



## #vicargate

One of the odder stories: earlier this week, *Newsnight*, the BBC2 late night show, had some people on as 'Vox Pops' to give the view of the general public about the current Brexit deal. One of them was a woman called Lynn, in a light blue shirt and a dog collar.

Among various aspects of her life, she is a pastor of a church, but as it happens it is a church that is so far on the fringe that it is barely a church: "Seeds of Wealth" ministries. From what I can tell, she genuinely does do something churchy, though heaven only knows who attends her church. And there's no law against wearing a dog collar. But it's a bit weird. Anyway, she argued in favour of Theresa May's deal, for Brexit.

Then, Twitter went crazy. Under #vicargate, there was general outrage not only that she wasn't who she purported to be, but that *Newsnight* was indicating she was someone who she wasn't. Hence *Newsnight* was guilty of 'fake news'. But *Newsnight* responded that they hadn't actually made any specific statement that she was a "Church of England" vicar. And on and on, in the way that Twitter does.

So for the record, here are some facts about the word 'vicar'. Not all priests are vicars; not even all Church of England priests are vicars.

The criteria for being a vicar are these:

A. you need to have been ordained a priest in the

Church of England. My friend Stan also wears a dog collar and does much the same job as me, but he's a Methodist, so he isn't a vicar.

- B. You need to do a job where you look after the souls of a parish or local area. Hence, when I worked a few years ago as a school chaplain, I was priest in the Church of England, but I wasn't a vicar: I was a chaplain
- C. You need to have a few legal things in place. So, while I am a vicar, I have an Anglican priest friend up the road who is a 'priest in charge' and isn't technically a vicar for reasons I don't quite understand but are to do with tenure, I think. If you are from a really old parish, you tend to be called a 'rector' because 500 years ago, you had the right "rect" to 10% of all the produce from the local farms. Those were the days... Surbiton isn't that old a place, so I am a vicar rather than a rector. The etymology is that I am around 'vicariously' for when the Bishop can't make it.

But most people don't know these things. They just think we're all 'vicars'. And none of us particularly mind, whether priests in charge, chaplains, or rectors. Except it's kind of irritating when 10,000 people bang on about who counts as a 'vicar' when (understandably) they really don't know. But it doesn't stop them telling everyone else about it.

*Nov2018. Thought for the Train is a short column by the Rev Robert Stanier, the vicar of St Andrew and St Mark, Surbiton, for people to read on the train. You can also read "Thought for the Train" at [www.surbitonchurch.org.uk](http://www.surbitonchurch.org.uk).*