As mentioned above, curates tend to leave IME1 with the expectation that ordained ministry will be a meaningful collaboration between stipendiary and self-supporting clergy and teams of lay people. What they often encounter in their curacy is a TI who is operating as a sole-practitioner, even within a team ministry or multi-parish benefice. This can simply be that the incumbent has never known anything different themselves, as in the case of Louise's TI:

He has, for nearly all his working life, been a parish priest of a single parish, and not used to multi-parish ministry, and so runs multi-parish ministry in the way you'd run a single parish. [...] Being used to working in partnership with people, and making decisions with other people, I find it odd that we're not working as a team in the vision and the direction.

Sometimes miscommunication occurs when the same words were being used to mean different things by different people. Following a critical comment she had written in her end of year report, Beverley was asked by her TI what she meant by collaborative ministry:

And I said, "well, you sit down and you talk through things and you make a collaborative decision". He said, "I haven't got time for that". No, that's my point. It does take time, but it also saves time, because you don't all do everything.

Clergy who have not developed effective models of collaborative working and lay teams in their own ministry are unlikely to suddenly develop the skills to treat a curate as an ordained colleague, and an indicator of this can be the way potential TIs talk about their desire for a curate. Beverley's TI expressed it by saying, "how am I expected to be able to do this on my own?" and "I can't do this on my own". Sentiments such as this could indicate an inability to appropriately share ministry tasks, which could be exacerbated, rather than alleviated by, the presence of a curate.

Despite wanting to operate more collaboratively, curates in the study were at pains to point out that they were not seeking to undermine their TI by introducing a different pattern of ministry. They did seek to include others in leadership roles and to develop them in those roles, and this received a positive reception. Beverley shared that this was "the only thing that has kept me going. They have always [responded well to that model] because they feel that somebody wants them to prosper".

Ajith Fernando couches collaborative ministry in terms of receiving help, of being vulnerable and sharing weaknesses (2002: 131-52), rather than perpetuating an unequal hierarchy. Louise observed how her conscious collaborative practice had helped her TI adapt his own model of ministry, at least for the time-being:

In the first year as a deacon I got to do things like take morning prayer and other things that I could do that you didn't have to be priested for [...] so, as soon as I was priested, I got lay people to do those jobs. And for a lot of them it was the first time that they had been asked to do that. And, I think, probably, that's changed [my incumbent] as well because he's now got lots of lay people doing things. But what will happen when I leave, I don't know.

Incumbents who are not operating collaboratively may be helped to refine their own model of ministry by the presence of someone who has been more recently trained and has professional experience from outside the church. As a self-supporting curate, Lesley found that it took a long time before she was accepted as someone who could provide leadership at that level:

What strikes me is that I had everything they ever needed [...] but it was the recognition that I had what they needed, and their recognition that they needed me. I always thought that what I knew in terms of teams was highly missional. Here was a culture that required transformation, and I had the knowledge to enable that, which, four years on, is starting to happen.

It can be tempting to think that a high-calibre curate could be that catalyst for change, but it requires a great deal of emotional maturity from the TI to accept that the traditional roles might be reversed and to give up some of their positional power (Handy 1998: 67). TIs can change, but they need motivation to do so, as Louise observed when she said, “he’s set in his ways, but not because he’s mentally set in his ways, it’s just because that’s what he’s always done”. Such change requires a willingness to learn, so placing a curate is not a way to modify that practice of a TI who is resistant to change.

***Problems can occur when clergy are chosen to be TIs, even though relational difficulties are evident to others or could be easily anticipated.***

Clergy are chosen to be TIs for a variety of reasons, some unrelated to their suitability to be a trainer. As mentioned above, some clergy feel they ‘need’ a curate to share the workload. Others may have a sense of entitlement to have a curate working for them, due to their perceived seniority or that they are working in an established ‘training parish’. This entitlement can place diocesan officers in a difficult position, experiencing pressure to place a curate with the TI, even if they are not a good match.

Sometimes, tensions within parishes and ministry teams are known locally but not reported to diocesan officers. As Martyn Percy comments, however, they are often overlooked due to a mixture of ‘denial and collusion, with a bit of inertia thrown in’ (Caminer 2015 :77). A number of curates in the study reported problems that were well-known and which, with hindsight, they saw that diocesan officers were alluding to in conversations before the curacy. Veronica reported that her TI announced he was leaving for a diocesan role within a week of her ordination, Beverley was told by her archdeacon that “it’s problematic you coming here”, despite feeling pressured into the role. Martin, who was placed with a TI who was known to be suffering from stress asked:

So, when was it a good idea to put a trainee with a manager who people recognised was struggling? That’s not something that we would have done in my job in [secular employment]. You would put a trainee with someone who was a role model, someone was excelling – on the top of their game. I suspect the reason I was placed here might have something to do with the house.

It is also difficult for a curate to give feedback on their TI after their curacy is over. Reports, interviews and even theological reflections, are focused on how well the curate has met the training

objectives and are not an opportunity to feed back on the performance of the trainer. Reflecting on his experience of a group debriefing with his DDO over lunch, Philip suggested that:

There needs to be a one-on-one, because you can't 'dis' your colleagues in front of others, it's not right, it's not a good thing to do ... so, that conversation would be helpful.

Those placing curates need to have the information and the opportunity to satisfy themselves that the placement will be appropriate and also to give the curate a meaningful choice about whether to accept a particular placement. It is also important to note that larger-scale studies have found that having had a previous curate is no indicator of the success of the next (Smith 2015: 318), so there should never be an assumption that a TI will automatically be given another curate or that the location of a diocesan house denotes a 'training parish'.

***Problems can occur when diocesan officers and materials perpetuate the myth that problems are rare and difficulties are part of the sacrifice of ministry.***

Beverley comments that she had "spent a lot of time thinking I was the only one having a hard time" and that this was reinforced by the "rhetoric that was coming from the diocese and nationally was about doing things differently". Despite the received understanding that it is common for curacies to experience problems, statements like this one still appear in diocesan briefings for curates:

In 99% of cases where curacies founder (and fortunately there are not that many) they do so because of personal, relational issues.

However well-meaning they are, statements like that quoted above serve to deny the experience of a third of the curates in this study. Those who have the opportunity to compare notes with others will quickly see the reality of this 'institutional gaslighting'<sup>1</sup>. Veronica described this as "developing a healthy mistrust of the institution". Those with less-developed support networks, however, can find their problems compounded by the belief that they really are the only one who is struggling in this way.

As noted earlier, it was beyond the scope of this project to undertake a large-scale representative study across the wider Church of England. The high level of dissatisfaction which was found in the four dioceses, however, suggests that this seems likely to be indicative of problems across the wider Church of England. A larger study would be beneficial to provide Bishops and DDOs with more comprehensive data.

TEIs and diocesan officers also need to be more transparent about the potential for problems and pro-active about developing supportive peer-groups at the start of IME2. This aspect of curacies is explored below.

---

<sup>1</sup> Taken from the title of the 1938 play *Gas Light*, the term gaslighting has come to be used for a psychological manipulation where someone in control makes their victim doubt their own sanity, perception and memory by denying their experience.

***Problems can occur where there is a lack of support due to confused lines of accountability.***

Issues which are addressed when they first occur can be prevented from becoming problems which need intervention from diocesan officers. In this respect, the practice of appointing a facilitator or work consultant to meet with both the curate and TI is a welcome step from many dioceses. As discussed earlier, however, it requires a combination of self-awareness and being undefended on the part of the TI for problems to be resolved. Lesley's experience was that, even when she prepared for the mediated supervision, the consultant was not able to facilitate honest discussion:

We had supervised supervisions and [...] the spiritual director who we had to go and conduct supervisions in front of, I said to her afterwards, "Why did you not say anything? I gave you ample opportunity to ask the questions that would have opened up the discussion about what was going on between us, but you never, you never did that?" And she said, "Yeah, I recognised something was going on but I didn't step in". And it took me – a year – to come to terms with the fact that I was scared of my own training incumbent.

Facilitated peer reflection groups can also help, although the perception is that, beyond the catharsis of talking about the problem, very little will actually change as a result of airing problems in this setting. Similarly, curates are frequently asked how they are doing, but this question is seldom asked in an environment or manner that welcomes an honest answer from those experiencing difficulties. Beverley reflected on the approach of the tutor assigned to her by the diocese:

There were about five of us in the cohort. I don't know where they picked the tutors from, experienced retired priests I would assume, and ours was a very nice man. He said, "Let's get together once a month and we'll have a cup of coffee and we'll go down to the cathedral coffee shop". You don't talk about your [personal] business in the cathedral coffee shop. He knew I was having trouble.

Veronica reported that, in an informal conversation, she had told her Archdeacon that her curacy was "not going particularly well". The next time they met, the Archdeacon said "I won't ask how you are, in case you tell me". Beverley recalled that her IME officer had delayed for four months before responding to a request for help in her first curacy, which eventually broke down. She said, "He sat us down together and tried to do a go-between thing. The ship had sailed by that point; he left it too long."

Those who are closer to the ground, such as Rural Deans, can offer more support but, due to the informal nature of the relationship, this can be patchy, as Beverley found in her second placement:

Had it not been for the Rural Dean, I probably would have gone belly-up. He was very good, but it's on an informal basis. I think rural deans are a better bet than many. But the impression I get...maybe it's always like this; it's very personal. If they feel sympathetic towards you, you're going to get a lot of support. If they don't feel sympathetic towards you or don't understand your perspective, you're not. And while that's perfectly understandable, that's not very professional, is it?



What the above shows is that there is a need, within dioceses, to build up a more complete picture of each training relationship and to have clear lines of accountability and communication. There is no shortage of people who are working with curates, but the crux of the problem seems to be that those who are able to pastorally respond to curates lack the authority to do anything about it, and those who have such power are too far removed from the situation to be able to offer pastoral support. Hannah summarised the problem by saying:

I think the longer that I'm in the Church of England I'm amazed at how much the senior officers in dioceses - and it's not just my diocese - do not appear to join the dots together and say "ok, this person is struggling", or "why don't I just give this person a ring?" [...] I know that they know that I've struggled here ... And they've done nothing about it.

There is a strong case for dioceses dividing the role of DDO into two, with one senior officer responsible for the placement, training and direct support of curates in a diocese. This is especially important in dioceses where the DDO holds another portfolio such as encouraging vocations. Such an officer would take on responsibility for ordinands during IME1 and would be able to offer direct pastoral support, while also influencing the placement of curates and their assessment.

## **Recommendations**

This report has made a number of recommendations, all of which are grounded in all parties having enough information to make informed decisions about placing curates.

1. The personal qualities of training incumbents should be paramount in the placement of a curate. Training Incumbents need to:
  - a. Espouse a model of training that takes seriously the andragogical principles of adult education and recognises the training and experience which a curate could bring.
  - b. Be 'undefended' in their own leadership, welcoming those whose presence offers a critique to their own ministry. They see that having is a curate is an opportunity for mutual learning.
  - c. Already be operating collaboratively, giving evidence of how clergy and lay people are meaningfully working together to give leadership in their context.
2. Curates should not be placed with the expectation that their presence will bring about a positive change to the leadership culture of a placement. This is unlikely to succeed unless the TI themselves has requested the assistance and is ready to cede some of their positional power.
3. Curates need to be given meaningful choice about whether or not to accept a particular placement.
4. There should never be the assumption that a TI will automatically be given another curate or that the location of a diocesan house denotes a 'training parish'.
5. TEs and diocesan officers need to be more transparent about the potential for problems and pro-active about developing supportive peer-groups at the start of IME2.
6. There need to be clear lines of accountability and communication between all those who have responsibility for placing, training and supporting curates.

7. Dioceses should consider dividing the role of DDO so that there is a single senior officer responsible for the placement, training and direct support of curates in a diocese.

Curacies are a vital period of training for new clergy. It is therefore imperative that diocesan officers make placements for the right reasons and with correct information. The consequences of making uninformed decisions can be catastrophic, as illustrated in this final quote from Lesley:

So my frustration was, I am here at this peak time of formation, and you are stealing from me an opportunity [...] men and women are responding to the call of God, giving up their lives and adopting something they're called to, and they are met in the church by a half-baked system which is not enabling what really should happen, which is the church, and its mission to the world. So unless someone actually wakes up to this as a real problem [...] we're squandering the gifts given to the church. And it's that serious! The church is not in a position to squander its gifts.

Jon J. Marlow  
St. John's College, Durham, 2017  
j.j.marlow@durham.ac.uk

## References

- Bennetts, C., K. Elliston and M. Maconachie. 2012. 'Continuing professional development for public health: An andragogical approach', *Public Health*, 126 pp 541-45
- Caminer, Matthew, Martyn Percy and Beaumont Stevenson. 2015. *Curacies and How to Survive Them* (London: SPCK)
- Fernando, Ajith. 2002. *Jesus Driven Ministry* (Leicester: IVP)
- Handy, Charles B. 1988. *Understanding Voluntary Organizations* (London: Penguin)
- Hybels, Bill. 2002. *Courageous Leadership* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan)
- Lamdin, Keith, and David Tilley. 2007. *Supporting New Ministers in the Local Church: a Handbook* (London: SPCK)
- Perrin, Ruth. 2016. *Vocational Pathways: Perspectives from Curacy*. (Ministry Division of the Archbishops' Council of the Church of England)  
<[http://www.ministrydevelopment.org.uk/UserFiles/File/RME/perspectives\\_from\\_curacy.pdf](http://www.ministrydevelopment.org.uk/UserFiles/File/RME/perspectives_from_curacy.pdf)> [Accessed 9 December 2016]
- Smith, Greg. 2015. *Exploring Training Relationships between Training Incumbents and Curates in the Church of England and the Church in Wales: Listening to Training Incumbents in the post Hind era*. Thesis Submitted for the Degree of PhD at the University of Warwick  
[<http://ethos.bl.uk/OrderDetails.do?uin=uk.bl.ethos.690486>]
- Walker, Simon P. 2010. *The Undefended Leader* (Carlisle: Piquant Editions)