

Knocking at Heaven's Door

A discussion booklet about the casual caller at the church's door

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As a new vicar in North London, I found myself having to deal with some very difficult, manipulative, abusive, and on occasion aggressive callers at the vicarage door.

It was following a particularly unpleasant encounter that I discussed the situation with others who had similar experiences. A London conference on the subject was subsequently organised, and a CARIS working group convened to look at the problem.

We quickly discovered that the manageable situation of the past had dramatically changed and we were facing something quite new. The casual caller of the past was often a fairly amiable 'gentleman of the road' who wanted a 'cuppa' before continuing his journey. Sometimes he would offer to do a small gardening or sweeping job to earn a 'couple of bob'. These characters were well known and their demands were on the whole willingly met.

Today's caller is an altogether more challenging proposition. It is not unusual in London to find at the vicarage, church, or parish office door, young people asking for or even demanding money. They are sometimes drunk or on drugs, sometimes mentally ill, often with no-one else to turn to. Others are homeless and asking for a bed.

How does the caring person respond? Indeed, should they?

This booklet is a digest of the full report, 'Knocking at Heaven's Door' that has been produced by a working party from CARIS in the Diocese of London. It has been produced to encourage informed discussion at parish and deanery level, leading to a locally agreed policy and practice.

John Hall, Chair of 'Casual Caller' working party

Jan 1996

Early one evening there was a knock on the vicarage door.

It was tea-time, the week before Christmas, and the family were all at home. The vicar was called from his table.

The man standing there was a stranger. He was unsteady on his feet, and clearly under the influence of alcohol. Tall and muscular he started to demand money. But money would go straight on more drink, and besides it was the vicar's policy not to give money to callers. So the vicar asked why the money was needed.

The young man became more angry and said that it was for food. The vicar asked if he would like some food. It was agreed, and, closing the front door to leave the man safely outside, the vicar went to the kitchen to make sandwiches and a drink.

When these were delivered a few moments later, the man became very abusive and aggressive. He threw the food at the vicarage and went down the road hitting the church railings threatening the vicar if he called the police.

The vicarage family were very frightened, and one of the children did not want to leave the house on his own for the next week or two. The vicar was shaken.

It was this incident which initiated our work on the casual caller knocking at heaven's door.

People who call at the church or vicarage door for help including many asking for money. Their expectations are that the church is a place for help for people in need.

In 1994 CRISIS, with the help of St Botolphs, carried out a survey of 145 people who were seen begging. These characteristics are arguably very similar to those people calling upon the Church for help

- > People begging are of all ages, most are men.
- > Most money they get goes on food.
- > There is a strong link between begging and homelessness. Four in five were homeless the previous night.
- > Four in five people had previously had a home.
- > The loss of a partner was the most common reason for losing that home.
- > Nearly half had been in care.
- > A quarter had slept rough before the age of 16.
- > People begging were often very isolated from their families.
- > A third had mental health problems.
- > A third had a substance abuse problem, mostly alcohol.
- > 90% had had jobs in the past.
- > Most had been abused by the public, a third physically.

The very fact that those in need call upon the Church for help indicates that the Church is still seen as a place where help can be found.

The working group conducted a telephone survey of 51 incumbents in the London diocese.

- > Most callers ask for money. They rarely receive any.
- > A half come who are hungry and thirsty. They receive food and/or a cup of tea
- > A third want counselling, or simply time for a chat
- > Occasional requests for clothing, accommodation, furnishings and even a bath were also made.
- > Half the incumbents were receiving upwards of 15 callers a month, some over 60 callers a month.

A conference entitled "Knocking at Heaven's Door" was held in the Diocese of London in May 1994. Those at the conference shared their experiences.

- > Three people had had to face a knife, one had faced prisoners on the run. Aggressive callers were not unusual.
- > More commonly it was manipulative callers seeking money, the homeless, the mentally ill, beggars, the hungry.
- > Callers made carers feel vulnerable and inadequate. Fear, stress and guilt were often the result.
- > The unclear boundary between work and home raised significant questions about the traditional vicarage.

Ecclesiastes 9: 11-12

*I have seen something else under the sun:
The race is not to the swift
or the battle to the strong,
nor does food come to the wise
or wealth to the brilliant
or favour to the learned;
but time and chance happen to them all.
Moreover, no man knows when his hour will come;
as fish are caught in a cruel net,
or birds taken in a snare,
so men are trapped by evil times
that fall unexpectedly upon them*

? Do you think casual callers are victims of misfortune?

Matthew 7: 6-12

*"Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you. For everyone who asks receives; he who seeks finds; and to him who knocks the door will be opened."
"Which of you, if his son asks for bread, will give him a stone? Or if he asks for a fish, will give him a snake? If you, then, though you are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give goods to those who ask him! So in everything, do to others what you would have them do to you, for this sums up the law and the prophets. "*

? What do these words of Jesus teach us about our relationship with God and with those who call on us?

At the induction and institution of the incumbent of a parish, the bishop asks the parish priest the following questions:

Will you care for the people of this parish in the name of Christ?

You are, with your colleagues, to lead people in prayer and intercede for the whole parish, to bless and encourage in the name of the Lord all who come in search of God's grace. Will you serve them with joy...?

This is the only job description that an incumbent has. It makes it clear that the focus of all pastoral responsibility lies within a church structure and in each parish the ultimate local responsibility rests with the incumbent.

Usually the incumbent and their family live within the parish. Normally the vicarage or rectory is locally recognised as part of the church 'plant'.

Like the hospital, police station or petrol station, the incumbent's official residence is seen to be 'open' 24 hours a day, seven days a week.

This arrangement is not living 'above the shop' but living 'in the shop'. Not surprisingly it raises difficulties and creates stress.

- ? Why do clergy tend to see themselves as the sole focus of care giving?
- ? Is it reasonable to expect the vicar (or anyone else) to be available at all times, night and day?
- ? Should the vicar have to carry out pastoral duties from home?

Parish Clergy should ask:

- ? Do you see yourself as the sole focus of care?
- ? Do you pass on callers to other appropriate helpers?
- ? What model of care do you use? Is it reasonable in its expectations of yourself and your family?
- ? Have you developed a strategy to enable boundaries to be drawn in terms of what care is reasonable and possible?
- ? Where can you turn for advice and support?
- ? What are the Diocese's responsibilities in relation to such issues?
- ? Do you need to discuss this issue with your PCC? (see page 9)

Deaneries of Local Churches should ask:

- ? What local strategies exist?
- ? What information is available?
- ? What support and help is offered?
- ? What is the level and type of local need?
- ? Is what is offered the best possible, and is it effective?
- ? Is it supported by the local 'churches-together'?
- ? What is the best local forum in which to discuss these issues and implement strategies?
- ? What responsibilities should the Diocese have in relation to these issues?

Local Churches and PCCs should ask:

- ? Do you know and support the policy operated by the priest?
- ? Has it been discussed?
- ? Are you aware of the number of callers and the needs they bring?
- ? Are you aware of the help given in your name?
- ? Are you aware of the security implications for the clergy and clergy household?
- ? Do you see casual callers as the sole responsibility of the clergy?
Should the laity help and, if so, how?
- ? What training and support do you need?
- ? Would a church office be helpful?
- ? How often is your church open?
- ? Could a plan be devised to enable the church to be open for those wanting quiet and a place to pray?
- ? Does your church need an agreed policy on care for the casual caller?
(see pages 10 & 11)

The following guidelines are offered as a basis for discussion.

They may appear at first sight to be stark and uncompromising, but this is a reflection of the society in which we live and the uncertainties surrounding this issue.

- > Decide locally what level of need exists and what help will be offered. *(Some with years of experience say that the type of caller has changed so much that clergy should not attempt to get involved, except on the level of giving information, or making referrals.)*

If you decide that help will consist of **information only**:

- ✓ Try to ensure that callers never leave feeling rejected or unloved. Even when you do not give the help requested, something positive can be offered.
- ✓ Have consistent rules and let the caller know clearly and quickly where they stand. Tell them what is on offer.
- ✓ Do give information. Have a printed list of resource centres (local shelters, social services, psychiatric social worker, emergency social worker, Citizens' Advice Bureaux, Alcoholics Anonymous, CRUSE, Relate).
- ✓ Work with other local churches to provide care cover.
- × Do not undertake a pastoral engagement.
- × Do not invite the caller inside.

If you decide to offer **more than information**:

- ✓ Ensure that the ground rules are consistently applied.
- ✓ Say if you feel a demand or expectation is unreasonable
- ✓ Do hold on to the 'stories' that people tell.

- ✓ Make arrangements with a local café to provide food and tea on production of a voucher. Have a limit of about £4.
- ✓ Keep food from harvest services to hand out.
- ✓ A stock of canned drinks can save us having to make tea at an inconvenient time.
- ✓ Set times and boundaries when help is available and do not make knee- jerk responses 'on demand'
- ✓ Help callers with a long story to get to the point. Ask them, "What do you want me to do?"
- ✓ If appropriate, refer people to specialised caring agencies.
- ✓ Remember that the traditional response of a cup of tea and a sandwich can meet both spiritual and practical need, and demonstrates God's care for the caller.
- × Do not look for thanks.

Money

- > It generally helps to have a local 'no money' policy. But parishes may wish to exercise discretion in particular cases.
- > Demands for money often come when social services are closed. In fact they are never closed. The number of the duty social worker can be obtained from local police.
- > Demands for train tickets have been met by people going to buy the ticket, but callers can present the ticket for a cash refund.
- > Demanding money with menaces is a criminal offence.

Leader One thing have I asked of the Lord
 This is what I seek
 That I may dwell in the house of the Lord
 All the days of my life.
 To behold the beauty of the Lord
 And to seek him in his temple

 Who is it you seek?
 All **We seek the Lord our God.**
 Do you seek him with all your heart?

All **Amen. Lord have mercy**
 Do you seek him with all you soul?

All **Amen. Lord have mercy**
 Do you seek him with all your mind?

All **Amen. Lord have mercy**
 Do you seek him with all your strength?

All **Amen, Lord have mercy**

Reader: A clergyman was at prayer, alone in the church. In the middle of his prayers a man came in. He recognised him as the man who had come to his door nearly six weeks before to borrow a pound. "I've called you a number of times to repay you," said the man, "but you were never there. I've got some work to go to today. Thank you." Crossing himself, the man turned and left the church. As the clergyman watched him go, he thanked God for him, and not being one normally to weep, found tears in his eyes.

Prayer: You are the caller
 You are the poor
 You are the stranger at my door

 You are my wanderer
 The unfed
 You are the homeless
 With no bed

 You are the man
 Driven insane
 You are the child
 Crying in pain

 You are the other who comes to me
 If I open to another you are born in me.
 (from D. Adam "The Edge of Glory", Triangle 1985. p.104)

