

Diocese of Ontario

A HISTORY OF THE OFFICE OF CHURCHWARDEN

The Churchwardens are the chief lay officers of a parish and share with the Incumbent responsibility for its administration. In a parish containing two or more congregations, each congregation may have its own pair of Churchwardens or two Churchwardens may act for the whole parish. (Canon C1)

The history of the office reaches far back in the story of the English people. As Christianity spread over England the whole country was gradually divided into parishes. Each parish was a district, usually co-extensive with a 'township', under a priest known as the Incumbent or 'curate', who was responsible to his bishop for the care ('cure') of the souls of his parishioners, and who came to be known as the 'parson', since he was at first the only person who legally represented the parish for many purposes.

From an early time, the parish was an important unit of English local government and the church or churchyard was a meeting place of the parishioners, who became known as the 'vestry' because they often met in that room under the chairmanship of the parson. In medieval times there grew up a custom of annual selection by the parson and the vestry of two parishioners, known as Churchwardens, to be responsible for the fabric and the furniture of the church, who gradually became the executive officers of the parish.

From time to time the state imposed on the Churchwardens and the vestry, civil duties, such as repair of the roads and bridges, appointment of constables, the care of the poor and raising money by taxes for these purposes. In more modern times these responsibilities were gradually transferred to other authorities, and the English parish and its officers are now purely ecclesiastical institutions.

When the Province of Upper Canada was founded in 1791, it was contemplated by the British and provincial governments that the Church of England would become the established Church of the province. Rectories were established by the government as settlement advanced; they were endowed with 'crown lands'. By the Parish and Town Officers Act of 1793, town wardens were to be elected annually by the inhabitants of every settled township, to have charge of the rudimentary local government of the township. Where there was an Anglican Church with an Incumbent, one warden was to be chosen by the Incumbent and one by the people, and the two were popularly known as Churchwardens. This arrangement continued in townships until Baldwins' Municipal Act of 1849, but was strongly resisted by adherents of other faiths. The unallocated clergy reserves were taken back by the government and compensation was paid to the Church. The *Freedom of Religion Act* of 1851 made it clear that we were to have no established church in this province and forbade endowment of other rectories. Since then, in this province as in England, Churchwardens have been simply ecclesiastical officials of the Anglican Church.