



## Ringers and churches – some frequently asked questions

We have highlighted some questions that we are often asked by bell ringers. The answers are based on Church of England practice, so may vary across the world and denominations.

### Getting to know the people involved in the church where we ring

#### \* **What is the difference between vicar, curate, incumbent, priest ...**

First of all, it is worth distinguishing between clergy status and clergy roles.

There are three levels of ordination:

**deacon**, a pastoral ministry;

**priest**, a sacramental ministry;

**bishop**, an oversight ministry.

These titles are separate from any particular job or role.

Secondly, there are many roles that clergy may take up. The titles for the roles are often historical, although may remain in use informally. Nearly all parish clergy are now '*Priest-in-charge*'. Cathedral clergy ('*Canons*' or '*Prebendaries*') are led by a '*Dean*' or '*Provost*'. Where parishes are grouped together, there may be a '*Team*', overseen in some way by a '*Team Rector*'. There may be associate clergy, curates, chaplains and other particular titles. An incumbent holds a benefice, but these terms no longer have their original meanings. The easiest approach is to call them all '*Vicar*' until they suggest their preference (such as '*Father*'). Better still is for ringers to get to know them well and be asked to use first name terms with the local clergy.

#### \* **Who is whose “boss”?**

A person recently ordained in their post will have a vicar who oversees their parish training. Otherwise, the local priest, including assistant clergy, will have considerable freedom to manage the church and parish. The key to the local 'boss' is to find out who, apart from the parish priest, can and does chair the Parochial Church Council

(PCC). Note that the PCC may delegate much of the business to a district church council.

For nearly all church activity, the vicar shares responsibility with the church council. The next management level is the *Archdeacon*, assisted locally by the Area (or Rural) *Dean*. The vicar is licensed by a *Bishop*, who has final (spiritual) authority but is very unlikely to intervene in parish management. A *Suffragan Bishop* is an assistant to the Diocesan Bishop.

\* **Where do these people fit in - Churchwardens, vergers ....?**

Churchwardens are officers of the Bishop, elected by the parish, and play a significant role (set out in Canons E1 and E2 of the Church of England ie the “laws” of the church <https://www.churchofengland.org/more/policy-and-thinking/canons-church-england>), as they are responsible with the vicar for much of what happens in a church, especially during a clergy vacancy. It is essential for ringers to know the Churchwardens and keep in communication with them.

Vergers, where they exist nowadays, ensure everything is in place for services. In cathedrals they may have a role in leading clergy in processions. In many churches, there is usually someone who looks after the building, locks and unlocks it, checks the heating and basic practical needs – a key person for ringers to befriend.

**Who should be responsible for the bells in our church?**

\* **Who owns them?**

The legal ownership of the bells is vested in the Churchwardens. The Parochial Church Council (PCC) has a duty for the use, maintenance and insurance of the bells.

\* **Who should maintain the bells?**

Ringers are well placed to maintain the bells in their tower. If unsure of the technical aspects of routine maintenance (such as checking ropes, replacing stays, greasing clappers, and so on), guidance is available from their association or guild officers, and from the Central Council resources. However, they are acting for the PCC when carrying out routine maintenance on bells and ropes, and should keep a written record. The PCC should at least be kept informed of any maintenance being undertaken, and their permission sought for anything other than routine maintenance. Good communication between ringers and the PCC is essential, and reports should be submitted to the PCC to keep them informed. This will prevent any ill-advised or inappropriate work being done in the tower. An invitation from the PCC for the Tower Captain and / or Steeple Keeper to attend an appropriate part of PCC meetings is often a practical way of reporting and asking permission.

\* **Who pays for the new rope / pulley repair....**

While the PCC may be willing to fund such repairs, the likelihood is that the funds will not be readily available. If the ringers establish a fund for covering routine replacements, the PCC is likely to be grateful. Such a fund can be built up from fees from weddings and other services, donations from visiting ringers and similar sources. A parallel might be care of a pipe organ, which PCCs often find they cannot afford, the organ falling into disuse or being replaced by an electric key board. Funds for more major projects should be handled separately to ensure that the funds are handled optimally.

\* **Can we put up a new peal board? Who do we ask?**

New peal boards need a Faculty, and ringers need to ask the PCC to approach the Archdeacon or Diocesan Registrar for permission. It need not be an arduous task. Existing peal boards must be cared for as historic artefacts. Information about the most recent changes to the Faculty process are available on the CCCBR website: <https://cccbr.org.uk/resources/stewardship-and-management/>

\* **The church handbells are locked in the vestry so no one uses them. Can the ringers borrow them?**

Handbells require proper care, especially if they are of historic value. Communication between ringers and the priest or church wardens should resolve any problems or misunderstandings about the use of PCC property.

If there is a set of handbells anywhere, it needs to be recorded where the handbells are kept, particularly if they are in someone's home, and also recorded if they are effectively the property of the ringers or PCC. Ringers should ensure that the handbells are recorded on the Church inventory. Experience shows that occasionally it has been thought they are the property of an individual ringer, and, on the ringer's death, have been sold by the family. There have been some bitter disputes around the ownership of handbells.

**How can we (as ringers) get more involved with church activities**

\* **“Greatown” had a ringers’ service, how can we do that?**

Suggest the idea to the local priest, with an outline of the service. Associations and Guilds often hold such services as part of local meetings, and clergy will appreciate some guidance about content and experience elsewhere.

Including some acknowledgement of ringers in a Sunday service, such as an introduction to ringers and ringing, or a dedication of some sort, is valued by both ringers and congregations. The Guild of Clerical Ringers is pleased to offer help. <http://guildofclericalringers.org.uk/>

\* **We weren’t allowed to ring for the church fete because it would disturb the school band – aren’t we important as a church activity?**

This is a matter of local consultation, and a willingness to work round the difficulties, such as coordinating the ringing and the band playing.

\* **How can we talk about ringing to the children in the church school next door**

The Central Council and ART provide resources and ideas for doing this effectively. The first step is to approach the Head Teacher, who may wish to check on the content and competence of any presentation. Being a church school does not mean that the church can insist on what happens within the school.

**The new vicar wants more formality – ringers have never done this before!**

**How do we -**

\* **Appoint a ringing master**

Hold an AGM, chaired by the local priest or church warden, and elect the Ringing Master or Captain then. Ringers need to have confidence in the candidate, so previous discussion and agreement is important.

\* **Hold an AGM**

This is most important, as it ensures that the ringers are fulfilling appropriate governance, and in accordance with any PCC requirements. It also connects the ringers formally with the church leadership. Most important is that it acknowledges that ringing is part of the church life and mission.

\* **All requests for visitors and extra ringing to the Parish office for agreement**

Technically, ringing is by permission of the priest and PCC. However, arrangements are easier to manage if ringers deal with requests, but are mindful of accommodating local limitations, such as nearby businesses, meetings in church and services, always ensuring that the priest is aware of the arrangements. It is useful for visiting bands and special ringing to be booked in the church diary.

There is a widespread requirement that visiting bands have, and abide by, safeguarding policies and requirements.

\* **Who decides the fee for ringing for weddings?**

The PCC decides on all of the fees for weddings, and ringers need to make a case for the amount they need or wish for. It is worth noting that fees for ringing may differ between churches, even in the same area, reflecting different costs, such as travel and car parking, which are incurred by ringers attending.

**The new PCC Chair has asked for ... we have never needed to do this before!**

\* **Health and Safety, Risk Assessment, Emergency Plan**

PCC requirements must be followed, and this list is important. For example, it ensures that the ringers are recognised for insurance purposes. Templates are readily available from ringing societies and church sources. Neighbouring towers may have good examples in place.

\* **List of members for GDPR**

Each tower should surely have a list of its members anyway, if only for local association membership, and to maintain band identity and mutual support; while noting that members must provide their written permission (an email would be sufficient) if they are to be kept on a mailing list and for their names to be printed in any Annual Report produced. Examples of GDPR consent forms along with compliance details, etc. can be found variously online.

\* **Safeguarding, DBS checks**

Safeguarding been shown to be of utmost importance. The Ringing Master or Tower captain must have received safeguarding training to the appropriate level, and in some towers, ringers are required or encouraged to achieve a lower level of training (online). Dioceses provide free training and advise on the appropriate levels required.

DBS checks apply to the Ringing Master or Tower Captain.

The PCC is obliged to follow diocesan safeguarding policies, and this applies to ringers too.

Further information on all these three topics is available from the CCCBR Stewardship & Management Workgroup <https://ccbr.org.uk/resources/stewardship-and-management/>

**We want to restore our bells, update the ringing room, recruit more ringers**

\* **Restoration projects, Faculties and Fund raising**

Detailed guidance is available on the Church of England website, along with further information about these FAQs:

<https://www.churchofengland.org/more/church-resources/churchcare/advice-and-guidance-church-buildings/bells-and-bell-ringing>

The CCCBR Stewardship & Management Workgroup can also offer advice. <https://ccbr.org.uk/resources/stewardship-and-management/>

\* **Advertising for new ringers and training new ringers**

The Association of Ringing Teachers (ART) has extremely useful material and resources to assist and encourage recruitment and training. Safeguarding becomes particularly important if young or vulnerable people are involved.

More information may be found here:

<http://ringingteachers.org/> and <https://cccbr.org.uk/about/workgroups/volunteer-and-leadership/>

***Members of the Guild of Clerical Ringers  
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