



SAVE OUR PARSONAGES

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Some reflections on lessons learned from this Essay Competition open to everyone in training for ordination in the Church of England will be posted here soon.

Meanwhile, the following pages announce the prize-winners and publish their essays

First Prize:

Sorrel Wood p.3

Joint Runners-up

Ashleigh Askwith p.5

Glen Ruffle p.7



PRIZE ESSAY COMPETITION

Open to everyone in training for ordination in the Church of England. Entries must be original works, of up to 1,000 words long, on the theme:

The Use Of The Parsonage For Parish Life Today

Entries should be submitted as an attachment to an email, with your name on the attachment, to Anthony Jennings, Director of Save Our Parsonages, at ajsjennings@hotmail.com

Entries must be received by 12 noon on Monday 6th January 2020.

The winner will receive a cheque for £500 and the runner-up a cheque for £50.

Entries will be judged by a panel comprising members of Save Our Parsonages. The judges' decision will be final.

www.saveourparsonages.com

This essay by Sorrel Wood, studying at Ripon College, Cuddesdon won First Prize in the 2019-20 competition held by Save Our Parsonages

The Use of the Parsonage for Parish Life Today

Sorrel Wood

The sprawling, Gothic parsonage captivated the nineteenth century literary imagination. From the Brontes at Haworth, pallid yet possessed by fiery passion, to the grotesquely comic Mr Collins pottering in the garden, to the yellowing Casaubon floundering in his study, the parsonage arguably defined an epoch. But what, if any, is its continued relevance and importance today?

Firstly, and perhaps counter-intuitively, the parsonage reminds us that the Church is more than buildings. I first realised I could no longer resist my calling to ordained ministry during a Wednesday evening communion service being held in the vicar's home. Usually, the Wednesday evening Eucharist is held in the choir stalls at church; a small, faithful band of six or so elderly folk who punch above their weight in spiritual depth and prayer. But during Lent, the 6:30pm communion moves to the vicarage, primarily because that is where the Lent group is based. But the shift is more than pragmatic: it's profoundly spiritual. Seeing that prayerful group gather on mismatched chairs, encircling the sacrament balanced on a wobbly coffee table, reminds us that Christ is not defined or contained by the church building. He is with the faithful, the centre of the worshipping community, from where his love ripples out to serve a desperately broken world.

The parsonage teaches us that Church is more than the building with the spire, because it is often integral to the building of community. The rector's home often models, and helps to build, the messy, flawed gift we call community. Whether that be tensions rising as a PCC meeting rolls later into the night, or a bereft woman bawling her eyes out, or a chaotic youth group dripping pizza onto the sofa, or a nervous wedding couple wringing a draft service sheet with trembling hands, the parsonage is where a vital chunk of ministry happens. It's where relationships begin to grow, and deepen, outside of the Sunday service.

This is not without cost: any clergy kid or long-suffering clergy spouse will recount with irritation the people who appear at odd hours, unannounced, on the doorstep, or who fail to read increasingly obvious signals and far outstay their welcome. Life in a parsonage is a sacrifice as well as a gift. But it is worth it. Almost certainly, in the long years of a life dedicated to ministry, at least one of the intrusive, uninvited visitors will be suicidal. Being charged with the cure of souls for a parish-worth of people is both an immense privilege and, at times, a crippling burden. But every soul matters immeasurably to God.

Secondly, the parsonage – again, perhaps ironically – reminds the congregation that the life of the church does not depend, or centre upon, the particular individual who happens to be the current incumbent. It's a cliché that the first thing one should do when moving into a clergy house is get the locks changed, because nobody knows for certain how many keys

exist or who has them. That is alarming from a security perspective, naturally, but it is also humbling. Many of the faithful worshippers will see several different incumbents, of all different shapes, sizes, family circumstances, personalities, and no doubt liturgical and theological preferences, move in and out of that house during their time listed on the parish directory. It will become clear at the first parish barbecue hosted by the new incumbent that nobody needs to ask where the downstairs loo is because they all already know. They probably also know where the pegs are hidden in the overgrown garden for the treasure hunt. The vast majority of guests at the barbecue have been there before. Some may make thoughtless comments about the furniture being the wrong way round, or preferring the previous dining table, or marching into the kitchen as if they own the place. Such behaviour is irrefutably annoying, but it marks a great truth: the life of the parish stretches back, and forward, many hundred years, and the current vicar is really only passing through.

Thirdly, the parsonage is inestimably important, because being a parish priest is not a job and it does not come with a salary. Certainly, it can feel like a job with a salary, especially when models are borrowed from the business world in a laudable attempt to improve Diocesan efficiency, but it is emphatically not. Priests receive a stipend, not a salary, because they are freed up by the Church from having a job, so that they can serve God in the ways demanded by their particular calling. They pray, not only for their parishioners, but often also in place of them: many of them are out at work, unable to attend the morning and evening office, and the priest lifts them all up to God. The shape of a priest's life is not the same as a nine to five job, although it is no more or less important. They are given a house, so as not to be bogged down by worldly matters like mortgage negotiations, because they are called to a particular life of leading worship in Word and sacrament, and of pastoral care for their flock. It may be frustrating when the new kitchen is chosen from a small selection stipulated by the Diocese, as opposed to having a free choice from all the kitchens in the world, but it is also hugely freeing.

And that word, freeing, brings me to my final point. The parsonage may feel like a burden: outdated, expensive to heat, in need of repair; and living in it can often feel like inhabiting a fish bowl. But, actually, it releases the clergy to fulfil their vocation. It teaches us something of what community can look like. In short, it aids us in our lifelong pilgrimage of learning how better to love God and love each other.

This essay by Ashleigh Askwith, training with the All Saints Centre for Mission and Ministry, a theological training institution with teaching centres across the Northwest, was Joint Runner Up in the 2019-20 competition held by Save Our Parsonages

The Use of the Parsonage for Parish Life Today

Ashleigh Askwith

The bricks slowly settled, one by one, nestled next to one another. Only time will tell if the house has been built on a firm foundation. A parsonage is a home, a refuge, a place of discovery, a place to grieve, a place of fellowship. But what really does a parsonage do in our parish lives today?

The Parsonage as Office

Enter any parsonage and behind one of the myriad of doors you will find an office, or at least somewhere set up to be an office. It may not be a room that parishioners are allowed to enter. It may be hidden away somewhere, only to be used by the Vicar. However, multiple rooms within the parsonage may be used for various church activities. The office seeps out from under the door and into the main body of the home.

But what are these church activities? Church activities can include but are not limited to: pastoral care, home groups, administration, study, prayer, hospitality. Space may be provided for a storage closet, a craft emporium, a youth centre, or a distribution centre. There can be a whole number of different people entering into the parsonage for a whole number of different reasons.

When a new Vicar takes up the parsonage they will have a whole host of different expectations of what takes place, and where, within the parsonage. Yet the parsonage is not just what the Vicar believes it to be. Parishioners also have their views on what a parsonage should provide, be it a blanket for the homeless, or a door to knock on when times are tough. For some there may be a barrier to get in at the church door but the parsonage may not contain the same restrictions.

So it can be a place where people meet God for the first time, show their anger and frustrations, a place full of laughter and hope, a place of refuge and a vast amount of learning, all backed with a deep level of prayer. But for some in society it is a place of irrelevance, or even held in contempt. For some there has been no beacon of hope from this building but voices of hypocrisy, and toxicity. That does not mean it cannot be a building of light once again, but we should recognise its irrelevance to some and the pain that may have been caused there.

A parsonage is brought to life through its uses. The buildings are designed (mostly) for their purpose of ensuring that they can be spaces used to help further God's mission within our parishes. They are the connection between the church and the community, as they allow

the Vicar to become part of the community also: not an outsider, but one living within the parish and within whatever living in the parish entails.

The Parsonage as Home

Yet the parsonage is a home. This is where the Vicar lives, eats and sleeps. They may have a family who live there also. So if the parsonage is a home, what does this mean?

The parsonage is a place of sanctuary, where the Vicar may be able to personally connect with God, yet also have rest and relaxation, just as God did on the seventh day. Being able to have a sacred space to which they can retreat can be extremely important for some and may mean that they are then able to provide better pastoral care whilst living out their vocation.

The parsonage may also have the Vicar's family living within it. A family that sees this vocation as much their own as it is the Vicar's. Who are there to support the community and offer whatever space is needed. However, they may also be a family that have their own vocation; who have different needs and desires. Both of these are acceptable. The parsonage being a home can mean that families have less of a burden on them, in the shape of knowing that they have a home to come back to. They also may need space away from the public life that ministry can often lead to. Giving them space in order that they too can better serve their communities in whatever capacity they see fit. A place away from the long public hours and the prying and judgmental eyes that clergy families often face.

Conclusion

A parsonage in many ways is what the Vicar and their family, if they have one, decides. It can be a hub of mission in which a hive of activity flows through it or a refuge in order that the community outside its walls can be better served. The uses of a parsonage are vast and will vary from parsonage to parsonage, Vicar to Vicar, and family to family. A parish will also have their own ideas on what they see a parsonage as offering and it is through this careful balance that a parsonage can be most useful. There are no set rules to a parsonage. There should be no expectations or ideals. A parsonage is a building that ultimately enhances the mission of God. It is almost like a Tardis, not necessarily bigger on the inside than out, but in that it can adapt to the needs of those who require it. The parsonage is a home, a refuge, a place of discovery, a place to grieve, a place of fellowship.

This essay by Glen Ruffle, studying at Ridley Hall, Cambridge was Joint Runner Up in the 2019-20 competition held by Save Our Parsonages

The Use of the Parsonage for Parish Life Today

Glen Ruffle

The very presence of the typical parsonage – often a large stone building in the centre of a picturesque village – is an affront to the human-centric illusion that says people can plan with certainty. Life is unpredictability, and while this student has still to finish his studies, he has learned this: only God knows the future.

The tragic result of the belief that we in the church can predict the future has been the loss of valuable heritage at knock-down prices. Often the very act thought to help finances – selling a parsonage – has in fact made matters worse; now there is no rental income, and no asset to leverage; vicars are forced into cars (adding to pollution) just to get to work.

The presence of the church and its often-nearby vicarage at the centre of communal life is deeply engrained in the subconscious of most British citizens. Imagine a village community, and in the centre of the thatched houses and oak trees conjured by the mind one will almost certainly find a towering spire: an ancient structure standing out against the modern reality of shiny solar-panelled roofs and identikit modern housing.

Even the regions of our cities started off as village communities, and they too were built around the church and its parsonage. And with the church so easy to find at the centre of communal life, logic deduces that the vicar can't be far away.

So the parsonage is placing clergy near the people, and – most importantly – near those who choose to visit a church. These people vary, but include the grieving, the searching, and the curious. There is no need to go and hunt for them, for they come to the graveyard; they come to the building to see its curiosities; they come to the oasis to find peace. And they come of their own volition.

In addition, the distinctive and varied architectural characteristics of parsonages help them stand out in their local communities so they can function better as strategic places of interest and outreach. Where else at the centre of communal life can one find a beautiful home that is almost obliged to be communal? When else can someone from a struggling, run-down estate drink tea for free in a safe, comfortable, treasure of heritage? For the parsonage is a private dwelling yet equally a public space: its resident committed to a strange life of self-sacrifice that welcomes in the needy, even when inconvenient.

Of course, many parsonage inhabitants would prefer to hide away and live anonymously! The ease with which a parsonage can be found – and targeted – requires its occupant to maintain a certain level of sharpness. There is no letting off the hook for the vicar to escape the ministerial calling. The spiritual ground needs to be kept fertile, for when trouble comes

to church, the sacrificial nature of the calling to ministry has to be remembered. Yes the parsonage can be a place of peace; but yes too it can be front line in the battle.

The vicarage is also providing a gentle reminder of identity. Looking at its Georgian columns or Edwardian windows, one is presented with more than a pretty picture. Here is an historical story, a place of importance to our ancestors.

So why was it so central? If modern people are willing to dig deeper, the questions lead on. Why is it so grand? Why so central to the village? Why did our forebears consider it a place of refuge, and its occupant someone they could gratefully serve? Were our ancestors slaves to corrupt superstition, or did their faith mean something more? And what does that vicar do? Does he really believe in that bygone religion of Christianity? Do you mean it *hasn't* been disproved?

These promptings disappear if the parsonage has become another private home...

And what of the incumbent? Sitting in a drawing room too big, surveying a lawn too long, the inhabitant of an old parsonage cannot help but remember "*this isn't mine*". The vicarage thus challenges the core of our society, provocatively witnessing that acquisition is, in fact, *not* everything.

This person, living in that house, is choosing to live as a resident alien, inhabiting a place that is not their own and yet being content with it, cobwebs and all. Here is a person – shock – who doesn't need to endlessly consume and own. Someone willing to lovingly steward a property that will never be theirs.

As well as the public witness, the structure is a daily private reminder to the present inhabitant that they are only temporary, and that many have gone before. The parsonage reminds us that we are links in a chain: as centuries of our ancestors have served here before us, so too future generations will build on our legacy. That what we have inherited might just be present for a reason we can't fully fathom, and that what we do today will have consequences we might not be able to foretell.

So in this era of box houses with the style of a filing cabinet, let us celebrate the (literally) central messages of the parsonage: that beauty matters. That there are values beyond acquisition. That the vicar is someone choosing to live a different life. And that we owe so much to our predecessors, that we have a duty to be careful we do not destroy things and are able to hand on our heritage to our successors.