



Panel Study Wave 3

# Covenant, Calling and Crisis

Autonomy, Accountability and Wellbeing among Church of England Clergy

January 2023

LIVING **ministry**



# The Living Ministry Research Project

## Aim

Living Ministry supports the work of the Church of England's Ministry Council and the wider church by providing ongoing, in-depth analysis to help those in dioceses, theological education institutions and the national church understand what helps ordained ministers flourish in ministry.

## Objectives

- To understand the factors that enable ordained ministers to flourish in ministry;
- To understand how these factors relate to ministerial education and continuing development;
- To understand how these factors vary according to person, background, training pathway, type of ministry, context etc.;
- To understand how ministerial flourishing changes and develops over time and at different stages of ministry.

## Methods

- A ten-year, mixed-methods, longitudinal panel study, launched in 2017;
- Focussed qualitative studies reporting on specific topics or perspectives.

## Reports and resources

Findings from Living Ministry are disseminated to dioceses, theological education institutions, the national church and associated organisations to inform understanding and good practice. In particular, as well as supporting the work of the Ministry Council and the Remuneration and Conditions of Service Committee, Living Ministry analysis has informed and continues to contribute to the General Synod initiative to promote and support clergy wellbeing through the 2020 Covenant for Clergy Care and Wellbeing. Research reports and practical resources are available online at <https://www.churchofengland.org/living-ministry>. *How Clergy Thrive* (2020) and *'If it Wasn't for God'* (2022) were produced in partnership with Clergy Support Trust.

## Panel study reports

- *Mapping the Wellbeing of Church of England Clergy and Ordinands* (2017)
- *Negotiating Wellbeing: Experiences of Ordinands and Clergy in the Church of England* (2018)
- *Ministerial Effectiveness and Wellbeing: Exploring the Flourishing of Clergy and Ordinands* (2019)
- *Moving in Power: Transitions in Ordained Ministry* (2021)
- *'You don't really get it until you're in it.' Meeting the Challenges of Ordained Ministry* (2022)
- *Clergy Wellbeing in a Time of Covid: Autonomy, Accountability and Support* (2022)
- *Covenant, Calling and Crisis: Autonomy, Accountability and Wellbeing among Church of England Clergy* (2023)

## Focussed studies

- *Collaborative Ministry and Transitions to First Incumbency* (2019)
- *The Mixed Ecologists: Experiences of Mixed Ecology Ministry in the Church of England* (2021)
- *'If it Wasn't for God': A Report on the Wellbeing of Global Majority Clergy in the Church of England* (2022)

## Resources

- *How Clergy Thrive: Insights from Living Ministry* (2020) is available in print and online along with a range of accompanying resources.
- A podcast accompanying *'If it Wasn't for God'* is available online.



# **Covenant, Calling and Crisis**

## **Autonomy, Accountability and Wellbeing among Church of England Clergy**

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Living Ministry Panel Study Wave 3

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## Executive Summary

### Background and method

This report presents qualitative findings from the third wave of the ten-year Living Ministry research. It builds on the Wave 3 survey, exploring clergy wellbeing during the covid-19 pandemic along with issues of autonomy, accountability and support. 63 people took part through individual and group interviews held on Zoom. A framework analysis based on the categories of spiritual and vocational wellbeing, physical and mental wellbeing, relationships, and participation was used to address wellbeing experiences (financial and material wellbeing was excluded because interviews preceded rises in the cost of living), while autonomy and accountability were explored through the lens of self-determination theory, which defines autonomy as acting in line with one's interests and values.'

### Wellbeing during the pandemic

- The qualitative analysis generally supports quantitative findings suggesting **varied experiences** between participants and through time, but an **overall decline in wellbeing** since Wave 2 (2019).
- Most wellbeing challenges **pre-existed and were exacerbated by the pandemic**.
- In general, **incumbents not yet looking to retirement struggled more** than curates who, with less responsibility and less vocational disruption, were able to recover more easily.

### Physical and mental wellbeing

- Experiences of lockdown were split between those who enjoyed a slower pace of life and ministry and those who worked harder than usual, including some hospital chaplains. Contributing factors to **workload** in parish ministry included moving online, heightened pastoral demands and reduced participation by congregations.
- Other implications of **lockdown** included varied effects on fitness and levels of pressure; stress of forced distance from family; business or employment concerns for some self-supporting ministers; and the impact on mental health of not being able to leave one's home or parish.
- The third, winter lockdown was the hardest due to **cumulative exhaustion** and **responsibility for decisions** regarding public safety. For similar reasons, along with increased workload, many clergy found the Autumn 2021, post-lockdown period even more difficult.

### Relationships

- Distance from **congregations** aggravated isolation and loneliness although some found opportunities for deeper relationship. Some congregation members were highly supportive while others withdrew. Several clergy experienced challenges navigating widely contrasting perspectives regarding covid-19.
- **Colleagues**, including deanery chapter, local clergy, staff teams and other groups and networks were variously deeply supportive, non-supportive or absent. Some chaplains struggled to find support in local churches.

- Participants emphasised **family** relationships, which increased in priority for some through the pandemic. Challenges included distance from family; supporting children at home or university; self-isolation with older or more vulnerable family members; other family health issues; and work-family boundaries during lockdown. Family was also a valued source of support for many and some benefitted from spending more time with family. **Friends** were also important and some single clergy struggled with being distanced from friends.

## Participation

- Participation, e.g. in the wider diocese, can have both **negative and positive effects** on other aspects of wellbeing.
- For some, greater **diocesan uncertainty and turmoil** has meant less reliable support, breakdown in trust and relationship, and increased distance from the diocesan centre. For others, this period has led to greater participation (desired or undesired).
- Some clergy differentiate between **negative experiences of the diocese as an institution and positive personal support and care from senior clergy**. Several participants reported feeling a lack of voice in established structures and suspicion regarding decision-making processes. Perceived support from bishops varied. Gestures of care are only valued if in the context of a wider and sustained environment of support and connection.

## Spiritual and vocational wellbeing

- **Spirituality sustains wellbeing** during difficult times. Clergy may also experience vocational fulfilment at physical, mental and/or relational cost.
- **Challenges to spiritual wellbeing** included disrupted ministry; disrupted spiritual rhythms (e.g. retreats); and exhaustion during lockdown and/or reopening.
- Opportunities for **spiritual repletion** included a slower pace and more prayer during lockdown, and online activities and resources.
- **Vocational discouragements** included restrictions to ministerial practice; high levels of workload; declining attendance; barriers to parochial vocation (for chaplains); and concerns over the state of the Church of England, including e.g. jobs, cuts, restructuring, pastoral reorganisation, and leading congregations through change. Some expressed a sense of institutional anxiety intensified by the pandemic, impacting vocational wellbeing.
- Contributors to **vocational fulfilment** included pastoral ministry and funerals (for some); chaplaincy (along with immense challenges during the pandemic); valuing of previously deprioritised skills; becoming more established in ordained ministry; and affirmation and support from senior clergy in discerning and settling into new roles.

## Autonomy and accountability

- The qualitative analysis supports the quantitative findings that many clergy **struggle to measure their work performance**.
- Three spheres of accountability were identified:

- **Formal:** legal responsibilities, finances, attendance, MDR etc.; quantifiable, structured, easily reported or monitored indicators; draw on a contractual framework. Clear accountability structures but low vocational engagement.
- **Felt:** relationally and vocationally rooted; primarily God and parishioners (also senior clergy); prayer, theological reflection, informal feedback, discernment, fulfilment of calling; day-to-day ministry. Accountability is unclear but highly vocational.
- **Chosen:** intentionally set up or engaged with; reflective of practice; e.g. peer groups, spiritual direction, pastoral supervision, mentors and coaches. Put in place to provide accountability in areas of ministry most central to vocation but often unclear expectations and consequences and often squeezed out under time pressure.
- In day-to-day ministry, clergy may feel they have little accountability and high autonomy, while simultaneously, with regard to strategic and administrative expectations, high accountability and little autonomy. **Attention can be diverted from vocationally fulfilling activities towards more measurable, formal tasks.**
- Clergy are **most autonomous when vocationally fulfilled**. Clergy wellbeing during the pandemic depended partly on how able they were to act in line with their values (i.e. autonomously), e.g. regarding opening churches and ways of working.
- Clergy seek **accountability that supports them to act in line with their values** (i.e. autonomously) and, therefore, to fulfil their vocation.
- **Trust is important to accountability**, especially in the context of covenantal relationships. Clergy feel more accountable to those with whom they are in good relationship and share values.
- **Collaboration** is a common value among clergy, therefore receiving input and being accountable can be integral parts of acting autonomously.
- Three gazes are important to accountability: **God, self and other**, brought together in constructive conversation through theological reflection alone or with others.
- **Supportive supervision** is helpful, whether supporting fixed goals and measures or working with co-created, qualitative and regularly reviewed objectives. Difficulties arise when an external gaze is absent or trust is lacking. Clergy need both to maintain critical distance from and to accept challenge and criticism.

## Acronyms

BAP	Bishop's Advisory Panel
DCC	District Church Council
GDPR	General Data Protection Regulation
IME	Initial Ministerial Education
MDR	Ministerial Development Review
OLM	Ordained Local Minister
PCC	Parochial Church Council
SDF	Strategic Development Funding
SDT	Self-Determination Theory
TEI	Theological Education Institution
TI	Training Incumbent



## Introduction

### Background

This report forms part of the Living Ministry longitudinal study into clergy wellbeing, which accompanies four cohorts of ordained ministers through their ministry to understand what helps them to flourish. The pages that follow represent perspectives and experiences gathered through qualitative interviews conducted in the autumn of 2021, as part of the third wave of the research, and build on the survey data collected in March 2021 and reported in *Clergy in a Time of Covid: Autonomy, Accountability and Support*.<sup>1</sup>

As the title of the latter report suggests, this third wave of Living Ministry has explored with the research participants, along with the ongoing inquiry into their wellbeing, the concepts of autonomy, accountability and support. The timing of the data collection, covering the two years since the Wave 2 interviews in Autumn 2019, meant that the Wave 3 narratives were situated in the context of the covid-19 pandemic, including all three periods of national lockdown. The pandemic, then, while not the explicit focus of this research, acts as the lens through which both aspects of the analysis are viewed. Following the structure of the quantitative report, the analysis in this paper considers first the wellbeing of participants during the pandemic and, second, how they experience autonomy and accountability.

### Framing wellbeing

Understanding wellbeing is at the core of the longitudinal element of Living Ministry, therefore we continue to use the framework developed at the beginning of the research. Living Ministry takes a ‘quality of life’ approach to wellbeing, exploring five domains of wellbeing (physical and mental; spiritual and vocational; relationships; financial and material; and participation in the life of the wider church) and how they interrelate.<sup>2</sup> Complementary to the longitudinal research, some of the Living Ministry focussed studies will consider the application of this framework to the experiences of specific groups of clergy. At the time of writing, the first of these, exploring the wellbeing of UK Minority Ethnic and Global Majority Heritage clergy, is nearing completion.

### Framing autonomy and accountability

In *Clergy in a Time of Covid*, we discussed the concepts of autonomy and accountability, noting that the primary basis of clergy working relationships is covenant rather than contract. To summarise: the nature of covenant, characterised by mutuality and grace rather than by transaction and penalty, leaves it vulnerable to exploitation both by clergy (if they prioritise autonomy over accountability) and of clergy (if accountability is privileged over autonomy in excessive demands and self-sacrifice). We settled on a

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<sup>1</sup> L. McFerran and L. Graveling (2022), *Clergy in a Time of Covid: Autonomy, Accountability and Support*, Archbishops’ Council.

<sup>2</sup> For further detail see previous reports, e.g. L. Graveling (2018), *Negotiating Wellbeing: Experiences of Ordinands and Clergy in the Church of England*, Archbishops’ Council.

conceptualisation of autonomy that includes a sense of ownership of one’s actions and behaviours and is therefore distinct from ‘independence’ or ‘agency,’ and whose opposite is heteronomy, being subject to or ruled by an external person or force. We explored this in the panel survey through questions asking about scope to make decisions and levels of input from others. We assessed four key elements of accountability (expectations, information, discussion and consequences) by asking about four aspects of accountability spaces: how far they help to measure performance, to ensure one does one’s role well (shaping performance), to allow reflection on practice, and to provide feedback and support.

In the qualitative analysis, we build on these concepts, delving deeper into questions raised from the survey about the desire expressed by clergy for both autonomy and collaboration; about what performance measurement might look like in the context of ordained ministry; about what kinds of accountability work well in ordained ministry; and about how the church might best balance autonomy and accountability to support its clergy.

To do this, we borrow from psychology to draw on Self-Determination Theory (SDT), on which we touched briefly in the previous report. SDT claims that human beings have three basic psychological needs: autonomy, relatedness and competence. The definition of autonomy, which is the focus of this report, is when ‘one’s behaviours are self-endorsed, or congruent with one’s authentic interests and values.’<sup>3</sup> To be acting autonomously, therefore, a person must be acting in line with their interests and values. How far this is the case depends on motivations. The highest levels of autonomy are reached when a person is intrinsically motivated, in other words, doing something simply for the sake of doing it, perhaps because they find it fulfilling or enjoyable. Extrinsic motivations come from outside and fall into four categories. At the least autonomous end of the scale are ‘external regulation’ or control, usually through rewards and punishments, and ‘introjected regulation,’ where a person has partially internalised extrinsic motivations and acts, for example, out of guilt, fear of disapproval, or to avoid shame. Extrinsic motivations can also contribute to autonomy if the person identifies with them to some extent (‘identified regulation’) or, more strongly, if they are integrated with the person’s other beliefs and values (‘integrated regulation’).<sup>4</sup> We will explore later in the report how these motivations play out in the lives of the clergy in our cohorts.

## Methodology

Living Ministry is a mixed-methods project and this qualitative report builds not only on previous waves of the research but also on the quantitative analysis conducted through the panel survey in March 2021 and to which we will refer at points in this report. While quantitative research is helpful for identifying patterns and generalising across datasets and between variables, it cannot go beyond the specific questions asked and the statistics produced inevitably raise further questions about how and why they occur. To understand what lies behind the numbers, we turn to qualitative analysis.

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<sup>3</sup> R. Ryan & E. Deci (2018), *Self-Determination Theory: Basic Psychological Needs in Motivation, Development, and Wellness*, New York: The Guilford Press, p.10.

<sup>4</sup> See Ryan & Deci *op cit.* pp.14-15 and p.193.

As in previous waves, the qualitative data were collected through individual and group interviews with clergy drawn from the same panel of participants. All 85 of those who had taken part in Wave 1 were invited and 63 people participated. This was nine fewer than Wave 2 and included two who did not take part in that wave. Numbers of participants across the three waves by cohort and gender are shown in the table below.

	<b>Wave 1</b>	<b>Wave 2</b>	<b>Wave 3</b>
<b>Ordained 2006</b>	14	13	10
<b>Ordained 2011</b>	18	16	13
<b>Ordained 2015</b>	26	19	18
<b>Started IME 1 2016</b>	27	24	22
<b>Female</b>	49	40	35
<b>Male</b>	36	32	28
<b>Total</b>	85	72	63

In line with Waves 1 and 2, interview groups were based on cohort in order to maximise commonalities among participants. Where possible, participants were grouped with people they had already met during previous waves of the research, although this depended on diaries (including several short-notice changes due to illness, funerals and other reasons reflecting the nature of clergy life) and the final groups varied between two and four participants. Those who were not able or preferred not to attend a group session were interviewed individually. Interviews took place in October and November 2021.

There were two key differences compared with previous waves. First, the same researcher conducted all the interviews, which deprived the research of the reflection brought by the second researcher but was helpful in allowing the person analysing the data to have met and listened first-hand to all, rather than half, the participants, and for all the participants to have met the primary researcher. Second, the interviews took place online, using Zoom. This was largely because of concerns about covid-19: although most restrictions had ended in July, there were fears of new variants emerging and participants had different levels of vulnerability and concern. The use of Zoom had some drawbacks, including limiting interpersonal connection between researcher and participants and among participants, and occasional technical issues. However, it was by then a familiar space for all the participants and so, especially given the small numbers in each group, did little to inhibit conversation. For the research team, the online format allowed for greater time and cost efficiency in three ways: first, in simplifying the arranging of interviews; second, in removing costs of venues and cost and time of travel (including reimbursing the travel expenses of participants); and, third, in providing for cheaper and more accurate transcription of interviews. More importantly, it also relieved time pressure on participants who would otherwise have had to travel to their interview, and allowed face-to-face interaction for those who, in previous waves, had had to take part by telephone.

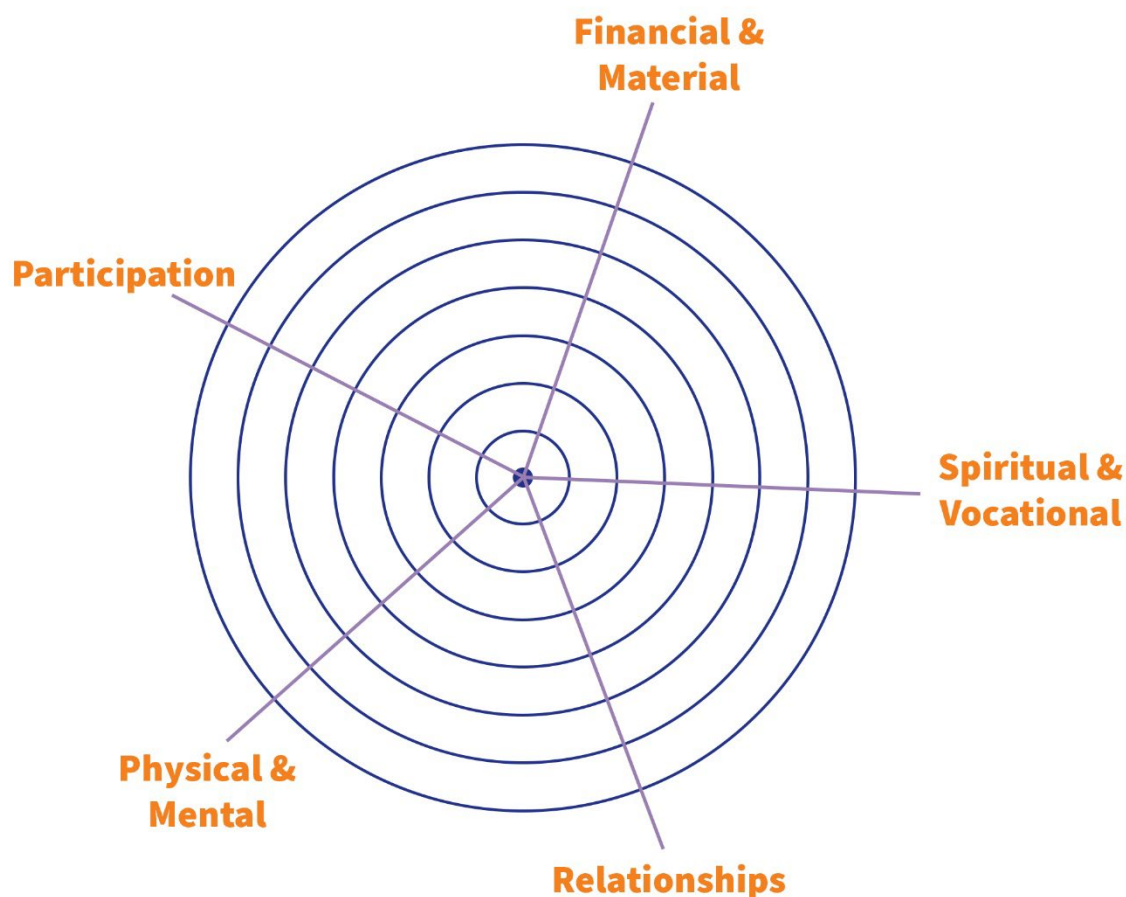
Interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed and analysed using the NVivo qualitative data analysis software. Framework analysis was continued from previous waves for the longitudinal inquiry into wellbeing, allowing a view of each participant’s whole narrative of wellbeing across all domains and through all three waves of research. Autonomy, accountability and support were explored in relation to wellbeing and also using categories drawn from SDT. It was beyond the scope of this report to conduct a full analysis of axes of social difference such as age, gender and ethnicity.<sup>5</sup>

To address the dual issues of autonomy, accountability and support, and wellbeing, interviews were divided into two parts, although discussion was fluid because of the interrelationships between concepts. The first part repeated the approach taken in Waves 1 and 2, using a ‘wellbeing map’ (below) to frame a conversation about participants’ wellbeing and how it is supported. Participants were invited to reflect on significant changes since their previous participation in the research and to mark for each domain where they would currently place themselves, annotating as appropriate, with the centre of the circles representing the ideal and the outside representing severe difficulty. This method provided a focus for discussion and a framework that ensured consistency across interviews while allowing participants the freedom to shape the conversation and talk about things that were important to them. Some, for example, chose to speak at length of their experiences of lockdown while, for others, the pandemic simply formed the context to other issues affecting their wellbeing. Some participants found it helpful to move around the wellbeing map systematically, while others preferred to focus on specific domains of wellbeing. The method was designed for collection of data longitudinally, providing a record of wellbeing during previous waves of the research. Where possible, participants were provided with their completed Wave 1 or Wave 2 map to help them reflect on changes to their wellbeing. Repeatedly asking about similar areas at different time intervals not only enables the exploration of change over time; it also provides rich contextual data and allows the participant to talk about details and situations (for example to do with health issues, sexuality, or specific relationships) they had not previously mentioned, whether because they had not had time, there was no apparent relevance, or because of increasing trust in the researcher.

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<sup>5</sup> As noted in previous reports, the voices of UKME/ Global Majority Heritage clergy are extremely limited among the qualitative participants.

## Living Ministry Wellbeing Map



To explore autonomy and accountability, participants were invited to reflect on three broad questions, building on the quantitative survey analysis. The first (*Where in your ministry would you like more or less scope to make decisions yourself? Where would you like more or less input from others into decision-making?*) dug more deeply into the quantitative finding that, while for most aspects of ministry respondents generally desired greater scope to make decisions, they also did not wish to make decisions alone and wanted more rather than less input from others into decision-making.

The second (*How do you know if you're doing a good job? How do you know what 'good' looks like?*) explored the conclusion that 'clergy are far better provided with spaces to reflect and receive feedback than spaces to measure and manage performance. Ministerial Development Review (MDR) was the only place that more than one fifth of respondents rated as helpful to measuring performance, and MDR itself was only found helpful for this by 39% of respondents.' The survey analysis raised the question of the nature of performance assessment within covenantal relationships, including both relevance and best practice.

The third question, (*To whom do you feel accountable?*) allowed participants the space to discuss accountability in ordained ministry without being constrained by categories imposed on them by the

researcher. Participants inevitably reflected not just on the individuals or groups to whom they were accountable, but also on the nature of accountability in different relationships.

The nature of qualitative research has been laid out in previous reports<sup>6</sup> and will not be repeated here. What has been striking in this wave of Living Ministry is the deep appreciation for the research articulated by participants. Participants in qualitative research often thank the researcher at the end of an interview, often to the surprise or discomfort of the latter, who is aware of the time and emotional costs of taking part. Living Ministry participants have expressed appreciation for a range of aspects of participation. For some, particularly those who are more isolated, interviews provide an opportunity to talk about their experiences and be listened to with no repercussions for their own ministry: as one participant said, ‘it’s lovely to be able to actually talk about it.’ Many of those taking part in group interviews enjoy hearing the experiences of other clergy at a similar stage of ordained ministry and, although the interviews are about listening to each other rather than offering advice, this interaction can itself be transformative. Beyond the interpersonal impact of the interviews, participants also express appreciation of their experiences being represented and listened to by the national church and the hope that their participation will make a tangible difference to the wellbeing of clergy more widely. With such a large and varied sample it is, of course, impossible to include every experience of every participant in every report; however, it is hoped that through the course of the longitudinal project all participants will see their stories represented. In this report, every care has been taken to protect the anonymity of the participants, including changing minor details in places.

With the research now in its third iteration and seeing some (fairly low) attrition in participation rates, it is of course likely that those who continue to engage are those who most enjoy taking part. Many of those value the longitudinal nature of the research which provides them with a framework for sustained reflection on their own wellbeing and their ordained ministry, along with a developing rapport with the researcher, which increases engagement with each wave. In addition, the first major resource published from Living Ministry between Waves 2 and 3, *How Clergy Thrive*<sup>7</sup>, has boosted confidence in the value of the research, and it is also possible that, with many clergy experiencing increased challenges and isolation during the first two years of the covid-19 pandemic, for the reasons given above, some clergy appreciate even more the space provided by the interviews to be listened to and to listen to others.

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<sup>6</sup> See Graveling (2018) *op cit.* and L. Graveling (2021), *Moving in Power: Transitions in Ordained Ministry*, Archbishops’ Council; and R. Perrin and L. Graveling (2022), ‘You Don’t Really Get It Until You’re In It’: *Meeting the Challenges of Ordained Ministry*, Archbishops’ Council.

<sup>7</sup> L. Graveling (2020), *How Clergy Thrive: Insights from Living Ministry*, London: Church House Publishing.

## Wellbeing during covid

### Introduction

The Wave 3 survey, conducted in March 2021 and open to everyone in the four Living Ministry cohorts, generated the following key findings about clergy wellbeing during the first year of the pandemic:<sup>8</sup>

- The aspects of wellbeing hit the hardest during the pandemic were mental wellbeing and relationships, with 42% of clergy reporting their mental wellbeing to be worse and 44% reporting feeling more isolated in their ministry than before the pandemic.
- More clergy reported an improvement than a fall in their financial and material wellbeing. Some were financially affected by family situations; some reported concerns about parish finances.
- Parochial clergy were most likely to report a drop in vocational fulfilment. This may have been partly temporary, e.g. due to restrictions on sacramental ministry, and partly longer-term reassessment.
- Beyond this, no groups across role, remuneration, tradition, gender, age or household structure appeared to fare significantly worse than others for any aspect of wellbeing. Responses varied within these groups, suggesting highly contextualised experiences and contrasting preferences regarding working practices.
- Certain groups, including curates, chaplains and clergy families, faced specific challenges.
- Disengagement from work was difficult: more than half of respondents (54%) did not take all their annual leave in 2020, compared with 34% in 2018, though a similar proportion (74% in Wave 3 and 78% in Wave 2) normally took at least one day off each week.
- Spiritual wellbeing may have fared better: the proportion of clergy reporting they had adequate time to pray increased from 68% in Wave 2 to 76% in Wave 3, matched by an increase in those who spent adequate time in prayer, up from 38% in Wave 2 to 47% in Wave 3. However, engagement in spiritual direction and retreats fell.
- Despite being in lockdown at the time of the survey, most respondents felt they had the tools and resources they needed, suggesting clergy had adapted to restrictions.

In the qualitative analysis we look in detail at some of these areas, in particular the physical and mental, relational, and vocational challenges facing clergy. We also explore how diocesan environments have influenced the wellbeing of the participants. Because both the quantitative and qualitative data were collected before the current cost-of-living crisis began, financial and material wellbeing is likely to have changed considerably in the intervening period and therefore is not a focus of this report.

Although this wave of Living Ministry covers the first two years of the covid-19 pandemic and so the narratives must be understood in that context, not all the experiences described by the participants relate directly to the pandemic. The method set out above allowed participants to reflect on how their wellbeing had changed and what had affected it, rather than starting with specific events and assessing how they had

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<sup>8</sup> McFerran & Graveling *op cit.* p.2.

affected their wellbeing. While for some participants the pandemic had been the major influencing factor in their wellbeing, others talked about a range of different things such as job moves, relationships, and other health issues. Indeed, beyond the pandemic itself, few of the issues described in this report are new. Rather, the pandemic has highlighted and exacerbated issues that already existed, including the key challenges to wellbeing of exhaustion, isolation and demoralisation.

Because of this, and notwithstanding the variation of experience (both between people and between aspects of wellbeing) captured in the quantitative data, the overall change since the second wave of the research has been a decline in wellbeing. Although some participants have seen positive changes for a range of reasons, including, for some, lockdown, the majority described a difficult period which included ups and downs but, overall, left their wellbeing at a lower ebb than previously. This varies somewhat by cohort, with longer-serving clergy (ordained in 2006 and 2011) articulating lower levels of wellbeing and deeper mental, relational and vocational struggles, while those ordained more recently (particularly those who started Initial Ministerial Education Phase 1 (IME 1) in 2016, most of whom are curates in this wave) reported more positive situations. These differences are explored further in the sections below.

## **Physical and mental wellbeing**

2020 and 2021 were physically, mentally and emotionally challenging years for many participants and, in March 2021, 42% of respondents to the Wave 3 survey reported that their mental wellbeing was worse than before the pandemic. However, experiences varied enormously for different people and at different times, depending on multiple intersecting factors such as role, age, health, personality, tradition, family situation, colleagues and congregations. Some clergy found themselves shielding at home; some home-schooled children; some ran initiatives in their local communities; some cared for dying patients on hospital covid wards. Some parish clergy moved their ministry largely online and some kept their churches open as much as possible. Some contracted covid, with varying degrees of severity, and some enjoyed the best levels of health for several years. Qualitative research is not usually intended to identify measurable patterns between groups of people and the wellbeing of clergy during the covid-19 pandemic is so complex and contextual that even the quantitative analysis was unable to do so. Instead, here we draw out some threads of shared experience running through parts of the data.

Few participants mentioned having contracted covid in a way which was seriously detrimental to their health, although the pandemic did have implications for the health of some family members, which is discussed in the section below on relationships. Beyond this, participants talked about two main ways in which the pandemic affected their ministry and their physical and/or mental wellbeing. First, the level and nature of their workload; and second, implications of the lockdowns and social restrictions.

### **Workload**

Experiences of lockdown were largely split between those who enjoyed a slower pace of life and ministry, and those who described working harder than ever before. Hospital chaplains tended to fall into the latter category, some experiencing long hours and extreme levels of intensity in their ministry (although not all hospitals allowed chaplains in covid areas), described by one as ‘horrendous.’ Another used the term ‘war zone’ and recalled



one particular day when I was called into ITU, we had prayers with a Jewish man with the family watching over the phone because nobody was allowed in. We were in lockdown. I stayed with him until he died and moved on straightaway to the next bed, to a Muslim man, had the imam and family on the phone, giving those prayers, waited with him while he died and moved on to the next bed. That was probably the worst and hardest day of all but most of the days weren't much different.

Despite recognising the toll this takes on their physical, mental and emotional wellbeing, this participant pointed to the excellent support received from their supervisor, line manager, staff counsellor and other colleagues, as well as from bishops. The quality of support for chaplains varies between dioceses and institutions, with two of the four healthcare chaplains in our sample reporting issues relating to lack of diocesan support and poor leadership or bullying in certain hospitals or hospices in which they had worked, resulting in them moving on.

For clergy in parish ministry, additional workload was largely the result of moving services, meetings and other communications online or to other formats; heightened pastoral demands; and reduced participation by congregations.

The closure of churches during the first lockdown required parish clergy, much of whose work is carried out alongside other people, to find ways to run services and otherwise communicate with people remotely. The range and extent of alternative 'church at home' services is set out in the report, 'Church at Home 2020,' which states that, during the March-July 2020 lockdown, 78% of churches, 80% of parishes, and 91% of benefices offered services in formats including online and via email, post and telephone.<sup>9</sup> While some clergy chose not to or were unable to move online, for most this meant grappling with new technology and, for many, it was one of the most stressful aspects of the pandemic. Those less familiar with online platforms such as YouTube, Facebook and Zoom, as well as recording and editing technology, found the move online extremely challenging. In the words of one:

although there was plenty of help online, actually making use of it and being able to produce things generates in itself—for someone who is not used to it—a tremendous amount of stress and I think that is the biggest problem that I faced, a great increase in the amount of stress and of course of recording services where we have never actually done it before.

While some found the shift online—including the learning curve—'energising', even many who had more expertise and support experienced the work of recording, editing and streaming services as 'exhausting' and 'relentless.' One incumbent estimated that an hour-long service would take 14 hours to produce, while a self-supporting minister described working through the night:

The pandemic was incredibly hard work. It was non-stop work, either work in the business or work in the parish, from dawn 'til dusk, and, actually, in those days, when we were putting together YouTube videos, sometimes working through until 5:00 am to put together the video to be uploaded before 10:00 am the next day.

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<sup>9</sup> K. Eames (2021), *Church at Home 2020*, Church of England Research & Statistics.

These experiences were not constant throughout the period of the pandemic covered in the research. One participant described the gradual learning process following an ‘appalling’ Christmas (in 2020) for her physical and mental wellbeing:

That Christmas, we still hadn't nailed it. And so we were pre-recording all the carol services, so filming and then putting them together. So that process was exhausting in itself. And now, with hindsight, we wouldn't do that. We would just live-stream and record as we live-streamed, but we didn't quite understand then what we understand now. So if the worst happens now, I would approach it in a very different way, in a way that didn't impact so much upon my mental and physical health in the same way that last year did.

However, while some were able to improve their practice as they learned, others, who were energised by the initial challenge, found the strain mounting as the adrenaline wore off:

So we were doing everything online, live-streaming services, recording kids' services in advance for each Sunday. It was just really busy. It was very invigorating initially, and very exciting. Then after a while it's like, this is quite relentless. ... Draining.

This was from a curate who went on to describe recovering from the more draining periods of the pandemic, which was a common experience in the narratives of curates. Some participants, particularly those with little support and/or further on in their ordained ministry, were not able to recover. The reopening of churches meant more, rather than less, work, to meet the expectations and safety requirements of different members of their congregations. A priest-in-charge commented how her technological learning had both improved her practice and contributed to maintaining levels of exertion:

Obviously, you cobble together Zoom and I'm not particularly technically minded, but we got better each week and we're now doing hybrid services and it has been okay, but it's exhausting.

Similarly, an incumbent echoed the experience of many participants in describing the post-lockdown period of Autumn 2021 (current at the time of the interviews) as the most tiring yet:

I think I'm probably getting more mentally tired now than I was during lockdown. Although we were very busy, you weren't trying to juggle two lots of things. And that's what's happening, is that it's just there's a lot more. Rather than paring down, things have layered up, and expectation.

Technological challenges and the logistics of hybrid services were not the only factors contributing to increasing levels of exhaustion as the country and its churches opened up again after lockdown. Throughout the pandemic, parish clergy have faced higher than usual levels of pastoral demand.

These demands included, for some, large numbers of funerals: one participant reported conducting 140 funerals in a year, while another, in a parish with several care homes, said, ‘we then went into funeral mode, almost on a daily basis.’ Mostly, it was the overwhelming number of funerals that participants talked about as affecting their wellbeing: someone who began their first incumbency shortly before the first lockdown recalls ‘the sudden thought of, “I can't manage eight funerals a month.”’ Several discussed dilemmas over work boundaries: for example, a part-time priest-in-charge limiting funerals to two per week (but

sometimes agreeing to more), while a full-time incumbent reluctantly took on more than desired to cover for colleagues:

So one week I had 12 funerals. ... You're covering for other clergy who are saying, 'I need to look after myself,' and other clergy who are just saying, 'I'm not doing any funerals.'

Because clergy are office-holders rather than employees, they are responsible for arranging cover for when they cannot work. Self-isolation during the pandemic thus caused difficulties, as for this new incumbent:

There was one week when I had to self-isolate because of covid, and I had 13 services, including weddings and funerals and baptisms and things. I had to get cover for these 13 services. It's at that point that people said, 'Oh, I didn't really take it seriously how much you had to do.'

While funerals are an aspect of ordained ministry that many clergy find vocationally fulfilling (see section below on vocational wellbeing), there is also an emotional toll, in particular when the deceased is known to the minister. One participant described taking her parent's funeral, while another commented, 'I'm just doing a spate of funerals from the nursing home, which is quite challenging because you grow to love them.'

Funerals are, of course, one among many types of pastoral demand that clergy manage. Particularly during the pandemic, the burden of pastoral care for those for whom they hold the cure of souls weighed heavily on many participants. One curate located her anxiety 'within the realm of everyone else feeling anxious,' saying, 'there was a certain responsibility, I think, for myself and my training incumbent (TI) to hold it together a bit for everyone else.' An incumbent noted the mental toll of this and echoed many participants in struggling to manage without being able to remove herself physically from her ministry context:

what you're experiencing is really draining ... because you're taking on a lot of angst, and we're still doing that. We're carrying a lot of anxiety for others, still. And so not physically being able to deal with that for me was very, very difficult and is still very difficult.

The persistence of the crisis and its resulting anxieties, three months after the last restrictions on social contact had been lifted and as the second winter approached, were articulated widely by participants. Along with the new challenges described above of reopening churches and running hybrid services, some clergy experienced further intensification of pastoral demand from struggling and traumatised people with support services not running at full capacity and many people, including colleagues, sick or self-isolating:

And actually, this has been particularly in the last two to three months, I feel I've been deluged with stuff from people needing to talk, people in hospital and people who don't seem to have any other port of call and are struggling with accessing support and services that we might expect to have been there. ... I'm finding this period much more demanding than at any other point in the pandemic. Coming out of it has been, for me, quite hard to manage, not personally, but in terms of demands made upon me. (Incumbent)

The same participant commented that this increase in demand was compounded with an issue widespread within narratives of incumbents:

what I've spotted mostly, the impact of the pandemic on my church communities, is that those people who were sitting on PCCs or were treasurers have withdrawn. They've either withdrawn because they've been hit by ill-health in the period or because they've re-evaluated what they're doing and they don't want to be doing those things. For example, I currently have the books of three of my churches because I can't find treasurers.

In this case, the main difficulty was with Parochial Church Council (PCC) members and treasurers, but other participants described it in wider terms, recognising that people's circumstances had changed and they were unable to contribute as much, or, in the words of one incumbent,

my congregation has spent a lot of time reflecting on how they're serving the Lord and have decided that they are doing too much. ... My rotas are emptying out and there is no-one to fill them, so you just have to readjust.

Readjusting in the immediate term often means filling in gaps and taking on roles that others previously held. In some cases, as with the treasurer roles, this is essential; however, it may not be sustainable and at the time of the interviews, many clergy found themselves wondering what shape church would take in the future. While a few articulated a sense of relief in the pandemic forcing reassessment of what was already an overstretched ministry and 'a chink of hope' that their role might become more sustainable, many struggled with such decisions:

I am conscious I can't afford to be the one that keeps all of those plates spinning and that, actually, probably some of those plates need to be allowed to drop, but that is never an easy thing to do. Just trying to discern what the right answer is and what the right plates are to drop is a bit of a challenge.  
(Incumbent)

The reduction in participation from congregations has been accompanied and partly fuelled by declining church attendance, with numbers in most participants' churches not having returned to pre-pandemic levels. This is discussed in the section on vocational wellbeing below; however, we note here the effect of this on the mental wellbeing of clergy, both directly as they seek to maintain and grow their churches, and indirectly through the ensuing reduction in volunteering and financial giving. One incumbent described 'panicking just a little bit' over a building-related bill that her reduced congregation was unable to cover.

Finally, it is important to remember that, while the pandemic preoccupied much of life during the period covered by this wave of research, it was not the only thing happening within the Church of England. Other events and initiatives at a national level included the establishment of the Anti-Racism Taskforce in the context of the Black Lives Matter movement; the Living in Love and Faith work on human relationships and sexuality; the 2030 carbon-neutral target agreed by General Synod; the Emerging Church work to set a new national vision and strategy; and indeed, the Covenant for Clergy Care and Wellbeing that was passed as an Act of Synod in February 2020. All of these have affected dioceses and parishes and, in different ways, added to the work of clergy, leading one participant to comment, 'There's a real sense of feeling rather overwhelmed by what feels like directives, from both national church level and diocesan level.'

## Lockdown and restrictions

We have seen above how the coronavirus lockdowns and social restrictions have affected the physical and mental wellbeing of Living Ministry participants through impacting their workload, including the move to ‘church at home,’ increased pastoral demands, and loss of congregation members, as well as, for some, the positive effect of a slower pace of life. Beyond workload, lockdown affected physical and mental wellbeing in multiple ways.

First, levels of busyness affected the amount of exercise participants were able to do. For some, staying at home meant losing the physical activity of their normal day-to-day lives, and several mentioned putting on weight and becoming unfit. While for most this was a result of inactivity, one described being too busy to find time to exercise: ‘I was going to run a marathon; now I couldn’t run a mile.’ Others, however, found they had more time for physical exercise (or were motivated by weight gain during the pandemic to start exercising) and have emerged physically fitter and healthier than before.

Effects of lockdown on mental health also varied. Again, some participants were able to enjoy a slower pace and to sleep better with less pressure or stress, while others, particularly if they were also home-schooling or otherwise caring for family members, were burdened by additional stress. Forced distance from family and friends impacted several participants strongly, whether because they missed the social interaction (especially hard for those living alone); because they worried about children living away or at university; or because they felt guilt and/or sorrow at not being able to be near a loved-one who was sick or dying. Several self-supporting clergy with employment or business concerns beyond their parish experienced additional pressure and anxiety from that direction. The direct implications of not being able to leave home were hard-felt by many participants, both on a day-to-day basis (a curate commented that during the third and hardest lockdown, ‘the only time I would leave the house for work was to take people’s funerals’) and, more widely, in the lack of ability to take time out from work. We have seen throughout Living Ministry how important it is for parochial clergy physically to leave their parish during annual leave and on days off, in order to disengage from work. With this option removed, many did not take leave at all during lockdown periods. The Wave 3 survey tells us that more than half of respondents (54%) did not take all their annual leave in 2020, compared with 34% in 2018.<sup>10</sup>

Like the curate who only left home for funerals, whether participants had experienced the first lockdown as a welcome break or adrenaline-fuelled intensity, for most it was the third lockdown, between January and March 2021, that was hardest. A dark winter combined with the cumulative effect of a long and drawn-out period of trauma and uncertainty, plus the responsibility of decisions about safely managing church services—largely absent during the first lockdown, when churches were required to close—added additional strain. We explore the implications of such decision-making in more detail later in the report, in the context of autonomy and accountability. Here, it is important to note the mental strain implicit in

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<sup>10</sup> McFerran & Graveling *op cit.* p.19. No directly comparable figures are available for other professions; however, a YouGov survey commissioned by Acas found that, in June 2021, 39% of British employees reported taking less annual leave during the preceding 12 months than in ‘normal’ years before the pandemic. <https://www.acas.org.uk/4-in-10-report-report-taking-less-time-off-during-pandemic>.

negotiating conflicting views within congregations about restrictions such as closure of churches and wearing masks, while carrying responsibility to keep the church(es) going and also keep people safe.

This uncertainty over decision-making continued up to the time of the interviews as the virus persisted and different mutations emerged. In some respects, the lifting of restrictions and re-opening of churches was a relief and a joy, as one participant described:

I know it sounds strange that it is a joy to take a funeral but, actually, for a life well-lived, it's quite a privilege. And to be able to have the whole surrounding area come to the funeral, as they tend to do in our area, it's really rather special. And to do that again, once more, rather than 30 people isolated over different corners of the church, is tremendous.

However, the constant threat of further restrictions and the resumption of activities reduced or put on hold during the previous 18 months meant that many clergy experienced increasing rather than decreasing pressure:

The downsides, for me, have been more associated with coming out of covid and re-establishing back into all the normal patterns of over-busyness and overactivity and all the rest of it, at the same time as trying to constantly adapt what church looks like on the fly, on an almost weekly basis, which, obviously, was quite challenging. (Incumbent)

Thus, while some participants—mostly curates not covering vacancies—were able to look back at lockdown (or, for healthcare chaplains, the busiest times in hospitals) as the most difficult period for their mental wellbeing and describe having recovered since then, this was not the case for many in incumbent-status roles. Along with increases in workload caused variously by hybrid services, pastoral demands and withdrawal of congregation members, uncertainties around the virus and responsibility for doing mission and ministry safely in the context of shifting and conflicting attitudes have contributed to mental health challenges for some clergy.

To lay the responsibility for clergy physical and mental wellbeing problems solely at the door of covid-19, however, would be short-sighted. While, as we have noted, there are many contributing sociodemographic and role-related factors, it is clear that, in most cases, the pandemic has either exacerbated or acted as an additional factor to pre-existing personal and ministerial challenges. Previous waves of Living Ministry have identified serious challenges affecting the physical and mental wellbeing of clergy, including: declining congregations; diocesan cuts and restructuring; concerns about the future of the Church of England; workload; family difficulties; unsupportive churches; difficult collegial relationships; bullying; unhealthy or unsupportive diocesan environments; loss of colleagues; pressures of juggling self-supporting ordained ministry with other work; gender and other social exclusion or hostility; lack of disability support; and curacy breakdown. All these issues continued into or, for some, began during the pandemic. Indeed, the vast majority of participants struggling with their mental wellbeing at the time of the interviews (which includes most of those in the 2006, 2011 and 2015 cohorts) discussed some major contributing factor unrelated to the pandemic. The importance to clergy wellbeing of the underlying national, diocesan and local church environment cannot be overstated.

## Relationships

Along with mental wellbeing, relationships was the aspect of wellbeing hardest hit by the pandemic, with 44% of those responding to the survey in March 2021 reporting feeling more isolated in their ministry than before the pandemic. As with physical and mental wellbeing, however, there is not only immense variation of experience but also many different contributing factors at play in participants' relationship wellbeing, some unrelated to the pandemic and some involving personal rather than ministerial relationships.

## Congregations

We have already touched on the physical and mental wellbeing implications of congregation members withdrawing their presence and participation, and of the difficulties of negotiating the re-opening of churches. The latter has affected relational wellbeing in different ways. There was little mention of concerns about unpopularity or hurt feelings as participants made decisions about restrictions; however, some mentioned challenges in navigating uncertainty in personal interactions:

every interaction with people is somewhere on the scale of, 'We're back to normal, isn't this brilliant? Let's go full steam ahead,' and, 'I'm too scared to leave the house.' I think every interaction you go into, you don't necessarily know which combination of all of those, and of course, we're all somewhere on the scale, too, so I'm then finding myself constantly almost having to readjust every conversation.

More widely, participants described managing conflicting viewpoints:

So I'm holding a church which has these tensions ... I've got extreme, extreme charismatics who are antivaxxers and saying that there is a fierce spirit in this church because you are allowing masks ... And then I had the traditionalists saying, 'Those terrible antivaxxers, they don't care about us.' ... But it has been very difficult holding those tensions and managing conflict and just taking us through and saying, 'Come back, come back. Let me listen to you.'

This incumbent has charge of one church. Those in multi-parish benefices have faced increased complexity, with contradictory views both within and between congregations:

we've got six churches and they all had very different opinions about what they wanted. And of course the team had their own concerns and considerations and when there was a central decision handed down it was a lot easier because it just stopped all of the constant infighting and the back and forth about it. It was a lot more stressful when we had to try and work out, 'Okay, do we push through a decision that we make, even though there are at least one or two churches who are going to rebel but other churches want to back us up? Or do we let each church do a free-for-all?' It just became quite difficult. I think, some of those decisions, it's really useful if they are taken from higher up.

Clergy themselves are, of course, not neutral in such decisions and we explore how their own perspectives come into play as we explore autonomy and accountability later in the report.

Participants described efforts to boost social connection within their congregations in a variety of ways, including by post, email, Zoom meetings, other online platforms such as Facebook and YouTube, and

telephone. This came more naturally to some than to others, with one incumbent echoing others in ‘suffer[ing] ... an awful lot of fairly intense guilt because I was not one of those people who could ring round all my parishioners and see how they were doing.’ This participant has explained in previous waves of the research being used to and happy with a certain amount of isolation in rural parishes. Conversely, participants who normally thrive on social interaction struggled with the limitations of lockdown. As one put it,

I think for most clergy, that's impacted our wellbeing massively because it's not what we were trained to do, and it's not the way most of us are built. ... [W]hen you're dealing with your everyday congregation, it feels quite limiting and isolating not to be able to have any physical contact with them.

Parishioners are one of the main sources of community for many clergy so, beyond the implications for their ministry, distance from congregations can lead to personal loneliness. Several participants pointed to their extrovert personalities as a factor in their struggle with being isolated from other people. The reverse may have been true for introverts, although some mentioned other consequences, including unhealthy levels of self-withdrawal and not being able to find personal space while being locked down with family. One ordained local minister noted that, for her and her husband, despite her introversion, ‘We felt very much on our own during that time, as if we were in an isolated place, I suppose.’

This sense of isolation was strongest for those who moved post just before or during the pandemic, when the levels of isolation identified in previous waves of Living Ministry<sup>11</sup> at moments of transition were intensified by lockdown and social restrictions. Curates in particular can feel a step further removed from their congregations in the sense of needing to follow the lead of their training incumbent and, while most of our curate (2016) cohort began their title post at least eight months before the first lockdown, some remembered struggling with loneliness. One, who moved curacy during lockdown, said, ‘I felt like I couldn’t really connect with the congregation because the incumbent was very, very, very cautious in terms of the restrictions,’ while another described

moving into a new parish where you don't really know many people. You're trying to build relationships and get to know them, and then the pandemic hits. You just about learn what people's names are, and a little bit of the most important details of their lives, and then suddenly you're stuck at home. I'm not very good on the telephone, really, so that put a bit of a stop on that. ... [A]ll the things you'd hoped to do in terms of building relationships with parishioners, that has been a lot harder. That has been a disappointment.

Some, however, found that the pandemic opened up new opportunities to build relationship. Pastorally, for example, an incumbent commented that the pandemic helped him connect more, through Zoom, with parishioners who were homebound or otherwise found it easier to join an online rather than an onsite gathering, including some he had never met before. A curate noted, ‘there were a lot of people coming to me with interesting questions: ‘Is God punishing us? What is happening? People coping with loss, people

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<sup>11</sup> Graveling (2021) *op cit*.



copied with that bereavement of being separated from family who might be ill.’ An incumbent recently starting a new post telephoned every member of his congregation, something he would normally not have done: ‘in many respects, it’s not been a bad way of getting to know one’s church.’ Another, who had been in post several years, explained how working alongside people on social initiatives such as foodbanks ‘gave me a lovely opportunity to get to know some of the congregation in a different way, because we were forced into this different kind of relationship.’

This incumbent described her congregation as ‘very supportive,’ echoing others who valued the efforts of parishioners in recording services, establishing support networks, reaching out to the community, and providing much-needed expertise, listening and general interaction. We have already seen how other parish clergy had very different experiences, of congregation members withdrawing in both attendance and participation. This has implications for relational as well as physical and mental wellbeing, with some clergy feeling abandoned: ‘when the first lockdown came, I never heard from anybody. So, whilst I had set up a team of people to ring around everybody, not a single person rang me.’ In addition to personal isolation, it was also, in the words of one incumbent,

a very lonely time to lead ... as everyone else went into survival mode. ... [M]y doers and sounding-boards and movers and shakers were all dealing with all kinds of other things in life, and the normal form of decision-making wasn’t possible.

A third incumbent described the loneliness of having to readjust relationships with key people in her congregation for whom she also carried the burden of pastoral care:

I can't think of anybody, anywhere within the parish, that has an understanding of the complexity of the pressures, financial things, what's going on in the wider diocese beyond their congregation. ... The role of cure of souls and care for folks, mixed with that being the same folks who carry certain responsibilities, either officially or unofficially, feels quite a difficult one.

In the small number of cases where participants had already described difficult relationships with congregations in previous waves of the research, the pandemic aggravated the tensions, one recalling ‘no recognition from the parish that we were parents’ and that home-schooling would affect their capacity for ministry.

### **Colleagues**

Colleagues—including deanery chapter members and lay colleagues within the local church—were an important source of support for many clergy. Some found such relationships absent or non-supportive, whether because they were not there in the first place, because people had moved on, or because people were sick, preoccupied or not organised to provide support: ‘I’m part of a team ministry, but ... [when I was ill] it just went to the wardens and the church’ (incumbent); ‘As a deanery ... we were having Zoom meetings, but, to be honest, they just became a competition of who was doing the most and the best’ (incumbent); ‘the two churches that I actually belong to, I’ve not had one phone call in two years to find out how are you’ (chaplain). The pandemic, of course, occurred in the context of pre-existing relationships and, in most cases, any tensions that were already there (as with this chaplain’s experience) continued or were brought into

sharp relief during this period, for example as colleagues found themselves holding isolated views or conflicting over covid restrictions.

However, many participants experienced deeply supportive collegial relationships during the pandemic. Several applauded the efforts of rural or area deans to make personal phone calls checking on their wellbeing, and to organise peer support through regular Zoom or socially-distanced meetings as permitted:

We've had a few meetings as a deanery. We met together as incumbents on Zoom. Sometimes we met weekly, particularly when things were changing, it felt like every five minutes ... you just got organised and then the government would change something and you think, 'Oh, my, here we go.' So that was really helpful. And in terms of sharing people's difficulties, in terms of not being able to get away from it, that was really helpful.

A curate who was isolated from their training incumbent commented that such meetings functioned as 'a regular check-in, which was a bit of chat and how are we, and a bit of planning: that was very, very helpful.'

Where deaneries were less supportive or too large to allow personal sharing, some participants organised themselves in mutual support relationships with local colleagues:

The local clergy in our area were myself with my vicar and my other colleague in the other church; we got to have monthly meetings, sat outside, no matter what the weather, with a cup of coffee, basically socially-distanced but able to just see each other face-to-face, which did make a great deal of difference. That was well done and very useful and we are continuing that process now, even though, of course, lockdown has finished. (Incumbent)

One incumbent commented about a similar arrangement, 'I'm really thankful for sharing the journey.' As we have seen in previous waves of research, access to safe, non-judgmental spaces of support with people who understand the challenges of ordained ministry is a crucial part of clergy wellbeing. During the pandemic, the importance of shared contextual experience also came to the fore, often experienced through relationships with clergy, staff or leadership teams within local churches. Several participants described the experience of working closely with a small team in a time of crisis as vital to their wellbeing as well as to the ministry of the church, for example:

what does help, and what did help in the pandemic, is that we had an administrator [and the] churchwarden, and the three of us were running the show. ... [A]nd we just had a lot of banter and a lot of friendship in our working together. Yes, so that sort of kept me alive emotionally. It stopped me from being dreadfully lonely during that last year, and it still sustains me. (Incumbent)

Some found that relationships deepened and teams grew stronger as a result: 'we just got really close' (incumbent); it 'felt much more supportive than it had been actually before the pandemic' (curate); 'the way that can unite you together and make you feel a real sense of bond' (curate). For some, although not all, curates, this included a strengthening of their relationship with their training incumbent. Several understood this as a shift towards a more equal relationship, as the TI came to rely more on them either for particular (e.g. technological) expertise or as a colleague with whom to share their feelings and discuss how to approach new and uncertain territory:

we became a lot closer very quickly, just because we were both thrown into a situation that we had no preparation for, no experience of anything like this happening before. ... I think this just solidified that working relationship and was quite a special time in terms of working together. Obviously, you learn from your TI, that's a mentoring, learning relationship, and yet we were both learning at the same time on this.

Four curates covered vacancies during the pandemic. Experiences varied enormously, including one with a highly structured support system and clear roles and communication set up with churchwardens; one who described it as 'a power vacuum ... a really, really difficult place to be, because there was no clear line of responsibility,' and two who felt they were forced to take on more responsibility than appropriate (not matched by levels of authority), one with some support and the other with very little. In these cases, the pandemic aggravated the situation by increasing uncertainty and the need for decision-making, but the underlying issues and levels of support were not specifically related to the pandemic.

Some other participants who did not have close teams, either because they worked alone or because colleagues were unable or unwilling to engage, struggled with isolation, including at least four chaplains who found it difficult to find community and/or ministry within their home church. Two of these described difficult relational situations, leaving one for the first time in their life 'without a place in a worshipping Christian community.' A third commented, 'you find yourself wasting for lack of fellowship because, especially during the first lockdown, you weren't allowed to meet anybody.' In this case, support was eventually provided by a senior colleague, who 'picked that up and started inviting us to online Morning Prayer, which really helped.' Others participants found support through various groups and networks, including cell groups of peers from IME 1; Facebook groups of clergy with some kind of shared experience (e.g. 'Clergy Mummies'); and a range of orders and networks based on tradition or ministry support and learning, such as the Franciscans, New Wine, Heart Edge and The Gregory Centre for Church Multiplication. A few participants mentioned reflective practice groups or similar, mostly set up through diocesan structures, with varying experiences. While one self-supporting minister described hers as 'a lifeline' amid the isolation she was experiencing in her parish, other participants discussed groups coming to an end, either because they were fixed for a limited time period, the facilitator had left or retired, or the group members did not share enough in common for the group to function well.

### **Family and friends**

One of the most striking things about the Wave 3 interviews was the extent to and immediacy with which many participants spoke about family when invited to reflect on changes to their wellbeing over the preceding two years. Experiences varied enormously according to different family situations, but in several very different cases participants expressed appreciation that such relationships were included in the research, for example:

I think the good thing about the research is just how multifaceted it is. As an individual, I think, 'How am I being as a husband, as a father?' Because how that's affected, in a sense, is a reflection of how well I'm doing. (Incumbent)

Like the rest of the population, and depending on their family status, during extended periods of the pandemic clergy were either separated from or locked down with key family members. Some participants described the distress of not being able to see loved ones, especially if it meant they were unable to give or receive support during especially difficult circumstances. As well as the suffering caused by the pandemic, other challenges and life changes (particularly for curates) continued to occur and the collective experience of the Living Ministry participants included marriage, engagement, bereavement, birth of children, menopause, marital breakdown and school moves, as well as having to watch from a distance family members struggling with relationships or physical and mental health problems ('it was harder that we couldn't get up to see him to give him any support') or simply not being able to spend time with family and touch children or grandchildren ('I feel like I have missed out on 18 months of their life really ... The first time we ever saw [a grandchild] was through their living room window.'). Bereavement was especially difficult, with participants describing the pain of not being 'able to mourn as we normally would' and, for some, guilt that they saw a close family member so little before their death.

While the pandemic forced distance on some relationships, it had the opposite effect on others and participants described the stresses and joys of being locked down with family. Some expressed (sometimes with surprise) pleasure that their relationship with their spouse had benefitted from increased time together: 'we hadn't been together all day, every day, for a number of years. ... [T]he interesting thing was, instead of being quite a tricky situation, we managed our relationship better' (incumbent). Others, especially those with children, struggled to support them through uncertainties around GCSEs, A Levels and university (several had children unexpectedly staying at home again) and, for younger children, the challenges of home-schooling:

I ended up with three children home-schooling, and my husband [working] from home as well. And it drove me really mad because they were just constantly in and out of my study [which] is at one end of the living room. (Curate)

Several participants described the additional stress of supporting older (including adult) children with anxiety caused by the pandemic, whether they were at home or further away. One, for whom 'one of the big tension points has been relationships within the family,' talked of supporting teenaged children who were 'deeply affected by the pandemic ... and for whom anxiety issues have been off-the-scale bad.' Another nearly broke down while recalling concern for a child at university: 'That's had quite an effect on me worrying about him being at uni on his own. I haven't worried about covid, but I've worried about his mental wellbeing about being on his own.'

Children were not the only ones whose health was affected by the pandemic. As well as family members who contracted covid (in one case, long covid) itself, some of the—particularly older—participants had spouses who were clinically extremely vulnerable for all or part of the pandemic, resulting in self-isolation for both of them, with implications for their ministry: 'all that time we had to stay housebound because if I went out I was putting [them] at risk ... which meant that [my TI] couldn't oversee me in person' (curate). Throughout this period, many cared for family members with physical or mental health challenges unrelated to the pandemic (including a spouse with depression, an autistic son, elderly parents, and other

unidentified issues), as well as providing other support such as childcare and during relationship breakdown.

Alongside such challenges of the pandemic and other aspects of life is the impact of ordained ministry on the family of the ordained person. We have explored in previous waves of research how families both affect and are affected by the wellbeing of the clergy person as well as by ministry directly. Here, it is important to recognise the continuation of this and, for some but not all, its aggravation by the pandemic. Some pointed to their work being even more present in the home and requirements on family to keep quiet while recording or broadcasting services, while one commented,

I think, for me, this has been the time when I've most noticed the cost on my family of what I do. ... Some people found they were literally twiddling their thumbs for large parts of lockdown. I've never been busier, and that was taking a toll on family relationships. I suspect anxiety—my own anxiety—was probably playing out a little bit in the family, as well. (Incumbent)

The two underlying issues here, anxiety and, especially, workload, resonate with other previous and current narratives. One incumbent talked of her adult children having to book time to have a conversation with her, while two others reflected on the positive difference made to family life by regular and bounded time off in a new role, for example:

When I went into my curacy, I said, 'I think I do need a certain number of weekends away so we can go and visit relatives and so on.' And that, I think, has made it a lot easier for my family to deal with. (Self-supporting curate)

Times of transition (or potential transition) between roles are the most common context in which participants refer to the impact of their ministry on their family. New roles may bring improvements but it can also take time and effort to adapt to things like schools, housing (including disability adaptations by the diocese, cathedral or church), relationships and routines.<sup>12</sup> Particularly in this wave, two incumbents in difficult situations described, in the words of one, feeling 'trapped' because moving would mean disrupting schooling or making their family leave their home, while a third, whose role was coming to an end, expressed fear that they could be made homeless. Several curates anticipating the end of their title post recognised the implications for their children:

the fact that we will be moving at some point because of what I do, and it will probably mean the kids need to leave their school, and that we need to move house and we need to move away from my parents, all this kind of thing, that's a big ask [and] a big part of your decision.

While families present challenges and concerns for many participants, they are also, as we have seen consistently throughout the longitudinal research, the most valued sources of support. The curate considering her move, above, preceded her remarks with, 'It's so important. I could not do what I do without the support of my family,' while an incumbent explained, '[ministry] affects everything and you've got to have your grounded places. So mine are my family and this regular parish ministry.' When discussing

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<sup>12</sup> See the in-depth discussion of transitions in the Wave 2 qualitative report, Graveling (2021) *op cit*.

accountability, family was frequently mentioned as an accountability relationship, particularly partners who ‘can recognise the pattern’ (OLM) of overwork or stress or act as a ‘helpful counterbalance ... when I’ve had a crisis of confidence’ (curate). In fact, several participants talked about how their family relationships had grown in importance through the pandemic. For some, this was a result of intentionally spending more online or ‘visiting’ time with wider family, for example, for one curate, a weekly Zoom meeting ‘so that we could just try and be together. So family has become a lot more important to me.’ For others, it was the trauma of being separated from or supporting struggling family members. One incumbent described ‘some really new, special bonds’ with a child with anxiety home from university. The participant we heard earlier recalling their intense concern for a child on their own at university stated, ‘[family relationships] are more important to me and I’m putting more effort into those than I was in October 2019.’ Finally, some participants discussed how the pandemic had helped them to redress the balance between work and family life, either by providing opportunities to reorganise service patterns and make more room for family, or by allowing them to recognise their limits without feeling guilty:

I think one of the things that covid has taught is, actually, some days, it’s going to not happen and that’s okay. It’s not ideal, but I have a vocation to be a parent, I have a vocation to be a husband, and they have to be held in balance. ... [T]he reality is when you’re getting out the door at half past eight and you’ve got to do the school run and drop [your spouse] off at the train station, and then you’ve got to get back to open up for toddler group at 10:30, that’s just what it’s got to be.

Participants also described receiving support from friends. Several, of varying family situations, referred to distance from friends as a key contributor to their sense of isolation during the pandemic, although it was some (not all) of the single clergy who found this most difficult. One incumbent, working in a social context very different from her own and where she had struggled to build personal relationships, talked of using her days off before lockdown to visit friends in other places, commenting that ‘the pandemic has affected that severely.’ Despite physical distance, however, friends have remained important relationships through phone calls and online, in both sustained regular contact (‘that’s been a constant and a lifeline’ (incumbent, married)) and at times of crisis (‘it has been really good to offload to her some of the issues that I’ve had. ... I’d say [friends] were absolutely key’ (curate)).

## Participation

The ‘participation’ aspect of wellbeing has to do with the extent to which clergy feel able to participate in the life of the wider church as they would like to. There are a multitude of ways in which clergy participate, including: taking on roles such as rural/area dean or vocations adviser; membership of and participation in Deanery and/or Diocesan Synod; officiating on groups and bodies such as Deanery Standing Committee, Bishop’s Staff, Bishop’s Council, or other diocesan committees; involvement in mentoring, spiritual direction or Ministerial Development Reviews; work on gender, race or sexuality; national involvement in areas such as vocations and discernment; or local ecumenical or community work.

This is not straightforward, as participation can be detrimental to as well as supportive of wellbeing, often simultaneously. Benefits include a sense of belonging, connection, value and encouragement as well as specific vocational fulfilment and wider involvement informing local ministry. However, at the same time

as being fulfilling and providing social and professional connections, engagement on committees or in supporting other clergy, for example, may be time-consuming, tiring and emotionally draining, and may involve confronting difficult issues or engaging in challenging relationships. One participant, in a role supporting the welfare of a specific group of clergy, described feeling ‘like I’m really doing what I’m called to do, but at the same time, I’m struggling, I’m really hitting the boundaries of the church’s structures and decisions.’ Another commented,

lots of involvement in things, all of which are good things to be involved with, but they just suck time, energy, and resources away from that task [of preparing the church for the immediate future], which seems to me to be imminently pressing.

As in previous waves, then, participation wellbeing cannot simply be measured by quantity or level of participation. Indeed, participants talk about meaningful participation at a range of levels, including both local (usually curates and assistant ministers) and national church. In line with previous analysis, deaneries continue to vary widely, with some participants meeting regularly with their chapter and experiencing strong collegial support, while others feel excluded or isolated. However, by far the most common context of discussion is the diocese, so it is on this that we shall focus.

We have already discussed the workload challenges experienced by many clergy, both before and during the pandemic, and previous waves have shown how this can both limit and be increased by diocesan involvement. This continues in Wave 3, with participants restricting their participation in the diocese for a range of reasons including the extra work of covering deanery vacancies, difficulties managing parish, deanery and diocesan roles simultaneously, and efforts to avoid feeling overwhelmed during the pandemic. However, the diocese itself also contributes to levels of participation wellbeing.

For most clergy, and particularly those in parochial roles, the diocese is their key organisational environment beyond their own parish or ministry context. It is the structure in which they locate themselves and their ministry, and the closest they have to an employer. The diocesan offices provide practical support and accountability in areas like housing, safeguarding, finance, buildings and data protection. Bishops and their staff set vision and strategy for mission and ministry across the diocese; they provide pastoral care for clergy; and they act as gatekeepers to further participation and jobs. Dioceses therefore play an important role in all aspects of clergy wellbeing, not least the extent to which clergy feel able to participate healthily in the life of the wider church.

Participants’ narratives point to three ways in which their participation wellbeing is affected by dioceses. First, the diocesan environment; second, the amount of voice they feel they have; and third, support and care.

### **Diocesan environment**

The diocesan environment, in the words of one participant, ‘sets the mood music’ to which clergy minister, both in terms of vision and strategy and in administering systems of communication and support. We have seen in previous waves of research how tradition can affect this, depending on whether clergy find themselves working in dioceses with whose predominant theology they are more or less comfortable. Other factors also play a role, such as size, tone, and personal or professional connections with diocesan officers.

One participant, for example, recently arrived in their diocese, described being invited to explore vocations work:

I'm quite interested in vocations, so it is just more interesting stuff. It's a very small diocese, so there are lots of opportunities to get involved with things. ... So it feels very friendly and with the various connections.

Throughout the Living Ministry research, experiences of clergy have varied from diocese to diocese and also from person to person, depending on things like how new they are in the diocese, how proactive they are at building relationships, and what role they occupy—with self-supporting clergy often feeling more marginalised and curates experiencing more levels of gatekeeping—as well as sociodemographic factors such as gender, class, race, disability and sexuality. However, in the first two waves of research, there was a general sense for most (not all) participants that, in the words of one incumbent, 'I sort of feel like if there was an issue then I could contact someone and there would be some support there for me if I needed it' (Wave 1). In Wave 3, for many, it seems that this has been lost. The financial and organisational impact of the pandemic, in the context of already declining church attendance and concerns over diocesan finances, has led to both short- and long-term uncertainty within dioceses. A large part of this relates to fears of (or already proposed) cuts to parochial ordained roles, discussed as we explore vocational wellbeing below. Moreover, it is not just parish roles that have been under threat. During lockdown, some diocesan staff were furloughed, adding to uncertainty and instability. However, it is the longer-term implications, not entirely caused by the pandemic, that arose repeatedly in the interviews. Participants across several dioceses described the implications for their sense of connection and involvement of working within dioceses undergoing, as one incumbent put it, 'a programme of change, redundancy and uncertainty.' This person, despite being a member of Diocesan Synod and Bishop's Council, expressed their feeling of disconnection: 'It does not seem to me to be being very well-managed and, in that sense, I feel very distant from having any effect on it.' Another incumbent, in a different diocese, described their restructuring as 'a breakdown in relationship and communication ... a mess and a nightmare.' For this person, relationship is key and they note the contributing effect of the pandemic that

you can't get to have a nice friendly chat with someone in the way that you used to. Doing everything on Zoom has been really difficult. ... Not just because of the dynamic, but it's meant that the way decisions have been made and things have been discussed hasn't had that fluidity that was there before.

For both these participants, the result has been a distancing from the diocesan centre. Both mentioned that they would not stand again for key diocesan bodies that they had until then been part of and one commented, 'I have lost some of my enthusiasm for being part of the diocese.' An incumbent in a third diocese that is also struggling explained how, for more practical reasons, she also found herself distanced:

there have been all kinds of cuts and restrictions at our diocesan centre and so, where there was quite a high degree of involvement and collaboration on things, that seems to have shrunk. ... if you have an issue about anything, you genuinely don't know if the person that you need to phone up about it is going to be in post at the moment. That's the situation. There are big gaps. ... Those who



are left are doing an amazing job and they're wearing many hats, but it's really confusing on the ground.

This has led to 'a shift of gaze' towards local collaboration with clergy colleagues: 'my whole shift has been positive, but it's flatter in structure.'

For others, restructuring has resulted in increased—but not necessarily desired—participation as they take on extra responsibilities. One participant was reluctantly extending her involvement in order to ensure lessons were learnt, while another described holding a temporary role with pastoral and strategic responsibility for more than two years during diocesan turmoil.

Most of these cases have been in dioceses which have seen recent changes in senior leadership roles. In a culture based on covenant, where relationship is valued, archdeacons and bishops both leave a relational as well as a management gap when they move on. One participant commented, 'the relationships that were there before, lots of the people have moved on, so it's always going to be hard.' Regarding participation, the comings and goings of diocesan bishops can be especially challenging for clergy because bishops tend to set the vision and strategy of the diocese as well as its theological tone. An episcopal vacancy can therefore leave things in limbo before a new bishop arrives who may seek to make profound changes—or may implement a 'waiting' period before doing so. Thus, an incumbent talks of their diocesan participation, 'it's been very slow because actually it feels like everything's come to a massive halt, partly because we've got a new diocesan bishop, and everything has slowed down for that.' The pandemic has exacerbated this: as a participant in a different diocese put it, 'we have all felt we have had to try and get to know [our new bishop] via Zoom,' commenting that the post-lockdown arrival of a new archdeacon felt very different as 'we were able to welcome her properly.' Depending on wider circumstances and the individual relationship, the departure of a bishop may be a moment of sadness or of relief but, either way, it can affect the way clergy participate in the life of their diocese.

### **Voice**

Clergy sometimes feel distanced because processes of communication and decision-making leave them with little perceived voice in diocesan matters. This is implied in the challenges of restructuring discussed above, and some participants identified specific processes that caused them frustration. One, in the same diocese as the incumbent talking of relationship breakdown, understood the diocese to be 'pretend[ing] that we're consulting ... there's a lot of mistrust for the diocesan way of doing things.' This suspicion of consultative processes, whether to do with pastoral reorganisation, parish share systems, or initiatives such as plans for carbon neutrality, is echoed in other dioceses, with one incumbent stating, 'they're asking us what we really want to do but, actually, they've already got a plan ... there's a pretence of consultation;' another, 'people say they're consulting by meeting, but ... it seems to be the decision-making is all taken elsewhere, so it doesn't feel fantastically participative;' and a third, 'it was a consultation, they said, but at the presentation that our deanery had, it was more a case that, "this is the situation, this is the proposal, do you have any questions?"'. This is not always the case: in previous waves participants have articulated varied opinions on diocesan consultations, while one incumbent in this wave expressed appreciation for a consultative process that allowed her to get to know her deanery colleagues better over an extended period

of time. In general, participants also recognise the challenges faced by dioceses and the need for structural change; it is lack of meaningful voice that causes frustration and distrust.

Lack of voice is also experienced in other contexts, including some already participating at senior level who question how much influence they can have. One noted, ‘the decision isn’t really made at Bishop’s Council; it’s rubber-stamped at Bishop’s Council,’ while another stated their intention to speak about an issue at Diocesan Synod but commented, ‘But I don’t really expect what I say to make any difference.’ Echoing Wave 2 analysis exploring the vulnerability of curates, a participant described feeling excluded from decisions made about their training and ministry: ‘I had no voice at all in the change [of context] ... I would have very much liked a share in the decision-making about what would happen to me. You know, I don’t want to make those decisions but I do want to be involved.’

The pandemic has had a range of effects on diocesan participation, including, as we have seen above, a focus on the immediate issues to be dealt with in the parish or chaplaincy context. We explore the experiences of decision-making at different levels below, as we discuss autonomy and accountability. While for some clergy, the pandemic meant increased distance from the diocese, others experienced greater levels of support (discussed below) or found themselves deeply involved in the pandemic response and therefore with increased voice, for example in relation to clergy care, ecumenical initiatives, or community relations: ‘very much in the middle of the melée of conversations and dialogue with both diocese and the city council around covid recovery and all that sort of stuff.’

Where clergy do feel they have voice, they are much more positive about their participation. Following local organisational change, one commented,

I previously had a sense that an awful lot was being stitched up just outside my reach, which I just found tremendously frustrating, but that has been one really positive thing, that I now feel that I am actually in the room when most decisions are being taken.

Some described feeling valued by the diocese, leading to a deeper sense of connection and further participation, for example, from one incumbent: ‘on a diocesan level, I feel I contribute, or I try to contribute what I can, and people seem to value a younger perspective. Therefore, I do see that I can ring the bishop up when I want to.’ A participant engaged in diocesan vision work during their curacy simply said, ‘I feel valued as part of the diocese.’ Meaningful participation combined with open communication channels can also give confidence to make suggestions and lead to further engagement, as in the case of a participant who, informed by involvement on a diocesan committee, felt able to propose to the bishop a new role, which was agreed.

### **Support and care**

So far, we have discussed participation wellbeing in terms of how clergy relate to the institution of the diocese. Despite positive engagement and support through systems such as counselling provision (and recognising that research participants are likely to talk more about negative than positive experiences overall), in this wave of the research, Living Ministry participants largely portrayed institutional structures and processes as barriers to rather than facilitators of participation. This included some HR processes which, in two cases, left clergy feeling hurt, unsupported, and questioning whether they wished or would

be able to remain in their diocese. Several participants, however, contrasted the institution with individuals working within it, particularly senior clergy. One participant who underwent a difficult experience later found an opportunity to engage further in their diocese through the invitation of a bishop. Another participant explained how improvements in their ability to connect and participate were a result of certain senior clergy and diocesan staff moving on and being replaced with people more sympathetic.

Previous waves of research have revealed the enormous importance to many clergy of being known, understood and valued by senior clergy, especially bishops.<sup>13</sup> This is reaffirmed in the context of the pandemic. Compare one participant expressing appreciation of an unexpected gift from their bishop:

I know it was only [small items] but it was posh [items]. I have to say, having been in a diocese where they didn't care whether I fell off the edge of the world, to me it made a big difference. It was delivered with a personalised letter from the bishop to say thank you.

with another, feeling demoralised following less encouraging messages:

I don't feel particularly supported. Some of the communications we've had from the bishops, I have not reacted particularly well to. ... I'm not particularly reactive with those sorts of things, but some of them have really got me quite riled.

It is important to note that the positive reaction of the first participant was in the context of a wider environment of support and connection established before and continuing through the pandemic. Where clergy experienced their diocese and bishops as generally unsupportive, they reacted less appreciatively to what they interpreted as token gestures:

Support from senior and central staff during the pandemic, here, has been non-existent. ... when the pandemic first hit, we were promised a fortnightly call from either the archdeacon or the bishop. I missed one call from the archdeacon, and that has been the only communication I have had from senior staff. ... We got sent a [small item], which wasn't particularly significant, at some stage from the diocesan bishop. That has been it and so that has fascinated me because, I think, if we'd treated our parishioners in the same way, there might have been mutiny.

Communications from and interaction with senior clergy—positive or negative—therefore remain highly significant. Personal relationships with bishops and archdeacons contribute strongly to positive diocesan participation, not only offering support but also providing connections to the centre of the diocese that can facilitate vocational conversations, provide access to resources, inform regarding strategy, and generate further involvement. These relationships exist in tension with the more impersonal machinery of the institution, making it possible for one participant to comment, 'Did feel quite abandoned by the diocese, in that nobody knew what they were doing and nothing was communicated,' and then, a few breaths later, 'I've felt increasingly supported by the senior leadership team, partly because they've rallied round ... that has fed into that sense of, actually yes, I'm in a diocese that is bothered about me.' Two others articulate the contradictory dynamic:

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<sup>13</sup> See Graveling (2018) *op cit.* and Graveling (2021) *op cit.*

[The bishops], if I want to talk to them, they're there. So, in a sense, they're accessible and they're favourable, but in terms of the wheels that turn, I don't feel very connected.

So I suppose to sum the participation thing up, in terms of the structures, I feel less involved. ... The individual participation with senior clergy is really good, but it's the general structural thing where I feel like I'm not as involved, or participating as perhaps would be best.

The question of how far emphasis on such personal relationships reinforces unhealthy power dynamics was explored in a previous report.<sup>14</sup> Here, we note the identification of senior clergy, and especially bishops, both with and in contrast to the diocese, and how it is often individual relationship with senior clergy that facilitates a sense of participation more than the structural workings of the institution.

## Spiritual and vocational wellbeing

Like physical and mental wellbeing, Living Ministry participants are able to approach spiritual and vocational wellbeing as a single category or to represent the spiritual and vocational aspects of their wellbeing separately. For some, the two are inextricably linked, for example in both being spiritually nourished and fulfilling one's vocation in the most profound way through celebrating the Eucharist. Others reflect on growing closer to God (i.e. high spiritual wellbeing) at moments when their vocational wellbeing is at a low ebb. Through the pandemic, participants narrate mixed experiences of both. Here, we focus first on spiritual and then on vocational wellbeing.

### Spiritual wellbeing

It is difficult to measure spiritual wellbeing in quantitative terms. The panel survey showed that, during the first year of the pandemic, clergy in our cohorts felt they had more time to pray (76% agreed they had adequate time to pray, compared with 68% two years earlier), and this was matched by an increase in those reporting spending adequate time in prayer (up from 38% in Wave 2 to 47% in Wave 3). On the other hand, during the same period, because of covid restrictions, the proportion of respondents taking retreats fell from 74% to 31%, and engagement in spiritual direction fell from 78% to 67% of respondents. These figures are supported by the qualitative data, which also reveal a mixture of experiences regarding spiritual wellbeing during the pandemic.

Some Living Ministry participants described spiritual struggles and depletion during the pandemic, for different reasons. For some, it is deeply interwoven with their sense of vocation, whether stemming from being unable to preside at Eucharist ('that is normally in your week the place of healing and the place of sustenance and the thing that feeds the rest of the week') or, within pastoral ministry, a sense of 'abandonment, of lamentation, of loss ... the old categories of God not really fitting very well anymore.' This is discussed further below.

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<sup>14</sup> Graveling (2021) *op cit*.

In previous waves of research we have identified the importance of spiritual rhythms. Those for whom these included external sources of nourishment, such as regular retreats and conferences, found their spiritual life disrupted and diminished:

I've missed some of the things that give me life, like going to New Wine ... doing stuff with people. Going out to conferences, doing things, getting out of the parish really, and that's been missing, and also, just because things have been so busy, like my own time, retreats, I didn't get one last year. I've got one in for the end of this year, but I haven't had enough space to just sit with God and I know I need to sort that out. (Incumbent)

This participant echoes others in attributing reduced spiritual wellbeing not only to covid restrictions, but also to tiredness. One incumbent comments, 'there was a period in the heart of the pandemic where just nothing was happening. I was just too exhausted and so spiritually I was exhausted, too,' and another, 'I was so worn down and tired, actually, that just everything becomes muffled, that relationship with God and hearing from God.' We have seen in discussing physical and mental wellbeing that levels of tiredness varied through the pandemic for different people: while some found lockdown exhausting, others struggled more during the subsequent period of re-opening. A few participants had recognised their need for healing and replenishment and had already, in the words of one, 'put in place some more structured support,' such as spiritual direction, mentoring and extended time for Bible reading and prayer. Others wrestled with where to find spiritual nourishment: a curate noted how priesting coincided with the first restrictions being lifted ('sometimes I've got three different sermons on a Sunday ... it's very time-consuming and you put a lot into it') and raised a difficulty observed of others in previous waves: 'Not many of those services then—ministry—feeds me, so I find that a big challenge. Where do I go?'

For some, this challenge was partly resolved by lockdown itself. Several participants who found themselves with more time valued the chance to slow down and spend more time in prayer (including some curates who initially resisted furlough): one incumbent 'absolutely loved it because I had that time with Jesus.' Some were able to take advantage of online activities and resources including spiritual direction, quiet days, retreats and spiritual exercises, or spent time on forthcoming ministry initiatives, 'making sure that a huge amount of time has been spent in prayer around it. Lockdown really did give space for that.'

Spiritual wellbeing does not always correlate with physical and mental—or other aspects of—wellbeing. Echoing previous waves of research,<sup>15</sup> several participants described their spirituality as fundamental to their wellbeing during difficult times (not necessarily related to the pandemic) in other areas: spiritual wellbeing is 'the chassis on which everything runs,' or, simply, 'I've had to cling to God to get through this.' One participant recounted experiencing 'a huge spiritual breakthrough' even while feeling extremely isolated and with physical health problems, and another commented,

I did have moments where I did have a real sense of not just fulfilment but of God's presence and about actually seeing, 'Yes, everything is going horrifically wrong, and here, on our cross now, is

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<sup>15</sup> Perrin & Graveling *op cit*.

Christ with us.’ That was real, and I don't say it glibly, but it was something that was a very real thing to me that did sustain me.

### **Vocational wellbeing**

Vocational wellbeing also presented a mixed picture in both the quantitative and qualitative analyses. In March 2021, when asked directly, just under half (45%) of respondents said they were fulfilling their sense of vocation to a similar extent as before the pandemic, while the remainder was evenly distributed between those who felt more and less vocationally fulfilled (27% and 28% respectively). However, when comparing identical questions between Waves 2 and 3, 42% reported lower levels of vocational fulfilment in Wave 3, suggesting that 14% either did not recognise the change in this aspect of their wellbeing or were judging it by different levels of expectation. The qualitative analysis cannot verify the statistics, but confirms a range of experiences regarding vocational wellbeing during the pandemic.

None of our participants talked of boredom during lockdown. Rather, as we have seen, those who were forced to slow down generally appreciated the relief from time pressure that lockdown provided, and frustrations came more from the ‘impact on my ability to do my job—to pursue the vocation,’ in the words of one incumbent. We have noted examples of this in discussion of relational wellbeing and the pain of being separated from one’s parishioners, for some, alongside for others the sense of guilt at not being suited to telephone or online ministry. We have seen, depending on tradition, the profound vocational disruption of being unable to preside at Eucharist with other people. Several of those in parochial ministry expressed a sense of loss at the suspension or restriction of occasional offices; the joy we saw earlier of being able to conduct a full funeral again was echoed for weddings:

I suppose that sense of creativity and things again, as well, has been something that sustains me. I’ve known that for a very long time but when you are deprived of doing weddings and then suddenly you can do them again, that has been a real support and joy. (Incumbent)

While some clergy struggled mentally with high numbers of funerals and little else, others found this aspect of the pandemic intensely fulfilling:

actually being grounded with enormous numbers of funerals and being alongside people, and weddings and things has been really, really healthy for me through this last 18 months, and unexpectedly has been the place where I feel like this is where God has definitely called me to be, with people and to share their journey and to share their joys and their challenges and the pain of loss. (Incumbent)

The importance of such pastoral ministry within ordained vocations is underlined by the survey finding that ‘those in parochial roles ... were more likely to experience a drop in vocational wellbeing (45%) compared to those in other roles (26%).’<sup>16</sup> The ‘other roles’ included chaplains, of whom those working in the healthcare sector faced extreme physical and mental challenges but also immense vocational fulfilment. In the words of one, ‘it’s a privilege and an honour to be with everybody that’s suffering or has died because of covid. There's no ministry in the world that I would do other than hospital chaplaincy.’ Conversely, other

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<sup>16</sup> McFerran & Graveling *op cit.* p.20.

participants experienced previous or current careers—healthcare or other—coming to the fore in vocational terms. An incumbent explained, ‘it was like, “Ah, so this is why I’m a vicar right now, right here.” ... I could do stuff and feel fulfilled by it and see what the point of me was,’ while a self-supporting assistant priest commented, ‘that was important for me, just to embed it in myself that I was serving God as a [professional] as much as when you do a service at church.’

A further outcome of the pandemic contributing to vocational wellbeing, touched on in the discussion of mental wellbeing above, is decline in church attendance. While a few participants pointed to encouraging signs, several commented on how congregation members, especially young families, have ‘gently filtered away’ or simply not returned to church following the lockdowns. Care and discipleship of existing congregants and evangelistic mission towards those outside the church are important elements of priestly vocation, and attendance figures, as we shall see later, are one of the ways in which parish clergy both measure their own success and feel judged by others. One incumbent commented, ‘it’s hard after a tough week to look at this small congregation again, and just where do you get the energy from to say, “Oh, right, here we go?”’, while another described losing confidence in their capacity to fulfil their vocation:

I think the real tough thing is seeing the numbers in services have been all over the place and really disappointing. ... And, actually, you start ending up in that question of saying, ‘Oh woe is me, what am I doing wrong? Am I up to this job almost?’

Some of these factors affecting vocational wellbeing were short-term effects of lockdown, while others are longer-term concerns. All have, however, in some way and differently for different people, fed into a wider and more profound sense of vocational malaise among many clergy. The difficulties of the pandemic combined with the pre-existing challenges of ordained ministry discussed in detail in earlier reports, such as workload, isolation and demoralisation, have led many participants to question the future of the Church of England and their place within it. This is not to the extent of leaving the church: none of the participants in this wave of the research was considering this in the immediate future. Rather, concerns fell into three broad and interrelated categories: workload, decline, and vocational fit.

The challenge of managing an excessive workload has been an important theme throughout the Living Ministry research<sup>17</sup> and the further impact of the pandemic on this is included above in our discussion of physical and mental wellbeing. Implications for vocational wellbeing continue in this wave of the research, with the extra demands of the pandemic resulting in work intruding well beyond agreed hours even for those in bounded, part-time roles:

lots of jobs needed doing that only I could do at that particular time. Now, people—quite a lot of people—are still reluctant to take back roles that they had before, so I've still got them. In theory, I work three days a week. In reality, that's obviously not the case. (Self-supporting team vicar)

For two participants, the pandemic has contributed to a decision to leave their (incumbent-status) role. One self-supporting minister is taking slightly earlier retirement than planned: ‘I was going to continue but I am

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<sup>17</sup> See Graveling (2018) *op cit.*; Graveling (2021) *op cit.* and Perrin & Graveling *op cit.*

afraid the stresses and strains of the lockdown were enough to convince me that actually I needed to slow down and go PTO or something like that'. A stipendiary minister, a few more years from retirement age, commented, 'I'm not sure if that's a stepping-back forever from full-time ministry, but it's a stepping-back from full-time ministry in this place at this time, because I need a huge amount of time off.' This person emphasised that covid was not the only reason for this decision but, combined with previous challenges, 'the two together have made me realise that I don't have inexhaustible resources.'

There are two important things to note here. First, for most participants who talked about vocational implications of workload, the pandemic has been a contributing factor exacerbating an already difficult situation, rather than the sole cause of a shift. Some participants barely mentioned the pandemic when describing an unbearable workload. Second, a decision to leave one's post may represent a shift in the shape of vocation and a positive vocational move, rather than itself being problematic. Indeed, both these participants felt that this was very much the right time to move on, both for themselves and for their congregations, and one expressed excitement at what may lie ahead and relief at being able to prioritise their own wellbeing. On the other hand, clergy may feel they are fulfilling their vocation but at a physical, mental and relational cost that is too high to bear. A participant early in first incumbency commented, 'I'm okay, but it can't keep going like this, and if that's the nature of what's required now of an Anglican priest, then I have to ask myself some serious questions.' Another, at a similar stage of ministry, described how immense vocational fulfilment provides sustenance amid the challenges: 'when I read the Ordinal, ... I read what I've been called to do and I just think, "Wow, it's me." The sense that in all this mess I'm being me, in the most deep and profound way possible, is very sustaining.' The same person, however, articulated the conflict between vocational and physical wellbeing by also stating, 'I want to carry on doing it but ... I just don't think I'm capable of the effort that's needed for 10 years of this. I'll drop dead.'

A second reason for clergy to think carefully about their vocation—and one that in some circumstances may contribute to increased workload—is concern over the current and future state of the Church of England. This was identified as an issue in previous waves of research, with many dioceses already in financial difficulties and seeking to restructure to save money, and has been intensified by the pandemic.<sup>18</sup> The widespread diocesan turmoil discussed above in relation to participation has multiple implications for vocational wellbeing. At a practical level, several participants—especially curates—voiced concern about the availability of jobs in the future:

When I went into this, I just naively assumed that the church was in a good financial state and this is a secure thing, that you would have a stipendiary job for the rest of your life. But that is feeling less and less certain at the moment.

More immediately, participants beyond curacy described being affected by cuts and pastoral reorganisation: some by diocesan systems designed to determine how clergy should be distributed

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<sup>18</sup> The interviews preceded the announcement by the Church Commissioners in May 2022 of increased financial investment in Church of England ministry over the next three triennia. It is not clear what effect if any this has had on clergy morale.



between parishes, and some by specific pastoral reorganisation which impacts on their role, as for one participant who will see a part of her role that fulfils a key aspect of her vocation removed:

a job that I felt I might be called to for a long time has then left me thinking, am I to see them through the change, and to support them, and enable them, and give them some stability, but actually am I called here long term?

Others have found themselves having to wait for restructuring conversations and processes to take place before laying down or taking up new roles:

that sense of vocation that has emerged for me during covid, at the moment, there's no movement on any of these things because we are, as a Church of England, bust in terms of our finances and we just don't know how to cope with it. ... That sense of frustration that comes and I'm seriously looking at the church trying to decide should I walk to another diocese.

Beyond such tangible impacts, participants reflected on what the financial and numerical pressures might mean for them as priests in their current and future roles. One incumbent suggested, 'we're in the painful, breaking part' of a process of redistribution, and that, as priests, 'we're called to preside over this at this time,' while another commented,

it unsettles me, I don't take any joy. But ... if we don't think about it now, how will we best- ... How are we best stewarding the people of God in a place, but also stewarding the church as an institution?

For some participants, such questions have become intensely personal and caused them to question how their vocation fits within the Church of England, either at a local level or more deeply. A previous report has discussed the sense of vocational dissonance experienced by many clergy as they find their time taken up with administrative tasks that distract from what they feel called to do.<sup>19</sup> This is echoed in this wave and explored further below as we consider questions of autonomy and accountability. What is striking in the Wave 3 interviews is the repeated narrative of vocational uncertainty, stemming partly from a sense of institutional anxiety that manifests itself in diocesan restructures and new national or diocesan strategies. This is felt particularly by those in our middle two cohorts, ordained in 2011 and 2015, and also relates to age. Several of the 2006 cohort are looking towards retirement and therefore not having to wrestle with vocational questions in the same way (for example, if potential job changes do not work out, the option of remaining where they are until retirement is more feasible), while most of those who started training in 2016 are, as curates, still in the normal process of working out their vocation. Many of those a few years into their ordained ministry, though, are experiencing new uncertainties. They may be reaching a point where they are seeking to move on from their current post, either as natural progression or in response to difficult circumstances, or sometimes both, as in the case of a participant ordained in 2011 who, already wondering about moving in Wave 2 and now hurt by diocesan restructuring, stated, 'I need a fresh something. I have hit that point where I am kind of feeling, I need something different.' Others are facing disruption to aspects

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<sup>19</sup> Graveling (2018) *op cit*.

of vocation they thought they had already—to some extent at least—settled. One, ordained in 2011, explained,

When we started the discernment, pre-BAP stuff, I think there was a clarity about what ordained parish ministry was and what it looked like ... I don't think that certainty exists anymore, and that is a weird thing. You never know what you are being ordained for, but I think that has just magnified. The pandemic has increased that sense of uncertainty.

Another, ordained in 2015, articulates a similar experience but links it more to evolving national church discourse than to the pandemic:

when I responded to whatever sense of vocation I had, I think I had a mental image of what that ministry would look like. And it looks so different now. In fact, I'm not sure I quite know what it is. ... [W]here does my vocation fit into what the church is now doing, in this simpler, humbler, bolder, etc., etc., etc., world?

These are not new narratives and may be common within mid-ministry, as clergy face the reality of their job in the context of what likely always has been and always will be a constantly changing social and ecclesial environment. It is clear, though, that external anxiety and uncertainty—from the church and from wider society—has an impact on personal mental and vocational wellbeing, as articulated clearly by one participant who recognises their evolving state of mind, influenced particularly by the pandemic:

You know, the pension statement arrives, saying, '34 more years of ministry,' or whatever. I look at it and go, 'I don't know what I can see. I don't know.' I feel just as called to it, but I'm not sure I quite understand that calling or can see how it fits. And I think some of the darker moments of the last year, those have been very scary thoughts. They feel a bit more like ponderings now, but not sure where to find the space or the context to process those things.

However, while such 'ponderings' were articulated by several participants, they are not universal. Some clergy have grown more settled in their vocation as they have progressed through their ministry: as one explained, 'I think I am more established in my vocation, who I am and who that is within the context of the priesthood that I share.' Moreover, 16 people changed posts (including two switching curacies and five starting a new post beyond curacy) either since the Wave 2 interviews or within the month beforehand and several more changed their focus or took on additional roles. The majority of these have so far proved to be positive moves, with the most challenging experienced by those taking up first incumbencies or finding themselves in difficult working relationships. For some, their move has been, as noted above, a response to vocational questioning and being or becoming unhappy or unfulfilled in their previous role. While one has found unexpected fulfilment after accepting a role reluctantly, for most it has been an intentionally positive change. For detailed analysis of transitions in ordained ministry, see the Wave 2 report, *Moving in Power: Transitions in Ordained Ministry*.<sup>20</sup> Here, we note that most of those flourishing in new posts described feeling affirmed and supported, both in performing their new role (for example, being invited to take part

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<sup>20</sup> Graveling (2021) *op cit*.

in diocesan life or by senior colleagues taking an interest in one's personal and ministerial wellbeing), and in the process by which they arrived at it. At least three participants explained their changing role as resulting from vocational conversations with senior clergy who have allowed, encouraged and advised them in developing a new direction of ministry: one describing 'a role that I created with the bishop because it was what I was interested in;' another how the diocese has 'been able to identify some skills and some things that I like to do that they wouldn't necessarily engage other people in doing. ... So that's been helpful, really well supported through the archdeacon and through the bishops;' and a third appreciating the diocese 'pulling out all the stops to make [a new pioneering role, including funding for additional training] possible for me. ... And so I feel, yes, as affirmed as I can be.'

The latter two participants are examples of self-supporting ministers being well supported in their vocations. Self-supporting ordained ministry can, however, be vocationally precarious, particularly if the minister is working alongside other ordained colleagues with whom they need to maintain good relationships for their ministry in that location to continue. We observed earlier how a chaplain lost their Christian community through breakdown of relationship with a colleague in their home church; if, as in this case, they are also a licensed minister in the parish, this has implications for their vocational as well as their relational wellbeing. Indeed, while stipendiary parochial clergy sometimes find vocational fulfilment in sixth-day, voluntary chaplaincy roles, away from the draining administrative work of the parish, clergy combining part-time paid chaplaincy and self-supporting parochial roles may find themselves engaging in bricolage, struggling to find and hold together two or more roles which sustain them financially and fulfil different aspects of their vocation within healthy working environments. When the parish side of this falls apart, as for three participants in Wave 3, the vocational loss can be intense: in the words of one, 'it feels like there are two sides to my ministry and one side is just really fulfilling and the other side is non-existent. So it feels very out of balance.' Likewise, chaplaincy roles do not always work out well, as we saw in relation to physical and mental wellbeing. One participant, having worked in several contexts, observed of one, 'I loved it there. I loved the people I was with, the staff, and I really enjoyed and realised that chaplaincy was for me ... I needed to be in the right place, doing the right thing.'

## Autonomy, accountability and support

### Covenant and contract

There are nearly 20,000 active clergy serving in the Church of England, of which around 7,700 are stipendiary, nearly 3,000 self-supporting in parochial roles, over 7,000 with Permission to Officiate (mostly retired clergy continuing to serve), approximately 1,000 in chaplaincy, and another 1,000 in other posts such as diocesan or national roles.<sup>21</sup> The real picture is, of course, more complicated, as these figures are based on an individual's main post and many clergy (at least 28% of stipendiary and unknown numbers of others) inhabit multiple roles. Chaplains and clergy employed in other roles, for example, are likely to hold Permission to Officiate in parochial ministry or be licensed as a self-supporting minister to serve in a specific benefice. For our purposes, what is important to note is that the majority of clergy are not employees. The single largest category is that of office-holder (including most stipendiary and self-supporting parish clergy and some chaplains who do not have a contract of employment or earn a salary) and even those who are employed may also have some kind of professional relationship with the church that is not based on a contract of employment. Indeed, ordination itself is rooted in the biblical framework of covenant, rather than contract, notwithstanding some contractual (such as common tenure) and constitutional (because the Church of England is the established church) elements to ordained ministry.<sup>22</sup> Covenant, with its emphasis on acting out of grace and the corollary of mutual responsibility for each other, rather than contractual obligation, holds autonomy and accountability in tension. As we observe in the introduction to this report, there is potential both for exploitation by clergy—in refusing accountability—and for exploitation of clergy, in the sacrifices required of them in their ministry.<sup>23</sup> This may be multi-directional, in the sense that the relationship clergy have with the Church of England actually consists in multiple covenantal relationships, including with parishioners, lay and ordained colleagues, senior clergy, diocesan officers, and the institution of the diocese, national church and any other working context such as hospitals, schools and theological education institutions.

Despite all these relationships, the Wave 3 panel survey found that, while

the vast majority of respondents had somewhere helpful to provide them with feedback and support (95%), to talk openly about their ministry (97%), and to ensure they enact their role well (86%), ... fewer than half of respondents (47%) reported a space that was beneficial for measuring their performance.<sup>24</sup>

Following this up in the qualitative study, when asked how they knew if they were doing a good job, many participants struggled to answer. On reflection, they mentioned a range of indicators, including

<sup>21</sup> Church of England (2021), *Ministry Statistics 2020*, Church of England Research & Statistics.

<sup>22</sup> See McFerran & Graveling *op cit.* for more discussion of this.

<sup>23</sup> See A. Berry (2005), 'Accountability and Control in a Cat's Cradle,' *Accounting, Auditing and Accountability Journal* 18 (2): 255-297; and Church of England (2015), *Guidelines for the Professional Conduct of the Clergy*, Revised edition, London: Church House Publishing, p.26.

<sup>24</sup> McFerran & Graveling *op cit.* p.38.

congregational feedback, church finances, and outcomes of ministry such as attendance figures, baptisms and transformational encounters; however, this response from one incumbent echoed the immediate reaction of many: ‘I actually quite often have no idea and, in fact, quite often, I feel as though I’m not [doing a good job] because I have nothing to measure.’

Because curates, in their training role, have different expectations and structures relating to autonomy and accountability, the following discussion centres on the narratives of ordained ministers beyond curacy, in particular those of incumbent status.

### **Formal, felt and chosen accountability**

Struggling to measure how good a job they are doing does not mean that clergy feel no accountability. Indeed, some perceive accountability coming from all directions, as in the case of one overwhelmed new incumbent:

When you ask ‘who do you feel accountable to,’ I just wrote, ‘everyone’: the school, the funeral director, the church, the [local ecumenical leaders’ group], the community, the diocese, the deanery, the bishop, the Church of England, my family, my friends, and that’s why I feel saturated and stretched and I can’t do the job.

The different relationships in this person’s list vary in nature. Looking across our participants’ discussions of those to whom they feel accountable, we can identify three spheres of accountability: formal, felt, and chosen.

Participants talked about being formally accountable to their diocese; their PCC (in some cases); their line manager if they had one; and sometimes to senior colleagues (such as training incumbents) and archdeacons. This kind of accountability largely related to legalities around things like buildings and faculties, as one incumbent observed when recounting an episode involving the emergency removal of a gravestone: ‘We were very accountable then, and why hadn’t we applied for the proper faculty for the moving of the stone?’ Participants listed formal diocesan accountabilities covering the extent of systems and processes required for a well-administered parish, as articulated by two participants in conversation:

A: The way the diocese measures you is how organised you are and are you paying your parish share and everything you need to do on time?

B: Have you got your safeguarding officers? Have you got your GDPR in order?

The mention of parish share echoes the intense financial pressure, alongside the pressure to increase church attendance, identified in previous waves of research. Both of these were repeatedly raised in the current wave as ways in which parochial clergy feel measured by their diocese and the national church:

The buzzwords in this diocese ... could be grossly oversimplified as money and numbers. So, you’re clear on some bits, the bits about money, and you’re not clear on the rest of it: am I a good priest, am I providing good pastoral care, and all those sorts of things.

Formal accountability tends to be based on indicators that are quantifiable, follow structured process, and are easily reported and monitored through forms, inspections and audits, drawing more on a contractual than a covenantal framework. Ministerial Development Review (MDR) falls into this category, although it was not discussed at length by participants (see below).

However, while most participants mentioned formal accountability relationships, these were not the ones they valued most in relation to their vocation. When participants used the phrase ‘feeling accountable,’ they referred to a wide range of groups and actors. Many of these they have no formalised relationship with: there are no reporting forms or numbers and no legal consequences of their actions; rather they are relationally and vocationally rooted.

Despite the formal relationship established through ordination, licensing and diocesan structures, in the narratives of our participants, shaped within the context of covenantal relationships, bishops and other senior clergy fall into this sphere of ‘felt’ accountability. However, there were two other parties to whom participants primarily and repeatedly described themselves as ‘feeling’ accountable. First, not in the list above but mentioned elsewhere by the same incumbent, many (if not all, given that several in group interviews acknowledged that this was something they took for granted) saw their primary accountability as being to God:

It’s what God thinks of you, isn’t it, and your relationship with him that really counts. Are you trying to be obedient and do what he wants? And that’s all he requires really, that we’re obedient and faithful to him. (Incumbent)

This, of course, is much less easily quantifiable and encompasses the whole of life. Reflecting on how accountability to God works, participants spoke about the importance of prayer, of theological reflection alone and with others, of spiritual discernment and, most fundamentally, of the knowledge that they were fulfilling their calling. The latter is explained by an incumbent who also raises the second predominant felt accountability relationship: with congregations and, beyond that, wider parishes and communities.

I am accountable to God primarily, so I would say I am given God’s charge to be his shepherd of this flock ... it is in the ordinal. I have the responsibility, and I have to answer to that to God. So, ultimately, I am accountable to God. I would then put next I am accountable to my parishioners. That’s how the parish structure works. They are who I am here to minister to and ... they are the people that I am shepherding. Therefore, I have a duty to make sure that they are in good spiritual health. Then the rest, then the rest.

The sphere of ‘felt’ accountability, then, is far less about ticking boxes, filling forms and reporting numbers, and more about day-to-day ordained ministry, consisting in things like transformative pastoral care encounters, spiritual nurturing of parishioners, church services that enable congregants to engage with God, and smooth and compassionate delivery of funerals and weddings. Much of this is, of course, difficult to measure. Participants gauge their performance informally in relation to parishioners, by feedback received via email, thank-you cards and conversation, as well as by their own sense of fulfilment and impact.

Finally, participants discussed accountability relationships that they themselves had put in place or—if facilitated by their diocese or workplace—with which they had chosen to engage.<sup>25</sup> These may take place in an individual or group setting and include regular conversations with peers, whether a neighbouring vicar as we saw above in the person who appreciated having ‘someone to share the journey’ during the pandemic; a facilitated ‘reflective practice group’ or similar; or a long-term cell group of friends from theological college. Deanery chapter may fall into this category for those who find it a safe place to discuss their ministry. Just as important as peers, however, are relationships with spiritual directors, pastoral supervisors, mentors and coaches, where participants described being able to give a personal account of their ministry and reflect with another person on their practice, their relationships, their vocation and their wellbeing. One incumbent explained,

I’ve made myself accountable to a spiritual director [who] asks me questions and tries to challenge me and just, sort of, walks with me. The mentor asks me how things are going, gives me the odd bit of advice, and, at the end, says, ‘You’re doing a really great job,’ and actually, I need to hear that sometimes.

Spiritual direction was by far the most commonly mentioned of these relationships, including by those who ‘confessed’ (in their words) to not having a spiritual director at the moment and expressed a need to find one. Pastoral supervision was mentioned by several participants, all of whom except one hospital chaplain had arranged and/or paid for it themselves (similar to spiritual direction):

supervision, that’s something I’ve had to organise. Dioceses will say, ‘It might be helpful to have a spiritual advisor or somebody,’ and some dioceses even have a group of people that they say, ‘You can contact us if you want one,’ but I don’t think it’s an option. ... In any other caring profession, like counselling, when you’re dealing with pastoral issues, if you don’t have supervision, then you won’t be able to handle any of these issues in a healthy way. You won’t be able to reflect on them effectively. You won’t be able to keep going, and doing all those things, and investing yourselves in areas that are really difficult. So, for me, I just think that’s so important, that supervision.  
(Incumbent)

Like this person, all those working with supervisors rated them highly, and at least two others expressed a wish for dioceses to put in place or facilitate access to supervision.

Mentors cover a range of advisory relationships, unlike coaches, who tend to be used in a highly specific and professional manner. Mentors are often unpaid and may be long-term or utilised at specific moments, such as for a curate covering a vacancy or an incumbent struggling in a new role. Mentors include local or retired clergy (sometimes bishops) and may be arranged by the diocese—on request or as standard—or self-

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<sup>25</sup> This may also include mandatory accountability relationships such as reflective practice groups during curacy in some dioceses or pastoral supervision in some chaplaincy contexts.

organised, often organically through existing relationships. A few participants mentioned mentoring groups, which overlap with the peer groups referenced above.

Considering these three spheres of accountability, we can see that accountability relationships in the ‘formal’ sphere are most easily framed by the four aspects of accountability in our framework: expectations, information, discussion and consequences. Expectations are well-defined; the information required and the way it is discussed or reported are fixed; and, at least to some extent, there are clear consequences of positive or negative performance. However, for most clergy, the formal sphere represents the lowest vocational engagement. While clergy may be enthusiastic about increasing attendance figures, many resist too much emphasis on numbers. While they may wish their parishes to be in good financial shape and support good safeguarding and data protection practices, for most, the tasks involved in administering such things are not at the centre of their vocation. Rather, it is in the ‘felt’ sphere that clergy feel the highest levels of accountability and responsibility in relation to their vocation: in (to varying degrees for different people) pastoral ministry, preaching, evangelism, prayer, occasional offices and sacraments. Here, though, expectations, measures, reporting and consequences are all far less clear. The ‘chosen’ sphere consists of accountability relationships that are put in place—either by the clergyperson or by their diocese—in an attempt to resolve this gap and provide accountability in the areas of ordained ministry most central to their vocation, as well as to help them meet the more ‘formal’ requirements. However, most of these chosen accountabilities are not mandatory, and performance expectations and consequences remain unclear, meaning that these relationships often get squeezed out when time is under pressure. One incumbent, describing a period of pastoral supervision, commented,

that really, really helped for a time, but I couldn’t keep that going time-wise, but I think, actually, it’s a really helpful thing in ministry. I want to plug that and say that if we could find the time, every vicar, to have [a pastoral supervisor], it would be amazing because they’re really very good at getting you to think about what’s really going on and helping you to manage yourself, you know, to manage difficulties and things.

The result of these different accountability frameworks is that attention is often diverted from vocationally fulfilling activities—the tasks of ministry for which clergy feel they were ordained—and towards the tasks and targets that are more measurable and for which they feel more formally accountable. One participant in parish ministry described

from time to time, when I have all this stress over finances and buildings and so on, thinking it would be so easy just to say, ‘I’m going to explore chaplaincy full time.’ ... I’m finding a need [for] a ministry which I feel is my vocation because the other stuff is so draining.

In their day-to-day ministry, then, clergy may feel they have very little accountability and a great deal of autonomy and, often at the same time, through pressures and constraints of strategic and administrative expectations, high levels of accountability and little autonomy.



## Autonomy and accountability during the pandemic

Turning to consider how clergy experienced autonomy and accountability during the pandemic, we can identify in the narratives of our participants three key areas: responses to lockdown and restrictions; implications for ministerial practice; and congregational withdrawal.

As for the whole of the population, the first lockdown in March 2020 came as a shock to clergy. Following the government announcement, the immediate instruction from the archbishops and bishops to close church buildings not only for public worship but also for private prayer, including by ordained and lay ministers, was met with a range of responses.<sup>26</sup> We have seen how lockdown affected the spiritual, vocational, mental and relational wellbeing of participants by separating them from their parishioners and preventing them from fulfilling key aspects of their ministry, including—especially for those of a more Anglo-Catholic tradition—presiding at the Eucharist in church. While some participants concurred with closing their churches and only one declined to close the building completely (‘there was no way that I was going to try and celebrate the Eucharist on my dining-room table’), several participants described complying reluctantly with church closure:

I opened my churches at the very first possible moment I was able to reopen them, they didn’t stay shut a moment longer. We were open for prayer absolutely the first moment we could find some reason to open the door.

During the second and third lockdowns, there was no fixed episcopal instruction and clergy were advised to make their own decisions about opening their buildings, within government guidelines. While some were happy to close, some, again, experienced local or diocesan pressure to do so against their will: ‘I was quite disappointed, particularly in the January lockdown when we were being encouraged from all sides to close, when my instinct as a priest was to be open.’ As we have already observed, many found these periods and the time between and following the lockdowns extremely difficult and harder than the initial lockdown, as they felt the responsibility of making decisions and negotiating between different needs and preferences within and beyond their congregations. While a few clergy had a clear viewpoint and were happy to decide what their church should do (‘I said to folks, “I’m making the decision.”’), many more struggled. Some attempted to accommodate different perspectives within or between different congregations:

three churches were just very definite about, ‘No, we don’t want to stay open, we don’t think it is safe.’ And that was much easier for me because if I am honest, if I had been completely making the decisions, I would have shut all six of them because I didn’t feel it was safe.

Others deliberated over decisions they felt ill-equipped to make, caught between wanting to open buildings and run services, and the need to ensure public safety:

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<sup>26</sup> For more analysis of this see, for example, A. Village and L.J. Francis (2021), ‘Churches and Faith: Attitude towards Church Buildings During the 2020 Covid-19 Lockdown Among Churchgoers in England,’ *Ecclesial Practices* 8 (2): 216-232; and *Churches, Covid-19 and Communities: Experiences, Needs, and Supporting Recovery* (March 2021), The Centre for the Study of Christianity and Culture, University of York.

I noticed that when the church was closed, whilst that was hard it wasn't my decision. The restrictions were in place. It has been a lot harder since, when, suddenly, there are no restrictions, so in theory we could do anything, and you are sitting there thinking, 'Do I want to have a Christingle service with 250, 300 people rammed in the building?' I could. Do I want that? Suddenly, people are looking to you to make a decision which you don't feel particularly equipped to make.

There were therefore two dynamics through which lockdown and restrictions impacted clergy experiences of autonomy: perspectives (including the clergy person's) on appropriate actions regarding restrictions, and decision-making processes around these actions.

Beyond decisions about restrictions themselves, lockdown made a difference to the ministerial practice of our participants. As we have already discussed, clergy had widely varying experiences of lockdown. Some felt constrained, unfulfilled, pressured and sometimes guilty because they found it difficult to close their buildings or to conduct pastoral ministry by telephone, or they were unable or unwilling to move online.

We have also met those who were busier than ever before, some very much on the frontline in supporting people affected by the pandemic, and others who appreciated a slower than usual pace of life and ministry. Several participants commented on how the abrupt stop to customary ways of working caused by covid restrictions both necessitated and gave permission for new creativity that resonated vocationally: 'We were encouraged from the very beginning not to go back to the way things were before but to use the opportunity to rip up rule books and to do things in a new way, a new, creative way.' However, this sense of heightened autonomy sometimes met obstacles in the formal accountability sphere discussed above: the same participant continues, 'Yet when you try to do that, you bump up against things. ... It took us approximately six months to get a faculty to put broadband into our church.' Others experienced it as a short-term period of liberation, with one voicing concern about increasing levels of 'micro-management' since restrictions began to be lifted, and another stating, 'The lid was let off and now the lid's back on again, or it's kind of coming down.'

Third, we have encountered the widespread narrative of congregations withdrawing during the pandemic and not returning in their entirety, in terms of both attendance—which, as noted, is one of the key metrics by which clergy feel they are judged—and participation. The latter has meant not only that clergy have had to juggle more tasks, but also, for some, that their local accountability structures dissipated, as an incumbent explained:

Within milliseconds of lockdown, literally anyone who had any involvement in anything just disappeared. ... Myself and my colleague just tried to keep people in the loop and say, 'this is what we're thinking,' and just no responses to any emails, no acknowledgement of anything, no anything from anyone, which was an odd place to suddenly be in, because it was like, 'okay, we can kind of do what we want, but that doesn't feel good or right.'

During the pandemic, then, the tension between autonomy and accountability was manifest and, to some extent, magnified, in relation to the way decisions about restrictions were made and responded to; the ways in which the challenges of the pandemic affected ordained ministerial practice; and in relationships with

congregations, with clergy feeling, sometimes simultaneously, free to do whatever they liked; wishing for more input or oversight; and burdened by expectation and red tape.

### **Self-Determination Theory, autonomy and accountability**

We move now to examine the autonomy and accountability narratives of Living Ministry participants in the light of Self-Determination Theory (SDT) which, as we stated earlier, defines autonomy as acting in line with one's interests and values.

First, keeping our attention on the pandemic, we can see that the experiences of clergy—with all the implications for their wellbeing discussed above—depended very much on how able they were to act in line with their values. Those who found the first lockdown hardest were those who felt forced to close their churches against their wishes and those who felt pressure to change their ministerial practice in a way that felt uncomfortable. It was easier for participants who concurred with closing churches and those who found lockdown vocationally fulfilling, whether in the sense of 'doing' (being more creative and having more time for pastoral work) or 'being' (having more time to rest and pray). While having little say in the restrictions, the latter groups were still largely intrinsically motivated—and therefore highly autonomous—as they were able to act in accordance with what they found fulfilling or enjoyable. Those who complied with restrictions or ways of working against their wishes or preferences were extrinsically motivated through external or introjected regulation—i.e. they felt forced to submit to an external authority or pressured to act out of fear of disapproval, shame, or guilt—and therefore had low levels of autonomy.

Many clergy, of course, fell between these two positions: they reluctantly closed their churches while agreeing that it was the best course of action. Within SDT, this form of extrinsic motivation is termed 'identified regulation,' where people act autonomously (though not to the extent of intrinsically-motivated actions) because they are acting in line with values with which they identify. We also see this middle ground in play beyond the pandemic, especially as clergy wrestle with the question of what a 'good job' looks like. One of the participants quoted above echoes others in resisting the emphasis on 'money and numbers' and calling for more attention to what it means to be a 'good priest' and provide good pastoral care. At the same time, however, most parish clergy do want to grow their churches and do desire financial sustainability. The complexity of these vocational challenges, experienced by many, is reflected in the account of one participant, a first-time incumbent, who began by holding in opposition 'worldly' (growth in numbers and financial security) and 'godly' (preaching, teaching and pastoral ministry) indicators of doing a good job:

in terms of how you measure success or know that you are doing a good job, it's holding the worldly and the godly measures of success together. I don't feel at the moment, ironically, that the church more broadly holds up the God priorities as much as all the other-

However, this person went on to acknowledge that they also identify with such measures ('I am a bit of a sucker for the world stuff as well') and recognised different—both more worldly and more godly—values within this:

I want to be thought of as good and doing a good job. ... I also want this church to survive and to continue. ... I think that's the right thing to do, but also I suppose, if I'm honest, because I want to be liked and loved and thought well of.

This narrative is further complicated by the introduction of the participant's sense of calling: doing a good job is not only measured in what is morally or professionally right to do, but also—and more fundamentally for many participants—in what one is called to do:

There are moments when I think, 'Hang on a second, I didn't feel called to have to spend my time dealing with money. I came into this because I felt a sense of call to preaching and teaching and pastoral ministry, and all that other stuff you find in the Ordinal.'

This too, though, is not clear-cut: the participant continued, 'I absolutely accept that [financial management and fundraising are] an important part of this job ... I am a priest doing a job and my job is being a vicar.'

Whatever the theological perspective on 'worldly' and 'godly' measures, this narrative is revealing of the complex interplay between different motivations. The distinction between calling to priesthood<sup>27</sup> and the tasks of ordained ministry is echoed by many clergy.<sup>28</sup> Through the lens of SDT, clergy are at their most autonomous in ministry when they are intrinsically motivated, in other words, when they feel they are most fulfilling their calling and, for most of our participants, this equates to their priestly ministry, the 'stuff you find in the Ordinal.' While they may appreciate the importance of good financial management, for example, this is a secondary, extrinsic motivation, with levels of autonomy depending on whether they are acting for reward or to avoid penalty, to avoid shame or guilt, or because they positively identify with this as a value. Even growing their church is, for some, extrinsically motivated, depending on the nature of what that means in practice. It is entirely possible, then, for clergy to draw on such indicators to assess their own performance even while critiquing them as measures. One incumbent said, for example, 'My instinct is to say that I'm doing a good job if I'm being faithful to my calling, that's the bottom line,' and then, later, 'So how do we know what good looks like? I think I just know. But I find it really hard to measure without just thinking about numbers and finances.' A participant involved in planting a church commented,

Some of it is about self-sustainability with numbers and, within the church plant, raising enough finances to sustain the ministry. So, that will be the success of it, but also we are a spiritual organisation ... So, for us, we're trying to build unity and diversity, so for me there are the values of are we growing in our relational stuff? ... but how do you measure that? ... I don't do a quantitative thing about that, but it's more gauging it as looking at interactions, both at services but also what's going on in the community and so on.

Other indicators found in the 'formal' sphere of accountability discussed above, such as compliance with data protection regulations, safeguarding practice, zero-carbon emissions and buildings regulations, vary in the extent to which participants identify with them as values (for example most, if not all, fully support good safeguarding practice while fewer are in favour of the faculty system). Whether they do or not,

<sup>27</sup> There are no distinctive deacons among our qualitative participants.

<sup>28</sup> See Graveling (2018) *op cit.* for a detailed analysis.

however, their ‘formal’ status as measurable or legal requirements means that priority—and therefore time and attention—is often given to these areas rather than to tasks that are intrinsically motivated and vocationally fulfilling.

The Wave 2 report, *Moving in Power*, highlighted the importance to clergy wellbeing of a sense of agency, using Hirschman’s model of exit, voice and loyalty to make sense of how people respond to difficult situations.<sup>29</sup> This remains pertinent in Wave 3, noting that the amount of choice people feel they have in how they respond is as important as the response itself. Compare this self-supporting minister who works part-time for the church and has other income: ‘I can choose to leave the priesthood. But I choose to stay in. So I'm not forced to stay or committed to stay in,’ with this stipendiary minister, for whom leaving (even to another role within the church) would have significant repercussions for their family: ‘I felt very trapped because I think any other job, even if you don't do it, you can say, "Oh, well, I'll just resign, I will go," but you can't even say that when you are talking about your family's home.’ Where such choices are about the ability to act in line with one’s values and one’s vocation, agency is an important contributor to autonomy.

Second, it is clear that collaboration—working with others and for the collective good—is a common value among clergy. The survey in March 2021 told us that, for all aspects of ministry considered and particularly those about vision and strategy, ‘respondents wanted more scope to make decisions themselves, but not to make decisions entirely alone.’<sup>30</sup> 45% of respondents said they did not receive enough input into decision-making from parishioners (35% from congregations), and 38% from bishops.<sup>31</sup> This is supported by participants in the qualitative interviews who described missing key members of their congregations during the pandemic not just for their bolstering of attendance figures, but also for their participation, wisdom and support. Therefore, taking the definition of autonomy as acting in line with one’s values, the desire for input and accountability is not at odds with the desire for autonomy; rather, for those who value collaboration (recognising that this is not everybody), receiving input and being accountable are integral parts of acting autonomously.

Third, the narratives of our participants around accountability suggest that the ‘felt’ sphere discussed above depends very much on levels of trust. Trust is always an important component in relationships, and especially so when the relationships are based on covenant rather than contract. For example, when asked to whom they felt accountable, participants told us repeatedly that they did not feel equal levels of accountability to all bishops; rather, they felt more or less accountable to bishops depending on the quality of the relationships:

I do feel accountable to my bishop, but I have a good relationship with my bishop. I didn't with the previous two bishops. I didn't have good relationships with them at all, and I didn't feel any accountability.

<sup>29</sup> Graveling (2021) *op cit.* pp.49-51.

<sup>30</sup> McFerran & Graveling *op cit.* p.29.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.* pp.34-35.

‘Good relationship’ has multiple aspects. Different waves of Living Ministry have shown that availability, connection, understanding, and personal and vocational support (as in this case) are all important to how clergy experience their relationship with their bishop. In this report we have seen, through the example of varying responses to gifts from bishops during the pandemic, the importance of positive relationship being built over time through a consistently supportive environment. A self-supporting participant commented, ‘I feel more accountable to God than to the church because ... there’s not really been that much interest from the hierarchy of the church.’ A sense of accountability may also stem from receiving trust: ‘[The bishop said] “I trust you,” ... and that holds me accountable, and although she doesn’t want reports she is going to get one soon. ... I’m going to honour that in everything I do.’ Or it may be rooted in respect:

I certainly rated [the previous bishop]. I would have felt accountable to [him] because I very much respected him, and I’m in slightly more of a complicated position with regard to [the current bishop]. ... I would certainly give [him] my ostensible support, but things aren’t going very well in the diocese at the moment.

Likewise, clergy may feel happier within parochial structures of accountability if they respect the people inhabiting those structures, and particularly if they believe they share a similar mindset, especially regarding mission and ministry. Discussing autonomy and accountability, one incumbent commented,

I feel I have a good degree of autonomy, but also a good degree of support in the things that I want to seek advice on. And I have a supportive ministry leadership team and a DCC [District Church Council] who make decisions in a way that is congruent with the vision of the church, so that's very helpful.

The security of shared perspectives can also be important to peer accountability groups. Fundamental to cell groups, reflective practice groups and other similar settings (including deanery chapter) is confidence that these are safe spaces, where people can share confidentially without fear of judgement. While diverse groups can work well, often if they are facilitated, contrasting perspectives can be a barrier to those in a minority or if there is not a mutual desire to invest in the group. A female participant in a predominantly traditionalist deanery described her deep sense of exclusion, while another participant in a group that was about to cease, commented, ‘I’m not too disappointed, because I didn’t see eye to eye with those folks. Not in a horrible way but just different spiritualities and stuff.’

Trust is important in all these relationships, and it is important to understand the nature of that trust, elucidated by one incumbent:

I’m happy to be accountable to people who I’m able to trust. And the trust isn’t just that they’ll be confidential and that kind of thing. It’s trust that their heart is in the right place and they’ve got integrity for the same kind of values that I’ve got for the church.

The kind of accountability with which these clergy feel able to engage—and, indeed, the kind that they seek when they look for collaboration—depends very much on good relationship and shared values. Put another way, it is the kind of accountability that supports the clergyperson in being able to act in line with their values (i.e. autonomously) and, therefore, to fulfil their vocation.

In the context of covenant, vocation is enormously important because labour is not given transactionally for monetary reward. If clergy do not feel they are fulfilling their vocation, their wellbeing and their identity as ordained ministers—along with their relationship with the church—are undermined. It is when clergy feel vocationally fulfilled—when they are intrinsically motivated—that they are acting most autonomously. As discussed above, when they are acting from introjection, for example feeling pressure to grow their congregations or their finances and shame when that does not happen, they are not acting autonomously and their wellbeing suffers.

### Three gazes of accountability

With vocation central to accountability, there are three parties to accountability structures: God, the self, and the other, as summed up by a hospital chaplain: ‘I suppose we get accountability from the organisation, from ourselves, from God, to know that we are doing what we are called to be doing.’ These three appear directly and indirectly throughout the narratives of our participants.

Participants bring their own gaze on their life and ministry into dialogue with the gaze of God through prayer and theological reflection. The latter may be systematic, for example the priest-in-charge who, ‘whenever I have done something new, something different, I have made a note of it, and I have done things like “what went well, what could you do better, and where was God in that?”’ It may also consist in reflections of the kind we saw above on values and motivations. More broadly, engagement with the gaze of God may be less systematic and more about a sense of vocational or spiritual rightness: gauging positive performance by whether one feels ‘settled in terms of how I am with God’ (incumbent) or, at specific times, ‘your own sense, sometimes, that God does actually turn up and is present in what you do ... sometimes you can feel it’ (incumbent).

Engaging with other people’s perspectives on one’s work and priesthood (or diaconate) is more problematic, largely because of the ambiguities we have discussed regarding accountability to other people. Relationships in the ‘chosen’ sphere of accountability function well in this respect as the external gaze of a spiritual director, pastoral supervisor or peer group, for example, is invited to shed fresh light on the clergyperson’s own reflections. Sometimes, especially but not only in spiritual direction, theological reflection is an integral part of the conversation between self and other, bringing together all three gazes. At other times, the ordained minister will need to integrate the gaze of the other through their own reflection.

The constructive gaze of the ‘other’ may also come from within church structures, such as senior clergy or diocesan officers. In some cases, this may be initiated by the church. Although survey respondents rated Ministerial Development Reviews as the most common place to measure their performance, with 39% of those who had participated in MDR reporting it as beneficial in this way, they were given little discussion by interview participants. Participants mostly noted that these reviews were too infrequent to be of much use (under Common Tenure, reviews are required every two years and some had been put on hold during the pandemic), although a few valued the opportunity to receive feedback from parishioners, colleagues, funeral directors etc. through ‘360’ processes.

Dioceses also commonly provide targeted ministerial accompaniment or supervision in specific circumstances, for example mentoring for new incumbents or some form of central supervision, often by an archdeacon or diocesan officer, for those undertaking Strategic Development Funded (SDF) projects. Administration (and therefore experience) of the latter varies between dioceses and examples in this study are few; however, the principle of regular supervision is one that some clergy find helpful. One, early in ordained ministry, explained the benefits of supervision for both personal and ministerial flourishing:

[He] is really proactive in not just checking in from a ministry perspective but from a personal perspective as well, which is really helpful because I do feel like if there was an issue, like within the church plant or within my own personal life, that I would be very comfortable going to him for support with that, and in an accountability setting as well. ... Before we launched, [he] sat down with me and said, 'I need to make sure that you've thought about what success and failure looks like with this,' which was really, really helpful of him because it's an SDF project, there are lots of targets and stuff that need to be met, and lots of targets that have been put in and prayerfully worked out, as well, and longer term than since I've been part of the project.

This is an example of a specific project where goals and measures have been clearly set out from the beginning. In another context, time-limited but without such structure, a participant initiated their own accountability framework: 'I've set up supervision for me with my archdeacon.' In contrast to the fixed targets of the SDF project, the essence of this approach is objectives that are co-created, qualitative and regularly reviewed:

it's also a chance to discuss the bishop's objectives for my time and adjust them and change them. And so, 'Well, actually, no, this is going to take a bit longer than we thought because the church hasn't met in person for a year, and that's fine.' ... And that's been really good because then it's out on the table, and we have a conversation, because [the archdeacon] is the person who will be a key part in the decisions about the future of the parish.

Despite the demands of this system, both in the time it takes to prepare written reports and in the sense of exposure in reflecting on progress, this person feels affirmed not only in their achievements themselves:

I feel confident that we are progressing, and I can look back on the progress that's been made and know it's not bums on seats and money and stuff like that, but it's qualitative progress, not quantitative. And the method of having an hour conversation with the archdeacon allows that qualitative stuff to really come out.

but also through the process of constructing and owning the measures and goals in collaboration with another person:

the experience of the accountability of having objectives and listing things next to them, that's been really positive because I can also come back and say, 'Actually, I think this objective is wrong, and we need to change the objectives.'



A third participant, a member of staff in a Theological Education Institution (TEI), values supervision in the form of ‘regular meetings with the principal.’ Again, targets are set and reviewed collaboratively and, like the SDF project supervision, personal wellbeing is also attended to:<sup>32</sup>

The principal will say, ‘How is it going?’ There are targets you have got to meet, but ... I set my targets. So we know where the college has set them, but I have set my own. ... He will say, ‘Have you met them? What’s the problem?’ At the same time, he’s asking me, ‘How is [your family]? How are things at home? Is everything okay? ... So I no longer feel isolated, I no longer feel alone, but I feel valued.

These three very different examples have two things in common: first, none are ‘typical’ parish ministry and, second, in each, the supervision was in place from the start of the role. As one participant wondered,

if you were trying to bring something like that in with somebody already in post, it will always feel like a judgement, won't it? It will feel like an intervention. When in fact, if it's something you've got from the very beginning, and you can discuss and re-agree those objectives, actually, it's just good management, it's good collaborative management.

Difficulties arise when an external gaze is absent or trust is lacking. None of our participants said they desired no input into their ministry from others and the majority identified at least one relationship in which they were able to reflect on their work with somebody else. No single relationship is adequate to support all aspects of ministry, however, and several participants mentioned gaps in this kind of accountability. This might be because a relationship with a spiritual director or local colleague, for example, has come to an end following retirement or a change of location; or it might have lapsed or ended because of other demands on time, as we saw above with the incumbent lacking time to continue with pastoral supervision, or as is often the case with cell groups formed during IME 1 when their members disperse into ordained ministry. Alternatively, the support may never have been in place, either adequately or at all. While several participants mentioned accessing pastoral supervision or coaching, for example, they represent only a small minority of our sample. Some curates voiced concerns about inadequate supervision, especially during lockdown or those covering vacancies or ministering in a workplace setting alongside their parish ministry, for example:

There is nobody supervising me [in my workplace ministry] ... my worry is that it is very much my individual relationship with God that is guiding me. ... So I lack that other part of discernment, which is the Holy Spirit speaking through fellow ordained believers with experience of being in ordained ministry beyond my limited experience.

While ‘chosen’ accountability relationships tend to function well because the clergyperson is engaging with (and often paying for) them of their own accord, relationships in the ‘felt’ accountability sphere can be more

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<sup>32</sup> Combining management and pastoral supervision is not always helpful, as discussed in Graveling (2021) *op cit.* and, in detail relating to experiences of the Methodist Church, in J. Leach (2020), *A Charge to Keep: Reflective Supervision and the Renewal of Christian Leadership*, Nashville: General Board of Higher Education and Ministry, The United Methodist Church.

problematic. This is partly to do with the reasons set out above, relating to differences in values, alongside lack of clarity of roles and purposes and inadequacy of purely quantitative measures for assessing performance.

Congregations pose particular challenges. First, while this is a study of the wellbeing, autonomy and accountability of the individual clergy person, the relationship between ordained minister and congregation varies in level and nature of collaboration. In some aspects, the health or performance to be measured should be of the church rather than the minister, as an incumbent points out:

So we have used mission action planning. ... Because there was a benchmark of what we had felt God had called us to do and had we achieved it? Where were we on that? ... So that's a performance measure of the vision of God's church in this place and the vision we felt called to do. It wasn't a personal performance, my own personal performance, but actually as I have talked about collaboration, personally, I think that the church needs to own that vision together.

Second, while on the one hand congregations are, after God and along with the wider parish, the party to which participants most commonly feel accountable, on the other hand, they are one of the groups whose views participants trust the least. Clergy receive frequent feedback from parishioners, usually in the form of conversation, emails, and letters or cards, relating to many aspects of their ministry, including church services, preaching, pastoral care, church policy and how they use their time. Such comments are not always helpful, as observed by a priest-in-charge:

I get feedback and I have to be very careful to sift it because there are those who will always be positive and see it almost as a duty to be positive and say encouraging things. And there are others who see it as almost their duty to, shall we say, pick up on the minor details which went wrong or didn't go quite right or the pew sheet seems to have a number of errors in it this week. There are those two different extremes. So measuring your performance against those two ... you become either self-satisfied or extremely despondent.

Taken to the extreme, negative feedback may constitute bullying. Some participants describe extremely difficult relationships with members of their congregations and express concerns at being held accountable to people who themselves have little or no accountability:

I'm kind of scared of being accountable to the wrong person ... if that was a warden, that would be a terrible thing: someone who's not trained, not able to do it effectively, not able to do it from outside of the situation but with enough knowledge.

However, when received from those they trust, participants describe finding congregational feedback helpful and constructive: 'my congregations are very good with feedback, and I have certain people in each of the parishes who I can rely on to be honest with me. That has been really helpful' (curate). Discernment is an important skill here. One incumbent, discussing funerals, said, 'you can tell the feedback when it's, "Oh, thank you, that was nice," or when it's actually, "Oh, that was just what I needed."' One is just being polite and the other is "you've done a good job there.'" Another, speaking of experiences of feeling hurt by

people ‘projecting their own crap onto you,’ commented that what is needed is ‘having the wisdom to stand back and detach yourself emotionally from some of this stuff.’

The gaze of the ‘other,’ whether paid professional, senior clergy, peer or parishioner, therefore requires a foundation of trust and a willingness both to accept and—particularly where trust is not present—to maintain critical distance from challenge and criticism. Where it is problematic, the two gazes of self and God, in the form of prayer and theological reflection, often alongside reflection with ‘other others’, are essential for the wellbeing of the clergyperson and their ministry. In the context of covenantal relationships, accountability is at its most fruitful where the three gazes can be brought together in constructive conversation. This may be in one place and explicit, as with spiritual direction; it may be an iterative process, as described by a chaplain and self-supporting minister: ‘I reflect a lot by myself, but then I take those reflections to other people, reflect again and then take it away and reflect again. It bounces around;’ or it may be through the lived experience of ordained ministry, as for a chaplain who cared for a dying patient during the pandemic and received written thanks from the family: ‘[they] were so moved by the length I went to to try and see this patient ... I pulled the curtains round so they had privacy and she was saying that I lassoed them all together in the love of God.’

## Conclusion

The qualitative research has supported and shed light on several findings from the panel survey, relating both to experiences of clergy during the covid-19 pandemic and to autonomy and accountability in ordained ministry.

Clergy experiences of the pandemic were extremely varied, both in the shape of people's work and, to some extent stemming from this, in how it affected their wellbeing. While, for some, lockdown meant increased workload, isolation and exhaustion, others appreciated a slower pace of life and time to invest spiritually. Whatever their experience of lockdown, however, for many it was the period of reopening (up to and including the time of the interviews) that was most challenging, because of cumulative tiredness, difficulties managing hybrid services and negotiating decisions over safety, withdrawal of congregational participation, and increased uncertainties within the church and wider society. Some incumbent-status priests in mid-ministry were hit particularly hard, carrying the burden of decision-making and unable to take time to recover but not yet able to look towards retirement, while struggling with profound vocational disruption in the midst of diocesan turmoil. Several participants, on the other hand, also described new opportunities for ministry, deepened relationships, and positive reassessment of values, especially in relation to families.

The pandemic has largely exacerbated and shed light on existing issues rather than creating new ones. In previous waves of research, clergy also spoke of tiredness and isolation, along with concerns about declining congregations, diocesan instability and the future of the Church of England. All these were intensified in the latest wave. The complex relationship between clergy and bishops has also been explored in previous waves; however, institutional upheaval combined with widespread traumatic experience has allowed us to observe differences in how clergy experience the impersonal institution of the diocese, from which some feel increasingly distant, in contrast with how they relate to the bishop (and other senior clergy) in their personal, pastoral role.

Analysis of clergy experiences during the pandemic through the lens of Self-Determination Theory has highlighted the centrality of vocation to both autonomy and accountability. While an emphasis on vocational wellbeing can be costly in terms of other aspects of wellbeing, including relationships and physical and mental health, a strong sense of vocation is also, as we have seen throughout the longitudinal study, something that frequently keeps clergy going during difficult times. Clergy act most autonomously when they are intrinsically motivated, which often means when they are vocationally fulfilled.

To act autonomously, clergy need both to be able to fulfil their vocation and to have accountability that supports their vocation. This poses a challenge to the church for at least four reasons. First, the Church of England by nature is a broad church that, in principle, is for everyone and encompasses an enormous range of Christian traditions and theologies. Clergy, therefore, do not by any means hold identical values (as we saw with their different responses during the pandemic) and every calling is unique. On the other hand, most clergy do not wish to work or make decisions entirely alone, and their vocation and wellbeing is bound up with the people among whom they minister. Collaboration and, indeed, self-sacrifice for the interests of

others are, for many, part of their core values and therefore contribute to rather than compete with autonomy.

Second, the need for a range of accountability relationships to support different aspects of life and ministry must be balanced with already high workloads. Often the ones most directly connected with core aspects of vocation are the least clear and the first to be squeezed out in favour of more formal systems and structures.

Third, in the context of decline, the church is largely in scarcity mode. With falling attendance rates and many dioceses in financial difficulties—alongside having to address serious issues to do with, amongst others, safeguarding, racial justice and climate change—it is difficult not to place emphasis on attendance figures, money and various kinds of policy which clergy may consider important but do not find intrinsically motivating. This may explain why participants in this study tend not to locate their calling as coming partly from the church, but rather often see the church as detracting from their God-given vocation.

Fourth, the basis of relationships within the church being covenant rather than contract, and the centrality in clerical narratives of calling by God, mean that the church must navigate the tricky terrain between grace and exploitation, sacrifice and demand, and autonomy and accountability. If covenant is rooted in mutuality, it is not enough for clergy simply to say they will only be accountable to those who agree with them, those who share their values and support their personal vocation. They must also be open to challenge and to recognising God's voice and God's call through others. The challenge for bishops and others who support clergy is to build relationship that engenders trust, in order for accountability to be healthy, constructive and freely embraced.

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