

# Effective Ministerial Presence and what it looks like in practice

Insights from the  
Experiences of Ministry  
Project 2011–17

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I am most grateful to Mike and the team at King's for their research. This project has made a significant contribution to the work of the national Continuing Ministerial Development Panel. It has provided challenging insights that continue to inform policy development and consultancy. However, perhaps an even greater impact has been the contribution the project has made to the growth of a culture of evidence-based approaches to national policy development. Indeed, one of its fruits has been a commitment to further investment in research capacity to enable us to better understand the impact of interventions which the project has inspired.

**Bishop Tim Thornton**

**Bishop of Lambeth and outgoing Chair of the Continuing Ministerial Development Panel**

## **Effective Ministerial Presence and what it looks like in practice**

### **Insights from the Experiences of Ministry Project 2011–17**

Across 2011–17, the Experience of Ministry Project has listened to the voices of over 6,000 clergy across the Church of England through regular national surveys, over 100 in-depth interviews and series of week-long daily diaries.

The project considers the difficult question of what an effective ministerial presence may be and how this may be supported and sustained across a diverse range of clergy roles, identities and settings.

This project seeks to inform national strategies for supporting ministry and shape the future emphasis of continuing ministerial education and development by asking clergy to share their personal experiences and views.

### **What exactly is ‘effective ministerial presence’ and how do you know when you’re seeing it?**

One purpose of this research was to help clarify what ‘effective ministerial presence’ means. It’s a term we hear often enough, Archbishop Rowan Williams used it in his presidential address to the General Synod in July 2011, when he said: “effective ministerial presence is essential if people are to be in touch with the faithfulness of God through the Church”.

However, although the language is in common usage, its meaning may differ from one parish to the next. So the research was careful not to second-guess interpretations, but approached the task with an open mind and by focusing on the positive experiences of ministry – the approach known as appreciative enquiry.

It also draws on the Job Demands-Resources – or JD-R – model that suggests work engagement is related to the demands of a particular job balanced against the resources available to carry it out. The understanding of engagement, for the purposes of the study, is a persistent, positive and fulfilling psychological state that is characterised by vigour (high energy, willingness and persistence), dedication (involvement, enthusiasm and pride) and absorption (full concentration on one’s work).

There is a general agreement that ‘being engaged’ is a positive and desirable state to be in, positively affecting a person’s ability to perform well and their wellbeing. It is suggested that people’s engagement can be influenced by the balance of demands (such as mental, emotional or spiritual demands) and resources (such as personal characteristics, support and training, or spiritual resources) within a particular role.

The survey findings repeatedly show that clergy, while facing significant demands and strains, are typically highly engaged within their role. However, the research also shows that simply ‘being engaged’ is not enough for growth or for a high level of clergy wellbeing.

“““

It’s a bit like grappling with blancmange really, that’s how it feels most of the time.

**Female**

**Multiple rural parishes**

“““

If I was to draw a job description of what I’d like to do, it might be quite different from everything I have to do. I think there’d be a lot more time just doing ordinary pastoral care, to be with people, visiting the sick and things like that.

**Male**

**Multiple urban parishes**

“““

If you only value what you can measure quantitatively, then you can miss out on a lot that’s very important and very good. It’s just not easy to measure success.

**Male**

**Pioneer, urban setting**

“““

We get a very steady number of people on a Sunday, but the number on the electoral role is increasing, which suggests to me that people are coming less often than they used to.

**Male**

**Single market town parish**

### **What is meant by growth and why is it difficult to measure?**

Growth, in the context of an effective ministry, has two distinct parts: numerical growth and spiritual growth. This research has focused on three growth measures for each and whether they have gone up or down. The measures for numerical growth are: weekly attendance, new vocations to licensed ministries and new of disciples within the church. While for spiritual growth, they are relationships (with God, with oneself and with others), discernment of what might be ‘of God’ in life, and faithfulness to the paschal mystery.

Respondents to the Experiences of Ministry Survey consistently presented a relatively positive picture for church attendance (albeit only ‘slightly positive’) which is in contrast to the findings of the national Parish Return data on growth which consistently reports that church attendance is declining. There are a number of factors that might explain this discrepancy, such as differences in the way measurements are taken including the range, focus and frequency.

In order to explore this further we matched attendance growth data to nationally held data. This showed that, despite the differences in measures, there was a small but statistically significant association between the two. There is, however, no way to know for sure which dataset presents a more accurate picture of attendance growth. Our data only reflects the views of a self-selecting sample of clergy rather than a truly random sample or census, so we need to be cautious.

However, follow-up interviews with some of the participants in the research has shown that they approached the questions with a high degree of sophistication. The nationally held data on growth also has its limitations, including, as it does, a high number of inconclusive trends in the data. At the very least, the results of the research show some optimism that both spiritual and numerical growth are occurring in the experiences of a great many clergy on the ground.

### Did the project throw any light on particular actions that are good for growth?

The research discovered that there were four factors that consistently led to enhanced growth and around which courses and training should be designed.

These are:

- 1 Maintaining a strong and clear sense of vocation
- 2 Innovation in how one goes about one's role
- 3 Seeking/receiving feedback on how well one is doing
- 4 Seeking/receiving support from colleagues

The statistical analysis suggests that in relation to spiritual growth these four areas are very much interlinked, each reinforces the other and offers the potential for sustained gains over time.

In relation to numerical growth, however, while collegial support, feedback and the strength of an individual's calling all help to increase attendance growth, there is no reverse relationship – i.e. greater attendances don't have any effect on an individual's calling strength, feedback or collegial support.

Innovation, however, does seem to work both ways: innovation brings growth and growth leads to further innovation. To explore these findings more deeply, we carried out a series of semi-structured interviews of clergy which all confirmed the research results.

We also discovered that spiritual and numerical growth are positively and reciprocally related, which suggests that there is no trade-off between these two forms of growth, rather that each is supportive of the other.

“““

I think I have some excellent people who feedback. My Church Wardens are very good with me. They try to make sure I get the feedback which I need to hear.

**Female**

**Three churches in market town parish**

“““

I think what I inherited is that the same group of people come to Church every Sunday. Whereas now, I think what happens is that there are more people coming but not every Sunday. So it is difficult to say. At one level you could say that there is no numerical growth, but on another level you could say that actually there are more people involved.

**Male**

**Single urban parish**

### What difference does Continuing Ministerial Development (CMD) make to growth and engagement?

Broadly speaking, clergy who participate in diocesan-led CMD activities such as Ministry Development Review and training courses, report greater spiritual and numerical growth, as well as higher levels of engagement. What's interesting though, is that while the clergy themselves don't always rate these activities as being all that effective, the results in the survey suggest they are having a benefit.

Diocesan-led activities have recorded an improvement since 2011 but they still lag behind non-diocesan activities which clergy consider more effective overall. The question needs to be asked of why this is, and whether it's to do with the way non-diocesan CMD activities are accessed, organised or resourced.

The two areas of diocesan practice that have received the most attention and resources over the period of the research, and had the highest participation rates, also show the greatest promise. These are Ministry Development Review and Leadership Development. There was a clear correlation between clergy who reported that their Review was more than partially effective also feeling positive about their diocese, more engaged and less burned out. Equally, clergy who regularly took part in Leadership Development opportunities – as compared to those who did not participate or participated irregularly – showed a greater likelihood to report growth. They would also value a course more highly if it actively led to growth.

### What do we know about clergy wellbeing?

The wellbeing of clergy in our research compared favourably with other occupational groups, a finding that often comes up in other studies too. Clergy wellbeing is key to their ability to be effective. Despite having highly demanding roles, most priests cope, and even flourish, because they are filled with purpose and derive meaning and fulfilment from their work. Even though they make substantial and frequent sacrifices as part of their role, they mainly do so willingly and see them as worthwhile.

However, due to the demands of the job, there will always be priests who are less able to cope and experience burnout and related ill-health. While for many, this will be due to too many demands and not enough resources, the research identified that other clergy who suffered a high degree of psychological burnout were those who sacrificed the most, felt less clear about their calling and were less able to psychologically detach from ministry in their time off.

### THE RESEARCH SUGGESTS THAT CLERGY NEED TO JUGGLE ISSUES OF SACRIFICE, GROWTH AND WELL-BEING FOR SUSTAINABLE EFFECTIVENESS



“““

I think I've probably got the best job in the Church of England, so I'm quite happy.

**Male**

**Single coastal town parish**

“““

Most days I try to balance the needs of people against the administrative needs of getting the job done, things like preparation. It is a very varied week, and no day is the same.

**Male**

**Single urban parish**

### What do we know about the daily working life of a priest?

There are many stereotypical accounts of priestly life available; but few accurate descriptions of how their time is split and what activities they carry out. Through a series of detailed daily diaries, this research has developed a rich account of 'a week in the life' of different groups of priests. For example, the figure below shows the breakdown of activities performed during a typical week for different groups of ministers.

Consistently, the days are long and demanding. Administration and organisation tasks take up the most time: these respondents spent more than three hours a day (or a quarter of their working week) doing admin. The broader research also found that admin was broadly disliked by the clergy and a task in which they often lacked confidence. Results also show that a longer time spent doing admin is linked to a lower level of fulfilment for the priest and lower reports of growth within congregations.

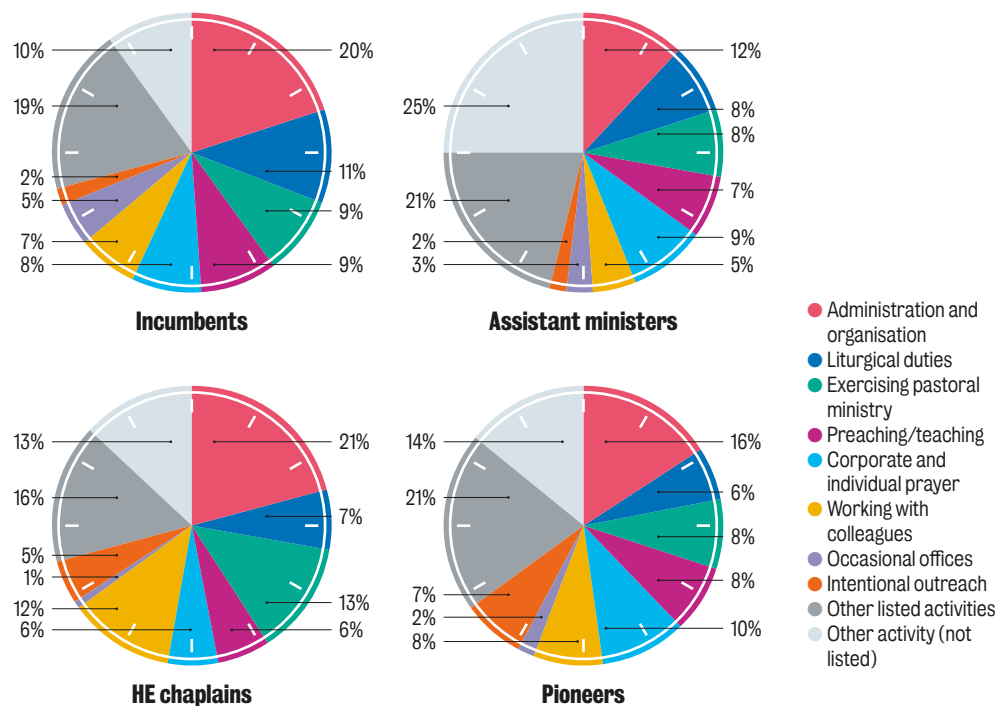
These insights were a contributory factor to the Church Commissioners and Archbishop's Council investing in 15 new administrator posts to reduce the 'admin burden' for groups of clergy in the Sheffield diocese, freeing up clergy time for mission work.

Dr Mike Clinton (King's College London) and Professor Neil Conway (Royal Holloway, University of London) are now carrying out a six-year evaluation to assess the value of this intervention (see more here: [sheffield.anglican.org/development-worker-project](https://sheffield.anglican.org/development-worker-project)).

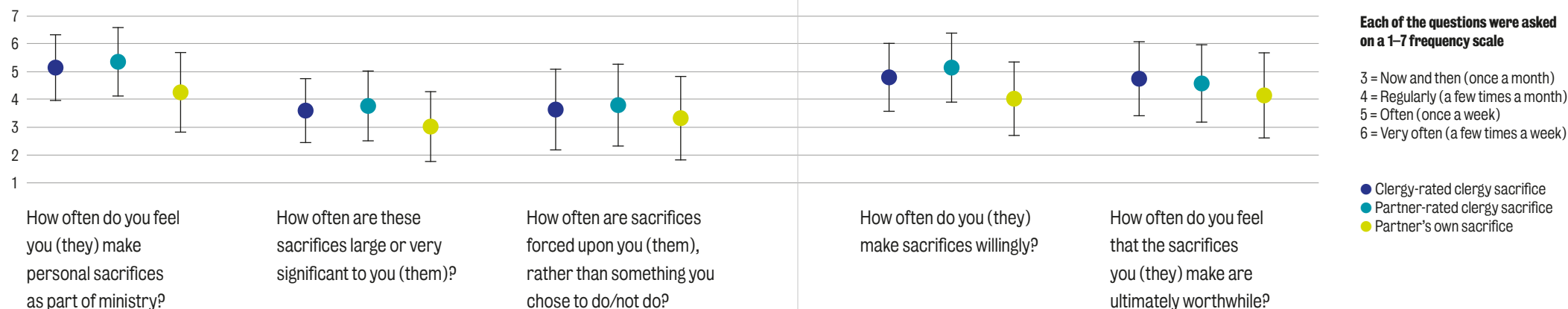




## WEEKLY TIME USE (SELECTED ACTIVITIES) FOR CLERGY GROUPS



## FREQUENCY OF CLERGY AND PARTNER SACRIFICES (MEANS AND SD BARS)



# 57%

of clergy partners agreed that they did not know where their partner's ministry ended and family life began

“““

I'm called to be a priest, I'm called to be an incumbent, but I'm also called to be a wife, and a mother and a grandmother and a person.

**Female**

**Multiple rural parishes**

## What does work-life balance look like for clergy and their partners?

Ministers occupy demanding and very public roles. But they have private lives, partners and families away from ministry too and they are at risk, perhaps more than most, of their working lives spilling over into their private ones. The hours can certainly take their toll; our diary work shows that clergy often begin work before sunrise and will not finish until late in the evening – even for those who are ‘part-time’.

While work-life conflict was not found to be a big issue, we did find that when priests felt their callings very intensely, it could be tricky to disengage and take time out from the priestly role. Within interviews the researchers heard a variety of stories ranging from clergy describing hugely positive integration of priestly and personal lives, to clergy expressing deep regret about how they had let their work affect both their partner and children.

Clergy partners themselves were surveyed and, while broadly positive about their own experience, they did report making regular sacrifices for their partner's role, and more than half (57%) agreed that they did not know where their partner's ministry ended and family life began.



### What's distinctive about ministries 'on the edge'?

Not all clergy are incumbents of parishes. There are also those who exercise ministries 'on the edge', i.e. chaplaincy roles in secular institutions such as universities, pioneering in new communities, or assisting the ministries of others.

Via a series of detailed daily diary studies and interviews we developed a rich account of a 'week in the life' of Higher Education Chaplains, Pioneer Ministers, and self-supporting Assistant Ministers. We also gained a picture of their sense of vocation, competence, and attitudes and traits. The findings suggest that across these different ministries each is well suited to their role. For example, pioneers have personalities that seek novel experiences and proactive entrepreneurship.

The findings also clarify what each role has as its core, respectively: pastoral ministry for chaplaincy roles, outreach for pioneers, and preaching and prayer for assistant ministers. While there is a considerable amount of crossover, there is also a huge amount of diversity in how callings are enacted and the importance of activities that do not necessarily conform to the template for parochial ministry. Surprisingly, this is most pronounced among Assistant Ministers who bring significant parochial experience to the role.

“““

Certainly in these benefices, probably the working out of things would be that I would spend an awful lot of time just servicing various things, doing administration for weddings, funerals, christenings; making sure that the rota... because three Churches all having services at the same time with a small team of retired in the area... I would have to organise that rota.

**Female**

**United benefice, rural**

“““

I'm probably one of the last people just in charge of one church, it's just how things have turned out. I'm very aware that most of my colleagues have got two, three or more churches to look after. So I think I'm very privileged.

**Male**

**Rural parish with one church**

### How does life differ for incumbents with single ministry contexts compared to those with several?

As the role of many incumbents moves away from overseeing just one church to maintaining a presence across two, three or perhaps more, there becomes a need to understand what effect this has on clergy demands and opportunities. Interestingly, the findings of the surveys and daily diaries found very little to separate the experiences of incumbents in these two groups, and it was only through personal interviews that more subtle differences emerged.

Incumbents whose ministries span multiple contexts felt less in control of their daily and weekly schedule than those in a single church setting, a finding that was especially pronounced for those in rural settings. This meant that many desirable activities such as outreach and pastoral care could become squeezed out of their weeks. As these issues only came to light in interviews, it could be that more priests feel the same way, and this is just the tip of the iceberg, or that others feel that moving to a multi-church context, while not without problems, brings benefits that outweigh being in a single church set-up.



Dr Mike Clinton is a Reader in Work Psychology and HRM at King's Business School and is the academic lead on the project. He is primarily interested in understanding the relation between work and well-being, but has a particular interest in vocational workers and the role that their calling plays in their experience of work. Mike publishes his research in some of the top international journals in his field, including the Journal of Organizational Behavior and the Journal of Occupational & Organizational Psychology.



Dr Tim Ling is the Director of Research for Church Army. He was formerly the Church of England's Head of Ministry Development and in this role led the church end of the project. He is a Senior Research Associate at University College London's Institute of Education. His books include Developing Faithful Ministers, SCM Press (2012) and Moving on in Ministry, CHP (2013).



Other King's contributors to the project include Dr Jane Sturges, Dr Alexandra Budjanovcanin, Dr Vandana Nath, and Dr Keely Frasca. Prof Neil Conway from Royal Holloway, University of London, is also a key contributor to the project.

For further details of the research and for copies of other reports linked to the project, please visit:  
[www.kcl.ac.uk/business/research/projects/experiences-of-ministry.aspx](http://www.kcl.ac.uk/business/research/projects/experiences-of-ministry.aspx)

The full findings of this project will be published in a book by CHP in 2018. For further information about the project please contact: Dr Mike Clinton, King's College London ([michael.clinton@kcl.ac.uk](mailto:michael.clinton@kcl.ac.uk)) or Dr Tim Ling, Church Army ([tim.ling@churcharmy.org](mailto:tim.ling@churcharmy.org)).

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The wide-ranging research conducted by the King's researchers provides fascinating and robust insights into what being a priest in the 21st century is like. Through different projects and different methodological lenses, we learn about the fine-grain, 'day-in-the-life' experiences of a variety of priests and how some of these experiences unfolded nationally between 2011 and 2017 to contribute towards the broader outcomes of the growth of the Church and the clergy's sense of competence, wellbeing and fulfilment. These insights are vital for developing initial and continuing training and development and support systems that will better support the flourishing of clergy across the years to come. Church leaders and policy makers need to take notice

**Baroness Alison Wolf of Dulwich**

**Sir Roy Griffiths Professor of Public Sector Management,  
King's College London**



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