

‘Becoming a curate raises all sorts of questions about what to expect, how to face the challenges and what to do if it goes wrong. This gem of a collection provides reassurance and much food for thought about how to negotiate being a curate in the Church today. It is a must-read for all future curates, and for anyone else (their families, training incumbents, church wardens, etc.) who will accompany them on their journey.’

*Dr Paula R. Gooder, Theologian in Residence, Bible Society*

‘This book is a rich resource of personal stories and insights around the experience of serving as a curate. They will help you understand the different parts of the journey and what this ministry is like today.’

*The Rt Revd Steven Croft, Bishop of Sheffield*

‘As someone who has been involved in the training of potential curates for many years I’ve often felt the lack of a resource that will help people think through exactly what this important role involves and prepare for the reality of being a curate. I’m delighted that Jonathon and Sonia have produced this excellent book which can fill that gap in an ideal way.’

*The Revd Dr Graham Tomlin, Dean, St Mellitus College*

‘This is an extraordinarily valuable collection of experiences and reflections around curacy. The diverse accounts will elicit equally diverse reactions from readers, and I would particularly recommend the book to those exploring calling and the practice of ministry in groups or one to one discussions.’

*The Very Revd John Witcombe, Dean of Coventry Cathedral and author of The Curate’s Guide (Church House Publishing, 2009)*

‘The main attraction of this collection of reflections is that they are broad and down to earth – there is something for everyone. The book brings together autobiography and well chosen anecdote with more analytical insight and wisdom about the doing and being of a curate. As such it will be a valuable resource for those exploring the possibility of ordination, for those in training or newly ordained as well as those responsible for the training and support of curates. I commend it warmly.’

*The Revd Stephen Ferns, Senior Selection Secretary, Ministry Division, The Archbishops’ Council*

‘A good curacy is the very best start to a fulfilling and fruitful ministry in the Church. *Being a Curate* very helpfully explores, through a blend of story and reflection, the opportunity and challenges for men and women

approaching ordination and then living the ordained life in its initial stages. There is much wisdom to be found within this book.’

*The Rt Revd Michael Perham, Bishop of Gloucester*

‘This book brings fresh, moving and relevant insights into an area of ministry often overlooked. With contributions from an impressive range of ordained and lay people, including training incumbents, bishops, theological educators and curates themselves, this book is a wonderfully practical, helpful and readable guide through various aspects of what it is like to be a curate in the Church of England today.

Based on personal stories as well as practical and theological reflections, *Being a Curate* explores the nature of ordination and raises issues that apply not just to curates but to everyone concerned with ministry in the Church.

One writer discovers that “being available is not passive but active” and that “being ordained isn’t a desk job”. A curate with physical disabilities writes about how her disabilities have challenged people’s perceptions and assumptions of the nature of ministry and even of the nature of God. Another curate realizes, somewhat disconcertingly, that by becoming ordained he has made a political decision and aligned himself in a new and different way with the Established Church and authority figures and with the Establishment in general. Yet another curate is led, to his delight, to see all of life as God’s “Holy Playground”.

*Being a Curate* is filled with wise advice born of a wealth of experience, deep theological reflection on God and ministry and honest, compelling and at times, extremely moving, personal stories. This book should be required reading for all ordinands and curates, but also for anyone, lay or ordained, who is interested in exploring the nature of ministry and what it means to be a Christian disciple.’

*Christina Rees, The Archbishops’ Council, Chairwoman of Women and the Church (WATCH) and a member of General Synod*

‘Anything that helps those being ordained, and those who will train them, to understand the nature of curacy is going to be a blessing for them and for the wider Church. This useful and insightful book highlights the variations of experience and context and helpfully notes the changes that take place both externally and internally – some predictable, others that come as a shock or surprise. The stories told lead to reflection, soul-searching and genuine learning. There is much wisdom to be found here.’

*The Ven. Jackie Searle, Archdeacon of Gloucester*

‘This book makes an important contribution to understanding just what it means to be ordained in the Church of England today, whatever shape

that ministry takes. There are inspiring and challenging questions, as well as practical insights. Not just useful, but a trigger for reflection on my own call and ministry as priest.'

*The Revd Dr Sandra Millar, Head of Projects and  
Development for The Archbishops' Council*

'Jonathon Ross-McNairn and Sonia Barron have drawn together a rich and diverse range of perspectives on what it is to be a curate in today's Church. Honest about the joys, challenges and sometimes difficulties of being a curate, the book highlights telling insights and important questions for all those involved in the curacy process. As such, it will make a valuable contribution to the thinking and practice of all those concerned to see curates flourish in the early years of ordained ministry.'

*The Revd Canon Dr Andrew Braddock, Director of the  
Department of Mission and Ministry, Diocese of Gloucester*



# BEING A CURATE

*Stories of what it's really like*



Edited by  
Jonathon Ross-McNairn  
and  
Sonia Barron



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*This book is dedicated to all ordained men and  
women who have said 'yes' to God's call to serve him.*



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We thank all our contributors who willingly gave their time to write up their experiences to share with others, and all those who have generously given their time to read scripts and endorse the book.

Our special thanks are due to Alison Barr, our commissioning editor, for her insightful advice when reviewing the scripts; and of course to her editorial team at SPCK.

Finally, we thank our spouses Emma and Tom, who have graciously allowed us time away from family and other commitments to work on the project. Without their support, encouragement and input it is highly likely that this book would not have been completed.



# Foreword

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Every few weeks, as a bishop, it's my privilege to license people to new ministries. Almost always the service will include a solemn moment when the licence and authority for ministry is read and handed by the bishop to the new incumbent. The bishop says: 'Receive this cure of souls which is both yours and mine.'

The word 'curate' comes from that phrase 'cure of souls' and it describes something very important at the heart of ordained ministry. Sometimes the words are paraphrased as 'the care of God's people', but they mean much more than this. A deacon or priest is called to help people to know God in Jesus Christ, and through Jesus to find healing and salvation in their lives. People live in families and communities, and the cure of souls involves ministry in the name of Christ to those families and communities as well as to individuals. The cure of souls which is entrusted to a new minister at a licensing service is far more than the pastoral care of the congregation. It is a responsibility and concern for the wellbeing, healing and salvation of everyone who lives in the parish, inside and outside the Anglican congregation. As the words imply, the cure of souls is a shared ministry: shared with the bishop, with fellow clergy, with authorized lay ministers and with the whole people of God.

A curate is someone who is learning to share in the cure of souls, normally alongside one or more experienced priests. A curacy is a time for learning and growing, when you feel the weight of the ministry entrusted to you but don't yet have to bear the full load.

God calls all kinds of people to ordained ministry and, as part of their ordained ministry, to be curates: old and young, rich and poor, men and women, from every class, race and social background. Everyone's experience of the journey to ordination and in their curacy is different. It really helps to listen to other people's stories and insights.

This book is a rich resource of personal stories and insights about serving as a curate. They will help you to understand the different parts of the journey and what this ministry is like today. As you read it, especially if you are exploring the path of ordained ministry, remember God's grace and love and remember God's call to a lifetime of ordained ministry in all kinds of roles with, at the centre, the cure of souls.

*Steven Croft, Bishop of Sheffield*



# *Introduction*

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This book is a collection of personal stories and reflections about being a curate in the Church of England. There are contributions from a broad range of people who are either curates themselves or who are or have been involved in curacies in some way. The book as a whole, through a blend of story and reflection, seeks to answer a number of key questions, including ‘What is it really like being a Church of England curate?’ and ‘What can we learn from the stories and reflections of others who are involved in the curacy process?’

It is intended for anyone who finds themselves at some stage in the curacy journey – whether already a curate, about to be ordained, in training or making those first steps of discernment towards a possible vocation to the priesthood. It is also intended for those who have responsibility for the training or oversight of curates or who may simply be curious about the reality of ordained life in the Church of England – thus the subtitle of the book, ‘Stories of what it’s really like’. Whoever you are, we hope that you will find something in this book that will inform and perhaps even inspire you.

The book starts with a look at ordination training from an ordinand’s and a training principal’s perspective. We have not considered selection and discernment as there are plenty of resources available in that area. We then move on to consider the pre-ordination retreat, the ordination service itself and those first few days in the strange new world that is ordained ministry. The Bishop of Gloucester, Michael Perham, takes us adeptly through these stages. There follow a number of contributions from curates or recent ex-curates, all telling the story of their curacy experience.

In our brief to contributors we emphasized the importance of contributions being real and grounded in order to offer an honest reflection about being a curate and curacies. Each story is, of course, different and can only be a ‘snapshot’, but taken together we hope that they will give you an insight into the reality of being a curate in the Church of England. Where necessary, the names of individuals mentioned have been changed in order to ensure anonymity; where names have not been changed, the prior consent of those concerned has been obtained.

You will notice that at the beginning of each chapter there is a profile of the author. Our intention is that the contents of this book should be

representative of the breadth and depth of the Church of England, and so there are contributions from men and women in differing contexts and from different church traditions. Recognizing that while all books have their limitations, we wanted our book to be as broad and inclusive as possible.

One of the key questions in relation to curacies is ‘What makes a good curate and a successful curacy?’ We have included a number of contributions that specifically address this question. As Lincoln Harvey points out in his chapter, the key relationship in any curacy is that between the training incumbent and the curate. We have therefore included two chapters written by experienced training incumbents looking at the nature of this relationship. There follows a chapter by Rosalyn Murphy on making the transition from curate to incumbent. There is no doubt that this transition is significant and needs to be carefully prepared for. While a single chapter can scarcely do justice to such an important topic, we have included it in order to highlight some of the areas to think about when moving on at the end of the curacy.

Unfortunately, some curacies encounter difficulties, despite the best of intentions. As Howard Worsley points out in his chapter, ‘You do not have to travel far in the Church of England to find a story about a difficult curacy.’ No book about being a curate would be complete without facing such a reality. This chapter – helpfully we hope – includes some thoughts and advice on how to address ‘thorny issues’ when they arise and also how to personally survive a difficult curacy.

We finish the book with a brief reflection on the value of sharing stories and some practical advice drawn from the contributions in this book and our own curacy experiences.

We are extremely grateful to all our contributors. It is an obvious point to make, but this book would simply not exist without their time, effort, prayer and thought. They have shared their stories and reflections with great insight, honesty, humour, warmth and generosity. It is not always easy to share our experiences, and some of the stories in this book do not make for easy reading. But it is important that the breadth of curacy experience is represented and that you, the reader, should be able to glimpse what it is really like *Being a Curate*.

*Jonathon Ross-McNairn and Sonia Barron*

*Part 1*

ORDINATION TRAINING





# 1

## *An ordinand's story*

JONATHON ROSS-McNAIRN

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*Jonathon is a full-time stipendiary curate. Prior to ordination, he practised as a commercial property solicitor in London and also served in the Army as a commissioned infantry officer. He trained for ordination at St Mellitus College in London and was ordained in Gloucester Cathedral in 2011. His church experience is predominantly in the evangelical tradition but his curacy is in an Anglo-Catholic setting serving two churches in Gloucester, one urban and the other rural.*

\* \* \*

There were quite a few people who had thought it strange that I should train to be a vicar. Part of me agreed with them. It did feel a bit odd but nevertheless I was able to start ordination training full of confidence and assurance. There were a number of reasons for this.

First, I was a recent 'Alpha convert' having come to faith through a powerful conversion experience on an Alpha course. I had encountered the risen Christ in an 'imaginative vision', not exactly on the road to Damascus – actually in a hall on a Pontins holiday camp – but the experience was categorical for me. Second, my sense of calling to ordination had been clear and at times almost audible. I remember cycling home from work along Islington High Street almost hearing God inviting me to give up being a solicitor and offer myself for ordination. Third, I had raced through the formal selection process. The Church of England had given me a resounding 'yes' and had publicly validated my vocation to the priesthood. So on day one of training I was keen and raring to go. It was undoubtedly a high point in my journey to ordination. However, my sense of confidence and assurance was not to last long.

As the training got under way and I started to read theology in depth, I found myself having to examine some of the assumptions underlying my faith. For example, I knew that Jesus had died on the cross for me, but what did that statement actually mean when examined? In addition, I had to grapple with penetrating and difficult questions. For example,

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