

Qualitative Panel Study Wave 2

“You don’t really get it until you’re in it”

Meeting the Challenges of Ordained Ministry

January 2022

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>.

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 in a Time of Covid: Autonomy, Accountability and Support* (2022)

Focussed studies

- *Collaborative Ministry and Transitions to First Incumbency* (2019)
- *The Mixed Ecologists: Experiences of Mixed Ecology Ministry in the Church of England* (2021)

Resources

How Clergy Thrive: Insights from Living Ministry (2020) is available in print and online along with a range of accompanying resources.



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Ruth Perrin and Liz Graveling

Living Ministry Qualitative Panel Study Wave 2

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Executive summary

Background and method

During Wave 2 of the longitudinal Living Ministry research, interview participants were asked to reflect on an aspect of ministry that had greatly occupied their mind recently, including what had shaped their thinking and sustained them as they engaged with it. Responses from 61 participants ordained in 2006, 2011 and 2015 and who started training in 2016 shape suggestions of good practice for ongoing training and support.

What was on their minds?

Concerns fell into three spheres: institutional reflections; ministerial challenges; and personal considerations. Responses revealed a shift in clergy 'gaze' as they gained experience over time.

- Concerns of **new curates** were often personal as they navigated changes in identity, role, and location.
- Those in their **first post beyond curacy** experienced the weight of greater responsibility with less support. Common themes included vocation, workload, and time and conflict management.
- **More experienced clergy**, having navigated early formational tasks, focussed on diverse ministerial challenges. They were often frustrated with factors inhibiting mission and ministry, including buildings, finances, local conflicts, and congregational passivity.
- The **most experienced clergy** often focussed on the future and sustainability of the Church of England. Those in more senior roles experienced the pressure of greater responsibility; those approaching retirement were reconsidering vocation and congregational sustainability.
- Issues related to experiences of **minorities** were present across all cohorts. Socio-economic background, sexuality, singleness, early parenthood and experience as a self-supporting ordained minister (SSOM) or ordained local minister (OLM) were all examples of 'otherness' that participants found challenging.

Formation

- The approaches clergy take to challenging issues are **built up over time**, shaped by **diverse factors** within and beyond the Church of England.
- Participants primarily valued **IME 1** for personal and spiritual formation; developing their sense of vocation; and understanding Christian diversity. Responses of more recent cohorts suggest positive developments in leadership training within TEIs.
- Some described practical skills and knowledge gained through **curacy**, dependent on context, training incumbent and diocese. Diocesan **IME 2** training and **CMD** were primarily valued for networking and peer support.



- Highly significant were skills developed in **previous careers**, particularly around management, finance, and strategic thinking.
- **Expertise and advice** were sought from diocesan officers (with varied provision); congregations; and ecumenical and other networks. The time such relationships take to develop means that some have better resources to draw on than others, including new incumbents and young clergy who lack former professional experience.

Sustenance

- **Spiritual resources**, especially prayer, and a sense of **calling or vocation** were the primary sources of sustenance.
- **Colleagues**: a support network of clergy is crucial, often including collaborative ecumenical relationships. Church officers and congregants can also provide vital support.
- Seeing their ministry have an **impact**, even in very small ways, encouraged participants that their efforts were worthwhile.

Implications

- Awareness is needed of **different levels of experience and stages of ordained ministry**, particularly at transition points, along with specific support for **minorities**.
- **Diocesan environment and support**, including good communication, signposting for advice, and availability of sympathetic and supportive senior clergy, has significant impact on clergy capacity to deal with challenging issues. Feeling known, valued and supported promotes flourishing, even when demands are significant. Those with less confidence or fewer personal contacts or congregants with relevant skills are in particular need of good diocesan advice and support.
- **IME 2 & CMD**: investment in training and development is important for long-term wellbeing. It should be perceived as relevant and adding value to ministry. Particularly important are induction and networking of new clergy; support for young and minority clergy, SSOMs and OLMs with responsibility, and those preparing for retirement; and the training of training incumbents (TIs).
- **IME 1**: personal formation, developing spiritual rhythms, and vocational confidence are crucial for future ministry, along with good leadership development, valuing existing skills, and exposure to a diverse range of Christian expressions which creates access to a range of spiritual resources. In some cases, IME 1 may require further tuning to the diverse reality of contemporary ordained ministry.
- **Developing healthy boundaries and sustainable rhythms**, particularly around time, is crucial, including time to rest, invest in their own faith, think and pray, be creative and build collaborative networks. Responsibility for this is shared between clergy themselves and those who support them.



Acronyms

CMD	Continuing Ministerial Development
DDO	Diocesan Director of Ordinands
IME	Initial Ministerial Education
MDR	Ministerial Development Review
PCC	Parochial Church Council
SSOM	Self-Supporting Ordained Minister
TEI	Theological Education Institution
TI	Training Incumbent



1. Introduction

Living Ministry

Living Ministry is a research programme conducted by the Church of England’s National Ministry Team that seeks to understand, through a mixed-methods longitudinal study and smaller stand-alone projects, what helps clergy flourish in ministry. The study follows four cohorts of ordained ministers through ten years of training and ministry, returning to them every two years through surveys and interviews. The second wave of the qualitative element began in late 2019 and explored two areas:

1. How are periods of transition in ordained ministry experienced with regards to wellbeing?
2. How do clergy approach the challenges of ordained ministry?

The first of these is addressed in the report *Moving in Power: Transitions in Ordained Ministry*¹ and the second in this report.

Method

The qualitative Living Ministry panel was drawn through stratified random sampling from the 761 respondents to the first survey.² In Wave 1, 85 people participated in the qualitative study. In Wave 2, 13 of these participants were not able or declined to take part, leaving 72 participants across all cohorts (those ordained in 2006, 2011 and 2015 and those who started training in 2016). As in Wave 1, these took part through individual or group interviews, the latter arranged around cohorts. Data collection was conducted by two researchers³ between October and December 2019.⁴ Interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed and analysed using the NVivo qualitative data analysis software.

¹ <https://www.churchofengland.org/sites/default/files/2021-04/Living%20Ministry%20Qualitative%20Panel%20Study%20Wave%202%20-%20Moving%20in%20Power.pdf>

² See the Wave 1 report, *Negotiating Wellbeing: Experiences of Ordinands and Clergy in the Church of England* (2018) for sampling details. <https://www.churchofengland.org/sites/default/files/2018-10/Living%20Ministry%20Qualitative%20Panel%20Study%20Wave%201%20Report.pdf>

³ Dr Liz Graveling, Research Officer in the National Ministry Team and lead researcher for Living Ministry; and Dr Naomi Maynard, at the time Senior Researcher in the Church Army Research Unit.

⁴ This was before the start of the covid-19 pandemic in the UK.



Interviews consisted of two parts. The first asked participants about their current wellbeing and changes in the two years since the Wave 1 interviews, and findings from this have already been published.⁵ In the second part, presented here, participants were asked in advance to reflect on one thing related to their ministry that had greatly occupied their mind recently.

Data were analysed in 2021 by a third researcher, Dr Ruth Perrin, whose background in studying faith development includes six years of freelance research into ministerial training and faith formation within the Church of England. All research, quantitative and qualitative, is mediated through the researchers, and this report has been influenced by both the interviewers, as they shape the questions and interact with the participants, and the analyst, as she approaches the data with her own knowledge and methods. In this report, as with others, we have tried as far as possible to represent the participants in their own words and to maximise the strengths of our different perspectives as researchers—Liz’s familiarity with the participants and their stories and her position within the National Ministry Team, and Ruth’s fresh approach to the data from a perspective outside the Church of England—through a collaborative approach. While the analysis and presentation in this paper is mainly Ruth’s, it is the product of many conversations. The findings will be of interest to anyone involved in the training, development, and wellbeing of Church of England clergy, especially senior clergy, diocesan officers and staff of theological education institutions. As with all research, each reader should be aware that their own position and identity will shape their interpretation of the analysis.

Scope

Of the 72 people who took part in the Wave 2 interviews, 61 consented to their transcripts being passed to an external researcher for analysis. These comprise:

- 11 from those ordained in 2006, now experienced ordained ministers;
- 12 from the 2011 cohort, either well established in a first post beyond curacy or moving on to a second;
- 16 from the 2015 cohort, now in their first role after curacy;
- 22 from those who started training in 2016, now at the beginning of their curacy.

The scope of the Wave 2 interviews is discussed in *Moving in Power*⁶ and repeated here.

⁵ See *Moving in Power: Transitions in Ordained Ministry*. <https://www.churchofengland.org/sites/default/files/2021-04/Living%20Ministry%20Qualitative%20Panel%20Study%20Wave%202020-%20Moving%20in%20Power.pdf>

⁶ *Ibid.* pp. 10-11.



This is a study of participants ordained or to be ordained since 2006. Care should be taken in applying findings to clergy ordained before this time. There is inevitably a focus on parish clergy, given that these roles make up the vast majority of our participants. Moreover, our sampling has not picked up sufficient numbers of minority groups within Church of England clergy, such as those of global majority heritage or those with disabilities, to enable these voices to be heard clearly in this study.⁷ No one was obliged to take part in the research, therefore there is an element of self-selection within the sample frame. The value of qualitative research lies in contextualising rather than generalising experience, and the following analysis seeks to understand better the complexity of the processes, dynamics and relationships that shape the wellbeing of clergy and ordinands. Individual experiences and sentiments expressed or referred to in the report should not, therefore, be understood as representing all or even the majority of clergy, although deeper patterns and dynamics identified may be more widely applied.

Throughout this study conversations have been extremely wide-ranging, covering the full breadth of issues relating to personal flourishing. For the purposes of this report it has not been possible to include every experience or perspective expressed: analysis has been limited to experiences of the participants themselves, largely in relation to periods of transition. The experiences portrayed here are necessarily self-reported and represent the perspectives of the participants: other people, such as spouses, colleagues, parishioners and bishops, will have different perspectives which we are unable to present in this report.

Discussions of wellbeing inevitably involve personal and, in some cases, highly sensitive information. We are deeply grateful to all the participants in this study who were willing to share their stories and we recognise the trust implicit in so doing. Some of the accounts are unique enough in a world as small as the Church of England potentially to identify participants even with the removal of names of people, places, churches and dioceses. For this reason, great care has been taken to maintain the confidentiality of those who have taken part in the research, including refraining from telling any individual's story as a coherent whole. Specific incidents or characteristics that may allow a participant to be identified have been omitted or altered unless express permission of the participant to include them has been received.

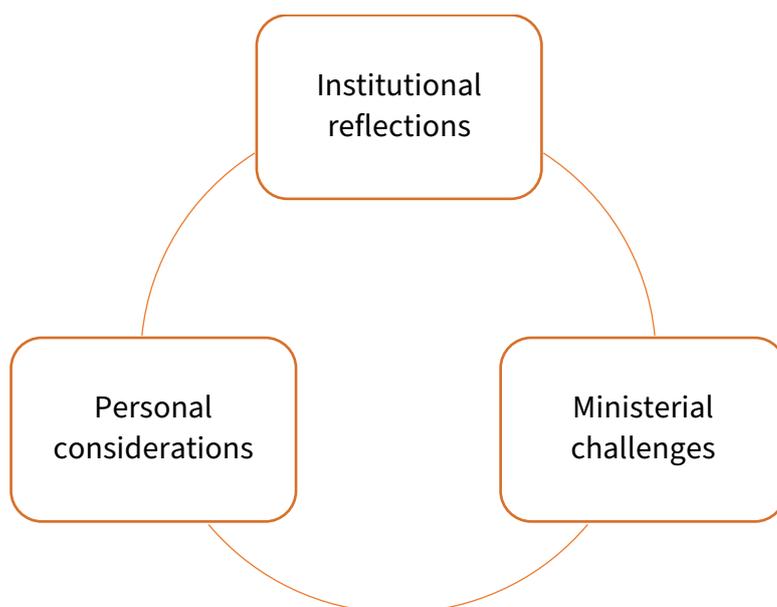
Key themes

This report presents a snapshot of the issues on participants' minds at a specific point in time. It is not representative of all clergy, nor prescriptive. Nonetheless, it was striking that there were patterns which can be taken as indicative of common concerns at different points in clergy development and experience. Seven

⁷ Further focussed studies are planned to address this.



recurrent themes were identified. These were not always clear-cut. In some cases, individuals were focussed on a single issue, but more often there was overlap: a primary concern which impacted on, or was shaped by, other factors. They fit into three overarching but interlinked wider categories: issues to do with the institution of the Church of England; challenges of ordained ministry; and more personal matters.



Moving broadly clockwise from the top of this model, the seven recurring themes were:

- Concerns about the structures and future of the institution of the Church of England;
- Worries and pressures around buildings and/or finances;
- Specific ministerial initiatives or issues;
- Challenges around conflict and/or change management;
- Workload and time management;
- Vocational reflections;
- Systemic problems with personal impact.

Structure of the report

Given the focus on clergy formation and development, Part 1 addresses the question, ‘*What has occupied your mind a lot recently?*’ chronologically by cohort, starting with the most recent (those who started training in 2016). The aim is to present a picture not only of dominant concerns but how those change during the journey clergy take as they become more experienced and established in their ministries.



Participants were also asked two related questions which form Part 2. ‘*What has shaped your thinking on that issue?*’ and ‘*What is sustaining you at this time?*’ Since their responses bore considerable similarities across cohorts, they are discussed more generally with reference to any significant variation. This allows for reflection on how formation occurs at different stages and what factors shape the thinking of clergy as they learn how to face the opportunities and challenges of ministry over time.

The report concludes with some reflections on good practice and makes some suggestions for those involved in clergy support and formation.

2. What’s on your mind?

Having been given time to reflect on this question prior to their interview or focus group, participants came with a variety of topics. However, despite their unique circumstances there were patterns in the concerns of different cohorts, illustrating something of the shifting pressures clergy experience at different points in ordained ministry.

2016 cohort

The most recently ordained cohort consisted of 22 people who started their training for ordination in 2016. At the time of interview, they were typically early in the first year of their curacies. Their concerns fell into four of the categories, primarily in the personal and ministerial spheres. These were: vocational reflections; ministerial activity; conflict management; and a significant number of concerns around time management. It is no surprise that despite their varying circumstances these new deacons should be asking questions around what it means to inhabit their role and learning how to minister in a positive and sustainable manner.

Vocation

A third of the participants were reflecting on questions of vocation. For some this was caused by changes in how people responded to them. One spoke of experiencing hostility in public and feeling the ‘weight of my calling, and the boundaries of power.’ Although this had been spoken about in college, experiencing it for themselves was disconcerting. A part-time self-supporting ordained minister (SSOM) spoke of their struggles to juggle curacy with an ongoing professional role, saying, ‘You don’t know who you are any more. I feel like a fraud. Neither one thing nor the other.’ They felt entirely unprepared for this experience.

Others were pondering how to express the passions that had drawn them into ordained ministry in contexts where those were not a priority. In some cases, it made them wonder about their calling altogether; for others, they sensed they ‘didn’t quite fit’ in their new congregation. One was concerned that their training



incumbent did no pastoral visiting and that they were receiving little direction in that area. ‘No one seems to care, it’s up to me how I structure this ministry.’ Three others were wondering what it might look like to ‘use my voice’ to provoke congregations into engaging with the marginalised. One was confident their training incumbent (TI) would be supportive, another less so, and the third explained that they were ‘holding fire’ on pushing that agenda, trying to follow the direction of their younger TI and instead model engagement with vulnerable people well.

For a number, their vocational reflection was shaped by family circumstances and how to juggle their role as priest with parenthood or partnership. They were experiencing difficulties in managing childcare, the multiple demands of their families’ lives and spouses’ professional responsibilities as well as the ministerial expectations now placed on them. Whether relocating or changing roles within existing locales, the strain on the families and marriages of curates should not be underestimated.

Ministerial initiatives and issues

Related to these vocational questions was how to develop specific ministry initiatives. These included ministries relating to marginalised people, asylum seekers, and children and families. Some were disappointed with slow starts and limited interest, or unclear as to how to engage with certain demographic groups. One said, ‘there is a bigger gulf than I appreciated with [local] parents.’ They often expressed a common sentiment, wanting their first independent project to be successful. Indeed, a number were explicit that they felt a need to prove themselves, to show that they were capable and could do effective ministry while others were learning how to cope with perceived failure and disappointment.

Conflict management

Conflict was also a significant issue on the minds of this cohort. For some this was ministerial, for example navigating historic tensions between church and local community or initiating necessary change in areas for which they had been given responsibility. For others, however, conflict with their training incumbent was the pressing issue. It is well documented that negotiating this relationship can be complex but at this early stage many of the common tensions were yet to arise. However, for a few it was already dominating their thinking. Discerning how to navigate and address complaints about the incumbent from the congregation was pressing for one. For others, the challenge was around a clash of spiritualities and their TI’s insistence on the curate emulating the TI’s spiritual practices. Whether this was around daily prayer, rhythms of study or times for reflection, these were pinch-points that they were unsure how to resolve. Negotiating these issues from a less powerful position is challenging and, in some cases, was extremely taxing.



Time and expectation management

Finally, and frequently related to all three of the issues, was the subject of time management. Again, it is not surprising that in a new role, with multiple demands, and often a relocation to factor in, participants should find establishing a sustainable rhythm for their ministry a challenge and priority. Several recognised the non-sustainable nature of former careers or mentioned the mental health of colleagues and poor work patterns they saw around them. They recognised the potential to become overwhelmed or burn out and expressed a desire to put in place systems that would protect their own and their families' long-term well-being. One was enthusiastic about their curacy, saying, 'God is amazing! [Curacy] is better than I expected.' However, this individual was also concerned about the expectations of others, both at diocesan level and in the congregation. They commented that despite only just having arrived, people's perception had shifted between their being an ordinand and a curate, and they were immediately expected to, 'have answers and know what I'm doing.' Juggling these expectations and the time involved in accommodating them was something they were pondering, wanting to create a reasonable and sustainable rhythm to ministry.

Reflections

At one level, it is not surprising that individuals were pondering these issues at the start of their curacies. The shift to a new role or entire profession, reflection on a new identity and responsibilities within the community, and negotiation of time, task and expectation are all to be expected. The start of curacy involves a lot of self-focus. *How do I fit here? What am I called to do? How do I create a sustainable rhythm and deal with complex relationships?* These are important questions to resolve in the transition from college to parish ministry. Translating learning from Initial Ministerial Education Phase 1 (IME 1) into practice requires a lot of reflection. Given the often lengthy process of selection, and the intense, highly structured nature of IME 1, it is important to recognise there is a lot resting on this first challenging ministerial chapter. It is the culmination of many years of effort and sacrifice for both individuals and their families. This is an introspective and intense season as individuals wrestle with their own expectations and begin to put into practice what they believe they have been called to do by God.

2015 cohort

Most of the 17 participants ordained in 2015 were newly established in a first incumbency, although a few had remained within previous contexts and swapped or undertaken new roles. One was yet to find a suitable post and very discouraged by that. It was clear that although many were enjoying this role, the challenges of transition from curate to incumbent were considerable. Their concerns were the most diverse of any cohort, representing all seven categories. Many initially mentioned one thing that was on their mind but



expanded that reflection to include several others. Consistent with previous quantitative findings that the move into first incumbency is linked with a dip in wellbeing, it was evident that adjusting to the responsibility and demands of incumbency was stretching for them all and, in some cases, verging on overwhelming.⁸

Vocation

One of the two most frequently cited issues was around vocation and identity as a priest. Much of this was to do with increase in responsibility combined with decrease in external direction or advice. Two of the participants were older self-supporting ordained ministers (SSOMs) who expressed a sense of struggle around what they were called to do. In one case, lack of diocesan support in discerning their particular calling was causing them to consider leaving ordained ministry already. Another was processing the limits of their capacity within the needs of their parish and, without a training incumbent or equivalent oversight, was struggling to draw those boundaries successfully.

Other participants reflected on how they ‘fit’ within their current setting. Differences between their own spirituality and that of their congregations were one challenge, but one explicitly spoke of feeling an outsider within the networks of their tradition since they were drawing on a wider range of theological resources and opportunities. It was clear that for some the transition to a new shape or tone of ministry was causing them to reflect on, or even doubt, their vocation. Similarly, structural changes between their curacy and current post were a concern for some. Shifting from a curacy in a large church to incumbency without a team was one such challenge. Conversely, the new weight of responsibility for a staff team was on the mind of another. What did it mean to be a priest and line-manage several people and the ministries they oversaw? Essentially, many of them were asking either ‘*Where do I belong?*’ or ‘*How do I serve here?*’

Conflict and change management

The other most frequently mentioned topic was managing change or conflict. Being relatively new in post this is perhaps no surprise. Whether they had inherited conflicts, or their presence had disturbed the status quo, navigating those situations was emotionally demanding. Some of these were tensions with external agencies or historic church antagonisms. These were particularly challenging as they impacted on the reputation of the church in the wider community—and by default the priest. Attempts to resolve them were

⁸ *Ministerial Effectiveness and Wellbeing: Exploring the Flourishing of Clergy and Ordinands*, Living Ministry Panel Survey Wave 2, 2019, pp. 27-28.

<https://www.churchofengland.org/sites/default/files/2019-12/Living%20Ministry%20Panel%20survey%20sm.pdf>



ongoing but participants expressed the limited amount of support they were receiving in their efforts and the anxiety these were causing them.

For three, the tensions which concerned them were power dynamics with senior clergy. Be it a new senior incumbent they were working under, former incumbents struggling to relinquish power, or situations under formal investigation, all these new clergy were processing how to manage these relationships with integrity and reflecting on the impact they were having on ministry more widely.

Workload and time management

What many of them mentioned in passing, but was the dominant concern for a few, was time management. One recognised that their current rate of work was unsustainable, that they had failed to put in boundaries but were also a victim of their own success. Ministry was flourishing but consequently creating more work on top of an already considerable workload. Alternatively, a participant described how their parish ‘isn’t the sort of place people retire to’ and thus without the support of any retired clergy, and with two congregations and an ageing community, the relentless number of funerals they were taking left no space to develop anything else. Another described the tension they were experiencing between the structure of the church institution and ministry itself. They said, ‘Mission, ministry, discipleship, evangelism have to fit in around the beast of the institution. I don’t think that can carry on. I have so many “support” meetings that there is no time left. How can I journey with people in their discipleship or be creative in missional thinking?’

Other issues and reflections

A wide variety of other issues were raised by individuals during their interviews. Building management was pressing for two, something they felt completely unequipped to deal with. An OLM who had switched to being an SSOM found themselves caught in a complex pastoral issue, made more difficult by their historic friendships with all the parties involved. Another was anxious about the future of the church: how to sustain a worshipping presence amid cultural shifts and help their congregation understand the extent to which change was necessary. As a young priest at the start of their career, they wondered what would be left when they retired.

What was clear from the diversity of concerns is the complexity of roles and responsibilities new clergy carry and doing so without direct supervision is a challenge for many. There is a huge step up from curacy to incumbency and no matter how good their training, clergy cannot possibly be equipped for every eventuality. Some can be anticipated and prepared for. Others fall within the skill set and natural abilities of individuals, but much is unknown, unanticipated, and unprecedented in their experience. Those concerned with clergy development and wellbeing need to note and address the reality that the learning-curve of first incumbency is sharp, and that research shows this is a time at which clergy particularly need



and yet often lack support. It was summarised by the participant who stated that, despite all their experience and training, they were unprepared for ‘the sheer volume of things to keep on top of,’ adding, ‘You don’t really get it until you’re in it!’

2011 cohort

Of the participants ordained in 2011, data were analysed from 13 clergy who were typically well established in a first or beginning a second post. They now had eight years’ experience of ordained ministry, and it was interesting to note the difference this made to the things that had been on their minds. Obviously, these varied depending on their situation, but the general pattern of their concerns was somewhat different from both the less and the more experienced cohorts. A small number were considering their own vocation in terms of spiritual wellbeing or ministerial focus. However, the majority were concerned about specific ministry situations and circumstances in their congregations and considering how to manage those challenges.

Vocational reflections

Those reflecting on their vocation included an individual who had recognised that, since completing their training, they had neglected their own spiritual development. The busyness of their first incumbency along with the lack of structure previously provided by IME meant several years had gone by without them undertaking any study or significant reflection. Others were considering their future: one felt that ‘God is unsettling me’ and was trying to discern a relocation, while another was approaching retirement age and reflecting on how to manage the relentless needs of ministry with their own decreasing energy. As an SSOM they were not intending to leave the parish on retirement and were anxious about the implications of that. These reflections were all motivated by a desire to be as fruitful as possible, whether the impulse was to ‘something bigger;’ to manage expectations with limited resources; or to replenish and deepen their own spirituality. However, the majority of the cohort spoke about specific local challenges. These fit into three of the seven categories but all within the ministerial sphere.

Buildings and finance

Although many mentioned it in passing, for three participants, their thinking had been dominated by buildings and finance. They described serious issues to do with the fabric of buildings which, in one case, had forced a church to close. They expressed anxiety around raising sufficient finance for building maintenance, to pay their parish share and to enable the expansion of ministry. Their inherited circumstances were the result of long-term neglect and poor historic decision-making. Now with decreasing income they were trying hard to resolve issues but spoke in terms of personal failure. One said, ‘It makes



me want to run away. The [church] community is viable, the building is not.’ Another explained, ‘We were doing well, now we’re going backwards.’ The third described financial chaos on their arrival and how much work had been done to try and resolve the situation. However, even with a business background they said, ‘The finances sap me.’ Despite considerable pre-ordination professional experience and in one case in oversight of a building project, they did not feel equipped to deal with structural engineers, historic building regulations, fundraising vast sums of money, and often sole responsibility for decision-making. One commented, ‘There’s no training in TEI about how to look after buildings, and these sorts of issues didn’t come up in my curacy.’ This administrative and stressful aspect of the ‘nitty gritty of running a parish’ was not what they had anticipated, nor did they feel equipped for or particularly supported in it.

Managing change and conflict

The rest of the 2011 cohort spoke about developing ministry and mission or managing conflict. Sometimes the two were related. One described an inherited situation with a local community organisation. Despite their best efforts it had escalated and become toxic. They described how emails from a certain individual made them ‘feel sick’ with anxiety and they dreaded a specific time of year. The interview took place within that time frame and thus the annual tension and seemingly unresolvable conflict was dominating their thinking.

The rest involved projects or ministries which they wanted to develop or change. In some cases, this was a restructuring, changing emphasis or altering service times, which they were anticipating might cause conflict. Several wanted to challenge the thinking that ‘the vicar will do everything.’ They wanted to raise up congregations to participate, take responsibility and become more outward focussed. These ambitions created concerns ranging from the time it would take to train people up, fear that their PCC would become dispirited over lack of immediate results, and how to re-vision an inward-looking congregation in the basics of Christian discipleship and mission. One commented that their congregation ‘got stuck in a vision of 20 years ago, but I can’t reach the village on my own. We need to generate a new vision.’ Another was looking for external support and resources for a specific technological project, explaining that their congregation ‘don’t have the capacity for where we need to go.’ One baldly stated, ‘I think the apathy is the thing that will destroy me.’

Reflections

After several years of experience and with a good grasp of their context, these were clergy wanting to innovate and reshape their congregations to focus on impacting the wider community. They had now learned ‘how to be a priest’ and were largely secure in that role. The pressing issues were typically less about themselves and more about ministry and congregation. Finance and buildings had a huge impact on this,



sucking their time and energy away from pastoral tasks. As one put it, ‘I went into ministry for mission, not to just keep the show on the road.’ Many were trying to address passivity and historic disempowerment in their churches, or to ‘raise the basics of prayer, mission and being outward-looking.’ As established leaders they were ready to instigate change now, and their frustrations were around factors that impacted that, be it a crumbling church building, financial challenges, or inward-looking congregations.

2006 cohort

The concerns of this most experienced cohort of priests predominantly focussed on three of the seven categories. Although a few of the 11 participants mentioned specific personal or pastoral issues, it was noticeable that their concerns were typically strategic, and future oriented.

Structural issues & future of the church

For more than half, this centred on the changing structure of the Church of England. For some this was concern about sustainability and future of their individual churches, particularly in rural areas. The impact of diocesan restructuring was frequently mentioned as occupying their thoughts. Although not all were negative about this and recognised the complexities, one described theirs as ‘a tsunami sucking the tide out, away from churches on the periphery.’ Another was concerned about communication, and although acknowledging the pressure on senior diocesan officials, recognised that the uncertainty was endemic and detrimental all round. Several reflected more widely on the future of the institutional Church as a whole, one summarising, ‘We need to stop focussing on buildings and put it back on people.’

Preparing congregations for change

Secondly—and related to this—a number were focussed on helping their congregations engage with future vision or preparing them for change. This frequently involved attempts to delegate or establish structures where key people could use their abilities and take greater ownership (in business, finance, strategy etc.) to free the priest up for oversight of pastoral ministry. Among older participants this was combined with considering their own retirement, legacy, and wanting to leave congregations in a healthy and sustainable shape where people felt enabled and honoured.

Weight of responsibility

The third area was shaped by the fact that at this established stage in their ministry, participants also tended to be carrying considerable responsibility. Be it in diocesan roles, team leadership, or chaplaincy and whether they had been successful or disappointed with the shape of their career, most were reflecting strategically. Some articulated the weight of that responsibility, saying things like, ‘everyone is looking to me’, or ‘we are the backstop now.’ One was candid enough to comment, ‘I want someone else to take that



particular responsibility.’ Others commented on the challenge of doing all that was expected of them, both by senior managers and congregations, and that expectations were not always reasonable or realistic.

Reflections

Overall, these experienced priests were primarily concerned about structural and sustainability issues. After more than a decade of ordained ministry they had a different perspective, often focussing on the larger picture and aware of wider challenges and demands facing the church. Most were doing their best to shoulder responsibility but recognising that they were overstretched in trying to do so. Similarly, somewhat older, and for some already in a second career, a number were focussed on retirement and what this might mean both for themselves and their congregations. Rather than the self-reflection common in curates and first-post incumbents trying to find their feet and deal with new pressures, and the ministry development and desire to encourage change of those five years behind them, this cohort were wondering how to be those providing the support and how to see systemic rather than just local challenges resolved.

Systemic issues with personal impact

One final comment in this section is that there was a small number of individuals across the four cohorts who raised concerns around systemic issues within the Church of England which were a dominating issue for them. It was evident that greater support is required for those who find themselves as ‘other’ in some way. It should also be noted that none of the issues raised were around race or disability. The absence of these themes no doubt reflects the lack of diversity of participants in the study but also the limited wider numbers of clergy from ethnic minority backgrounds or identifying as disabled, or their reluctance to voice their experiences. This silence is an important finding, illustrating the ongoing need for diversification in clergy recruitment and work towards equality for minority groups.

In terms of the systemic issues which had personal impact on participants, the additional challenges reported by SSOM and OLM clergy should be noted. Their experiences of training, identity formation, vocation and professional development were very mixed. It was clear that they face complexities and issues which are different to full-time, stipendiary clergy and, whether inadvertent or not, several reported feeling undervalued, unsupported in the complexities of their context and, in some cases, taken for granted or virtually ignored by their diocese.

Another issue was social class and the ongoing sense of being an outsider as a priest from a working-class background. Although there were others who self-identified as working class, for one priest the issue had dominated their entire ministry. They described developing coping mechanisms but without much anticipation of change in the institution since all those they spoke to about it seemed not to understand.



Two participants spoke about issues to do with sexuality. These were different in nature, one focussing on exclusion because of their relationship status, the other on a harassment investigation. Again, there were other LGBTQi+ participants who did not refer to such challenges, but particularly for individuals at the start of their ministry the sense of being other and not entirely welcome because of their sexuality may be acute. Two other groups that identified specific challenges were mothers of young children and unmarried clergy. The responsibility to shoulder the role of primary child carer as well as priest was extremely demanding. Participants made little mention of guidance or support for women in this position and it was noticeable that only female participants reflected on how to juggle the challenges of parenthood. It would seem that female clergy in this life stage experience particular pressures. Among the unmarried, several spoke of their loneliness and lack of partner support. Whereas the married or civilly-partnered had someone to walk the journey of ordination and ministry alongside, they did not. Friendship therefore was crucial for their wellbeing. However, existing close friends were often geographically scattered and building such relationships in a new parish as a priest was complicated and could be challenging.⁹ The result was the experience of being very much alone.

In short, it was clear that certain groups of clergy face additional pressures. It is evident that the already considerable demands of ministry can be exacerbated and compounded by persisting extra challenges and lack of support for those who do not fit the privileged profile of a straight, white, married, able-bodied, middle-class man. There is clearly a need, particularly at the start of ordained ministry, to ensure that dioceses and TEIs recognise and address systemic issues and that these individuals receive additional advice and support in order to thrive in ministry.

Conclusions

Clearly, each of the participants in this study came with unique temperaments, experiences, and circumstances, but in summary a number of factors appear particularly pertinent. Firstly, despite the diversity there are themes which frequently dominate clergy thinking. As stated in the introduction, there were seven of these which fall into three categories which intersect and impact on each other:

- Personal reflections which are often vocational in nature or focus on how to cope with the demands placed on them, including time management.

⁹ See *Negotiating Wellbeing: Experiences of Ordinands and Clergy in the Church of England*, Living Ministry Panel Study Wave 1, 2018, pp. 52-57. <https://www.churchofengland.org/sites/default/files/2018-10/Living%20Ministry%20Qualitative%20Panel%20Study%20Wave%201%20Report.pdf>



- Ministerial challenges, and in particular factors which prevent them from undertaking the ministry they aspire and feel called to.
- Structural and institutional concerns around the future of the Church of England.

A second, related, conclusion is what these accounts reveal about the developing nature of ordained ministry. It appears that at different stages many experience a ‘shifting of gaze’. New clergy seem to go through a season of self-reflection. Having spent several years discerning a vocation, studying and reflecting on their own formation, when newly in post there is inevitable identity work to undertake alongside new ministerial functions. Whether they are young adults undertaking normal developmental tasks of identity formation at that age, or individuals with greater experience, it is not uncommon for them to experience significant disorientation. Curates are trying to discern how to inhabit both the tasks and the identity of being a priest, often alongside relational commitments and relocation. First-time incumbents face a wide range of demands as they take greater responsibility with less support and this can also make them reflect on their own vocation and identity as they try to get to grips with ministerial challenges.

As clergy gain experience and confidence, their focus appears to be dominated by ministerial factors: congregations, conflicts, and communities. The frustrations many participants experienced were around factors which prevented them from engaging in the ministry they felt called to. Barriers to mission, both inside and beyond the church and a desire to bring about change in their context, seem common. Most came into ordained ministry to make a difference and were now in a position where they wanted to see that happening. Practical training, access to expertise such as legal and financial support, opportunities for reflection and prayer, and time for strategic and creative thinking seemed to be what many at this stage were in need of but struggled to find given the pressure of their workload.

Finally, with accumulating years of ordained ministry the focus of gaze appears to shift to wider, institutional challenges and the weight of responsibility and seniority. With this comes recognition of change over that time, concerns about changing diocesan and national strategies, cultural shifts, and the consequences of declining numbers. Alongside this, depending on age, comes a return to questions of vocation, of resilience, retirement, and concern for the longevity of their congregations beyond their ministry.

Of course, all participants, if asked, would undoubtedly have had views on each ‘horizon,’ since they are impacted by them all. However, it is worth noting that length of ministerial service—with consequent experience and confidence—appears to impact their concerns and focus. Inevitably we all give more thought to issues that are beyond our experience or capacity. We ponder the things we do not know how to resolve. It should be no surprise then that at different stages, different issues occupied the mental energy



of participants. Attention to this, particularly within dioceses, could make a significant difference to training and support offered at different points in clergy careers and thus their wellbeing in general.¹⁰

Finally, as documented in previous research, clergy wellbeing is particularly vulnerable for those who are minorities in some way, and at points of transition, particularly in early ministry. The transition to first incumbency puts enormous strain on individuals and their relationships, and dioceses need to pay particular attention to supporting them. TEs can advise and anticipate these challenges, but it is not until individuals make the transition that they recognise the extent of the demands they face. Likewise, those who belong to any sort of minority group are likely to need additional support as they navigate relatively untrodden paths in ministry or do so alone. Of course, this is a matter of individual temperament, but dioceses, TEs and others need to be aware and address those challenges if clergy who experience being ‘other’ in some way are to thrive and in doing so bring the skills and gifts they have to offer congregations, communities, and the Church more widely.

¹⁰ This may of course already be the case in some dioceses.



3. Sources of formation

Introduction

As well as exploring pressing issues for clergy at different stages in their ministry, a key aim of the research was to deepen understanding of how clergy formation takes place. In other words, how do they learn what they need to face the challenges of ordained ministry? Given that human beings are holistic, and that formation is a unique process involving a wide variety of factors, it is difficult to identify or pinpoint one specific event, strategy or circumstance that might definitively shape an individual and thus be replicable for others. Instead, as one participant put it, ministerial development is ‘like a cement mixer,’ combining over time a wide variety of experiences and resources, in addition to temperament and spirituality, until the individual elements can no longer easily be separated. In order to explore perspectives on their formation as a priest, participants were asked to reflect on two questions: ‘What has shaped your thinking on the issue on your mind?’ and, ‘What has sustained you as you face this issue?’ The following section of the report explores their answers, providing insight into both.

What has shaped your thinking?

Participants were asked, in considering this question, what part IME and continuing ministerial development (CMD) had played in this in addition to any other factors. Clearly, they had different levels of ministerial experience to draw on, and for the 2015 cohort IME 2 was current in their thinking whereas IME 1 was most recent for the 2016 cohort of new curates. More established priests in the earlier two cohorts had to reflect retrospectively on their initial ministerial education.

These findings must be qualified by the fact that the 61 participants attended a wide range of TEIs, undertook curacy in diverse dioceses and that training is constantly evolving. Thus, experiences are not directly comparable. However, there were some common themes which emerged in their answers.

IME 1

Views were mixed as to how far IME 1 had shaped their thinking about the issue currently on their mind. Unsurprisingly, those ordained more recently had a greater recollection of their IME 1 experience, be it full-time residential, full-time non-residential, or part-time non-residential. The general reflections from the 2006 and 2011 cohorts were that IME 1 had given them theological but not management resources. Some in the 2011 cohort reflected that training tended to ‘focus on a chaplaincy model [of church] rather than mission’ which is what they were now wanting to engage their congregations with. Few mentioned specific courses or modules of study. One described learning how to preach while another commented that they



had studied the Bible but not how to use it in ministry. Others identified undertaking a community survey and learning a framework for theological reflection as helpful.

More common among the experienced clergy were reflections on IME 1 and a broader sense of formation which had made a long-lasting impact. A number spoke about how daily rhythms of prayer ‘drummed in’ at their residential TEI had become foundational for their ministry. One commented that IME 1 ‘has given me resources to survive in ministry.’ Another, how it impacted their ‘formation as a person, and spiritual development, which gave me resources to make decisions “on the hoof” and to trust my instinct.’ However, another observed, ‘Training and curacy formed me but didn’t help me with the practicalities [of ministry].’

The cohorts who had undertaken IME 1 more recently had more to say. They too considered personal formation one of the most significant aspects of the process, particularly around daily rhythms of prayer in residential contexts. One described the Christian spirituality learnt during IME 1 as framing the ‘football pitch to play on,’ providing both security and freedom. Those who had undertaken full-time non-residential (contextual) training were typically positive about the flexibility it allowed and the leadership training they had received.

Although some found IME 1 extremely difficult, others spoke enthusiastically of it, ‘developing my ontological identity as a priest,’ or affirming and providing confidence in their vocation. For some it reinforced what they already knew; for others it challenged them to reflect on issues they had no experience of. Evidently, what is positive or challenging in IME 1 depends very much on the individual ordinand as well as the TEI and form of study.

Another recurrent theme was the advantage participants felt they had gained from being exposed to a wide range of spiritual traditions during their training. One described how they had learned to ‘plumb the depths of tradition’ which had ‘opened a door to a whole world of [spiritual resources].’ Although some of this was formally taught, several appreciated the informal learning which resulted from studying with those of other traditions and felt better equipped for the diversity of parish ministry as a result.

Whether it is because IME 1 training has developed over time or it was more current in their thinking is hard to know, but the more recently ordained participants were also more likely to mention specific modules of study that they felt had been practically useful in their early ministries. These included: resilience training; conflict management; power dynamics; psychology; pastoral care; time management; leadership; mission modules; and providing theological frameworks for reflection. One commented that although they had been frustrated by the focus of leadership training, they were now discovering that it had ‘percolated down’ into their day-to-day ministry. Another summarised, ‘it taught me to learn.’



There were still frustrations at gaps in their knowledge, particularly around the day-to-day management of a parish, especially if these issues had not come up in their curacy. Individuals in both the 2011 and 2015 cohorts described how unprepared they had been for becoming a school governor, or managing graveyard policy or falling plaster from the church ceiling. One expressed their frustration at having to ‘constantly say “I don’t know” and look things up like a sucker.’ They noted that this would probably have been improved with a ‘decent curacy’—but theirs had not been.

The final recurring view on the impact of IME 1 in shaping their thinking was that for many there was a constant need to reinterpret what they had been taught for their current, very different, context. One of the 2016 cohort commented that ‘the teaching on change management was based on a single congregation with a full-time minister.’ This was not their reality and much of what they had learned had to be translated. Another explained that their college ‘had a bit of a thing about being managers and getting other people to do things’. Now in post, they reflected that there were no suitable congregation members to delegate anything to. Several SSOMs and OLMs also expressed the challenges they had faced with generic training which failed to take their specific circumstances into consideration. However, as one 2016 participant commented, ‘College can’t teach this. Being given theory is one thing, but knowledge is something to be worked out as you go.’

IME 2 and continuing ministerial development

The ongoing training of priests within the Church of England is shaped by a second phase of IME, a curacy under a training incumbent alongside diocesan IME 2 provision. This can take a variety of forms but aims to equip clergy for their future ordained ministry. Beyond that, continual ministerial development is normally provided through dioceses for the ongoing training of clergy. Participants were asked to reflect on the impact both had had on their thinking with regards to the challenge they were facing.

IME 2 (parish)

Much has already been written about curacy and many of the participants reflected on its impact on their formation and capacity to manage the challenges they were currently facing. Across the three post-curacy cohorts (2006, 2011 and 2015) a number of themes recurred.

For some, curacy had equipped them well. For example, having undertaken a multi-parish benefice curacy or what one described as an ‘intensively liturgical’ curacy had equipped participants for a subsequent similar context. One of the 2015 cohort spoke of how a curacy project in a nursing home had provided skills they were now using with elderly parishioners with dementia. A member of the 2006 cohort identified the ‘gradual increase in challenging ministries’ starting with curacy, which had developed skills and resilience. A number also reflected positively on the practical skills they learned and the support of their training



incumbent, learning by ‘watching and doing.’ One summarised that curacy had taught them ‘how a church works’ and ‘the bread-and-butter stuff.’ Another’s training incumbent had modelled ‘how to flag up an issue [with the diocese] before it explodes’ and others spoke of being given confidence to take risks and process failures. These abilities were now standing them in good stead. Indeed, several of the 2015 cohort spoke of missing the wisdom and support of their TI.

Not everyone was positive about their curacy though. Some had primarily learned how *not* to lead, or practices to avoid. Undertaking curacy in a context that was very different from their first incumbency also caused difficulty since they needed very different skills. Some were more explicit: ‘My curacy was useless. The TI didn’t explain anything.’ Another reflected on their perception that training incumbents were not trained to be a trainer and thus ill-equipped for the task.

The newest cohort were still in the early days of curacy, and many expressed positive feelings about their training incumbent. For some, this was because they held common traits or values. One said, ‘We had crossed wires at first, but I know she wants to support me.’ Others commented on their TI’s insistence at their taking time to walk the parish and meet people or guard time for rest and study. One simply said, ‘I feel well loved by my TI and by God.’ However, as already explored, others were hitting tensions, challenges, and differing spiritualities and ministry priorities already. Indeed, for some it was the pressing issue on their mind. The dynamics of a curate-TI relationship are complex, as the 2016 cohort were discovering. In summary, although for many participants their curacy had given them skills and experience it had not necessarily given them the tools they needed for their current challenges.

IME 2 (diocese)

Although ‘IME 2’ correctly refers to the whole curacy experience, participants typically used this term in reference to the structured teaching delivered to curates through the diocese. This received limited reflection by the more experienced clergy, the 2006 cohort making almost no mention of it. Of the 2011 cohort a few had undertaken specific training, such as CPAS leadership modules, which had been helpful. Some spoke positively of exposure to other groups, networks, and traditions through the process. Even the group who had most recently completed IME 2, the 2015 cohort, said little. For one, an emphasis on relationships and conflict in their training had provided them with useful resources, but others felt it had been ‘a paper exercise.’ The 2016 cohort, currently at the start of IME 2, had more to say. Some enjoyed the opportunity to meet and share with other curates although experience of reflective practice groups was variable. One was finding theirs a positive experience and a supportive cohort, others less so. Poor group leadership and feeling uncertain that conversations remained confidential were two of the issues raised.



Diversity of practice across dioceses was evident when it came to IME 2. Some felt overwhelmed by the volume of highly structured, compulsory training. Others were sceptical: ‘It looks like a higgledy piggledy mess of whatever they thought of or found,’ or ‘a box ticking exercise.’ A few were more positive but felt that in terms of usefulness, it depended whether what they needed coincided with the rolling training programme. Some found it repetitive of what they had done in IME 1, others had hit specific issues they needed help with ‘a bit too late.’ For example, one explained that the specific training on baptism had come after they had already needed to work out how to navigate that task themselves. Overall, diocesan IME 2 training did not appear to have provided the majority with additional resources for their current challenge.

Continuing ministerial development

Continuing ministerial development also received little comment. Clearly, only the three earlier cohorts had been involved, but it was also evident that this varied enormously across dioceses. Of the 2006 and 2011 cohorts, some described it as ‘non-existent’ or ‘a bit hit and miss.’ One noted, ‘there was useful stuff in there—the legal stuff [for example] but [it was] largely a hoop to go through’ rather than a particularly constructive or formational process. The most positive comments were around the opportunity to meet with other clergy, and those dioceses where participants could use their CMD budget for self-sourced training. In these settings one commented that what they needed was assistance in ‘trying to help you think through what [training] you need.’

For the 2015 cohort CMD also included new incumbent induction. This was equally diverse. Some were positive and one had found an extended meeting with the bishop helpful. Others felt overwhelmed with the volume of meetings they were expected to attend; the extra pressure on their time was not offset by much benefit from the process. Alternatively, some had not received any form of induction. Temperament and confidence evidently played a part in their responses. One had ‘found more value in being released to get on with it,’ but another described not knowing where to turn for support and feeling ‘very much on my own.’ Clearly being new to a context is always demanding and all new incumbents need support, but particularly for first time incumbents, diocesan support at this point is crucial to their transition.

What else have you drawn on?

Previous experience

Across all cohorts, the most frequently cited factor that had shaped participants’ thinking about the issue they were facing was previous experience. The vast majority were using skills learned in former careers. Management, education, the NHS, business, finance, industry, and many more were cited. Repeatedly, participants commented that their abilities to think strategically, cast vision, deal with conflict and change,



or inspire and develop congregations came from skills they had brought into the ordination process with them. Only a small number were young enough not to have had previous careers and they were particularly dependent on IME to provide those skills. One older participant commented of his ‘building and graveyard management drama’ that, ‘if I was a bit younger, [without professional experience] I think I’d probably have freaked out.’

These skills they had ‘picked up on the way’ also included lay ministry experience. Youth work, missions, and church planting experience were all cited. Some spoke of drawing on historic theological roots or values, which had often been what drew them into ordination in the first place. For others, experience as a churchwarden, reader, or even as a clergy child meant they had absorbed knowledge of church structures and processes which they were now deploying. OLMs and some SSOMs had both the advantage (and challenge) of local knowledge and established relationships which informed how they managed new responsibilities.

What was clear is that when it came to the management tasks which comprise much of Church of England ordained ministry, although IME provided some training, skills gathered from life experience were what the majority fell back on. Such abilities should clearly be honoured and valued in the ordination and IME process and special attention needs to be given to equipping very young, inexperienced ordinands and ordained ministers who do not come with such abilities.

Diocesan support

Across the three post-curacy cohorts, asking for diocesan support was a common theme. Almost all participants mentioned it. In short, the help they had received with these pressing issues varied widely. Some were diocesan officers themselves and recognised the limitations on what help they could both offer and receive. One described having inherited the responsibilities of several other clergy and ‘working a 12-day week.’ They could see that their bishop was similarly struggling and appreciated her transparency. Another had changed diocese and identified the contrast in ‘mood music communicated from the top to clergy.’ In their case the new diocese had a far more encouraging tone than their previous location which they recognised impacted the general atmosphere of clergy in a positive way.

Some participants had experienced diocesan structures and officers as helpful, providing access to development, support and counselling. Descriptions from the 2006 cohort included creative dialogue, legal and pastoral support, forward-looking and consultative planning processes, and candid conversation with senior colleagues. One of the 2015 cohort explained, ‘I do the job by not being afraid to ask stupid questions of the diocesan officers.’ Their relationships were positive, and he felt well supported. Another’s experience was, ‘if you’re drowning and shout, people will come.’ However, more common were struggles where



participants had sought advice or support and had limited success. ‘It feels like they’ve washed their hands of me’ and ‘the bishop did listen, but I don’t think they understood’ were two such comments. Others expressed frustration at how long it took to get a response from the diocese, or how poor communication was. One, after several years of asking for a professional mentor, had found one themselves, despairing that the diocese would ever respond. Expectations varied: while one explained, ‘I like the fact that the diocese leave me alone,’ another lamented that one 90-minute conversation with the bishop was all the direction they had received in several years. Diocesan support appears to be varied, often requiring confidence and perseverance to access.

Proactive exploration

The final recurring factor participants across all cohorts spoke about was being proactive in looking for expertise and help to deal with the issue on their mind. Even among the most experienced participants there were situations which felt beyond their capacity. Structural upheaval and rationalisation and the management of finances, building projects and land sales etc. were not what had drawn them into ordained ministry, and many were wrestling with how to address such tasks. A 2011 participant who had entered ordained ministry from a well-established career reflected, ‘nothing prepares you for moving from total competence to incompetence. Training doesn’t prepare you for feeling like the rug has been pulled out from under your feet.’

Most participants spoke of proactively looking for advice or those with expertise to provide support beyond their diocese. Across all cohorts they spoke about literature they had read and courses they had attended or facilitated for their congregations. The ‘Shape’ course, ‘Dementia Friendly Church’ training, CPAS, personal coaching and New Wine events were all mentioned. A number had sought out members of the congregation, or contacts from their personal and professional networks, to provide assistance and expertise in areas like structural engineering or accountancy (although such individuals were not always available). In some cases, they had delegated responsibility to them or at least used them as sounding boards for guidance.

Almost all spoke of seeking advice and support from clergy colleagues who had experienced similar challenges, whether in person or via online forums. Beyond their training incumbent, the curate (2016) cohort turned to peers within IME 2 structures or from their TEI. A few continued to turn to TEI staff for advice, particularly around challenges with their TI. Having been in post some time, the experienced 2006 and 2011 participants appeared to have more established networks to draw on. Particularly the 2006 cohort expressed greater self confidence in asking for advice when they were out of their depth. ‘If I don’t feel equipped, I know where to go to ask’ was how one put it. The 2011 participants also referred to the impact



of collaboration and exploring what colleagues in similar situations had done. Indeed, swapping ideas took place during some of the research group interviews. Seeking support and advice was not always done within the diocese. The more experienced and well-connected priests often accessed wider networks and contacts within and beyond the Church. In short, as one summarised, many clergy resolve challenges and have their thinking formed by ‘accumulative experience’ drawn from TEIs, their own life, and knowing how to access the skills of others. Some of their concerns however were not issues they could resolve or were in a position to influence, which perhaps explains why those issues were so pressing for them.

The group that seemed to have the fewest external resources to draw on were new incumbents (most of the 2015 cohort). Establishing supportive networks, learning who to go to for advice and the specifics of any context take time. Although some were finding emotional and prayer support from their peers, they were essentially all in the same boat: facing the challenges of first incumbencies together without much ordained ministerial experience to draw on. Many had been proactive in beginning to establish contacts and networks. One had done considerable background research into their context and was drawing on ecumenical networks to gain a fuller picture of the complex situation they had inherited. Another was taking part in a network for church growth and learning much from those of another tradition. Some had read books around specific pastoral issues they felt unequipped to tackle. But, early in ordained ministry, they were often carrying the most pressure, with the least established collegiate or support networks.

Clearly, proactivity in dealing with challenging issues can be helpful. However, the energy and capacity required to be proactive and identify resources is difficult when clergy feel overwhelmed and overworked. Many despaired of being able to develop ministry or invest the time in relationships needed to bring about change. For some, exploring options and ideas took more than they had capacity for. Several spoke about having to ‘fight for time to do the thinking and reading I need to do.’ Space for learning, creativity and to make strategic decisions was clearly important for clergy at all stages, but too often felt to them like a luxury.

Conclusions

Participants’ reflections on what had contributed to their formation and capacity to deal with the challenges occupying their thinking were remarkably similar. IME 1 appears to have provided space for personal formation, spiritual development and deepening understanding of the Christian faith. Exposure to new ideas and spiritual practices and rhythms had laid foundations. However, in terms of the practical skills they needed to deal with day-to-day ministry, these were limited. It does appear that IME 1 leadership training has developed over time and that those who had undertaken it recently were more positive about



that aspect, but overall personal formation was what most seem to have taken from this phase of their training.

Ongoing training and diocesan support clearly varies enormously. Curacies ranged from those where individuals thrived and learned important skills to those which were difficult, leaving them unprepared for the demands of incumbency. The perennial question of how such placements are made and how TIs are selected and trained remains significant. So does that of wider IME 2 structure and content. Both IME 2 and CMD are mixed in quality and quantity across dioceses. In terms of equipping clergy, at all stages the most positive appear to be those where training is carefully tailored, or clergy have freedom to access training they feel they need. Of course, it is enormously challenging to provide training that is the right content at the right time for priests with a wide variety of backgrounds and contexts. Nonetheless, there is evidently scope to invest in and creatively develop both IME 2 and CMD. However, it was consistently reported that they provide crucial opportunities for networking, meeting colleagues, for mutual support and encouragement: the relational aspects are often more significant than the content.

Related to this is the issue of diocesan advice which is also mixed. In some cases, clergy received excellent support and communication, and knew where to go for the help they required. In others it was almost entirely lacking, leaving them to fend for themselves. Those who were confident, well connected, and proactive were likely to access alternative networks and connections for the resources they needed. However, for new clergy, those with less confidence and experience, or those who were already overwhelmed, doing this could be difficult. If their diocese did not support them well, or they did not know how to access support, then they were left struggling alone.

Overwhelmingly, participants were drawing on experience from previous careers or ministerial contexts. Such expertise is often overlooked but invaluable for the multiple tasks demanded of clergy and should be valued and encouraged. Of particular concern is the question of where young priests, without such life experience, will learn these skills. Clergy draw together learning from a wide range of contexts and resources, only some of which are provided by formal structures. Recognising the experience, skills and gaps in their knowledge is important, as is creating opportunities for appropriate continuing development. Providing this for such a diverse group of professionals in diverse contexts and with diverse experience and skills requires intentionality and creativity, but is crucial for their wellbeing. Likewise, provision of expertise (or at least signposting to it) to resolve the myriad challenges they face is needed at a diocesan level. This, like so much else, is particularly important at points of transition and acute for those taking up their first post.



4. What has sustained you?

Finally, all participants were asked what had sustained them in their ministry, and especially in the issue that had been occupying their mind. Again, there were common themes across the cohorts which fall into three clear patterns: spiritual resources and a sense of calling; colleagues; and, for the 2011 and 2015 cohorts, seeing positive impact from their ministry. Each will be explored in turn.

Spiritual resources and sense of calling

Rhythms

The most common response to this question was related to spiritual resources and rhythms: regular time to invest in their relationship with God or ‘cling to Christ’ as one put it. Boundaries that allowed for quiet days, retreats, conferences, and attending other congregations when they were able were all cited. A rule of life or community membership was part of the journey for a few. Bible engagement, either daily reading or in preparation for preaching, alongside reading more widely (in some cases described as a luxury) were mentioned. Study days provided this for the 2016 curate cohort.

Almost universally, a rhythm or routine of prayer was mentioned. Daily prayer—learned during IME 1—featured heavily whether alone, with their training incumbent or more formally, and involving Eucharist or not. Prayer with colleagues and prayer partners, prayer while walking the dog, driving, or walking on the beach. ‘Prayer and common sense,’ as one put it. Another said prayer was what they ‘cling to when all around is difficult.’ A third simply said, ‘I pray like mad!’

Sense of calling and theological understanding

Others found energy in their sense of calling or vocation. Some mentioned their confidence that this was what God had asked of them. One spoke of ‘40 years of God preparing me for this.’ Among the 2015 (first role of responsibility) cohort, several spoke of calling. One candidly commented that without that they ‘would have walked a long time ago.’ Another said, ‘only God sustains me, only my prayers. It’s a quagmire sometimes.’ A third identified security in God as crucial: ‘I’m loved, put here, and trying to be obedient.’

Others were explicit that theological understanding was shaping their responses. In the 2006 cohort, understanding the church as God’s responsibility and trying to be faithful rather than overwhelmed was how one participant managed their anxiety about the future. ‘I just trust it will be OK.’ Among the 2011 cohort, several spoke of evangelism, community transformation, and equipping of congregations as underpinning theological values. These deep-seated motivators were evidently something they fell back on



to inspire their ministries. Several in the 2015 group described a deep theological conviction to bless the poor, comfort the dying, or challenge injustice, and a certainty that this was what God had asked of them.

Clearly such foundations, sense of identity, and then devotional rhythms which maintain their own faith are crucial for clergy. Although the work done in the early days of ordination and incumbency may seem self-focussed, developing that sense of vocation and the rhythms which sustain it are clearly an important part of clergy development and need to be encouraged as a foundation for the demands of long-term ministry.

Colleagues

Although it is well documented that family and friends are the most important overall factor in sustaining clergy in their ministry,¹¹ on this occasion only a few in each cohort expressed this explicitly. This may be because most took that as a given even if they didn't express it, or that because they were considering a specific ministerial issue, spouses, families and friends did not come to mind. Certainly, some of those who were single (particularly those who were young) expressed the isolation they had experienced without the emotional support of a spouse or geographically close friends. What almost every participant, of all ages and levels of experience, did cite were colleagues. These relationships appear indispensable whatever the position and stage of ordained ministry.

The most established (2006) cohort spoke of support from within the parish, diocese, or wider church. National networks and ecumenical colleagues also provided a source of prayer and encouragement, a number mentioning how much they valued those from diverse traditions. Some also described highly supportive churchwardens, PCCs, or collaborative ministry teams.

The 2011 cohort echoed much of this. Now several years beyond training they described the need to create those connections intentionally. One summarised, 'building your own support network is critical.' They cited peers who shared their specific circumstances, but also senior and junior colleagues. One spoke of the support of their curate, another of good relationships with diocesan officers and the bishop. An individual who felt somewhat overwhelmed by moving to a more senior role described the kindness of their staff team. In some cases, online communities or those based around social media were providing emotional and spiritual support, but, whatever shape it took, prayer and conversation with colleagues was crucial. This cohort also identified members of their congregations as providing valued support. Supportive PCCs, prayerful churchwardens and experienced congregants willing to offer skills and advice on complex issues

¹¹ See for example *Mapping the Wellbeing of Church of England Clergy and Ordinands*, Living Ministry Panel Survey Wave 1, pp. 60-62. <https://www.churchofengland.org/sites/default/files/2018-10/Living%20Ministry%20Qualitative%20Panel%20Study%20Wave%201%20Report.pdf>



were all cited as sustaining the participants. This is perhaps not surprising given that their concerns revolved around ministerial and congregational issues, and that they were well established within those congregations but, nonetheless, when individuals engaged with the changes they wanted to instigate, this was a source of great encouragement.

Despite speaking about these relationships less than those who were more established, the 2015 cohort also took solace and encouragement from colleagues. One said, ‘colleagues make it cope-able with.’ The church administrator had become a good friend and confidant in one case. Those they had been curates with provided emotional support to many. Contacts from other deaneries, supportive diocesan officers, and mentors were all mentioned. However, this was less frequent than might have been expected. As previously mentioned, it appears that networks of supportive colleagues or significant relationships with congregants take time to establish and at the start of their ministry participants were still finding, rather than being able to lean heavily on them.

The 2016 cohort of curates expressed similar sentiments. Other curates in the diocese, training incumbents and older clergy were all mentioned as sources of support. A number were still emotionally engaged with peer groups from their TEI, often using social media to maintain contact. In some cases, tutors from that institution provided ongoing encouragement. A few described joining networks to access support from older priests based around gender or spirituality, but as with the 2015 group these less experienced priests had fewer relational resources to draw on locally.

A final note is that one of the relationships cited across the groups as a source of support was that with one’s spiritual director. Some spoke of coaches, mentors, or counsellors but, although few spoke in detail, it was evident that spiritual direction plays an important part in sustaining many clergy. Outside perspective, wisdom and experience are clearly an important touch point for clergy as they navigate challenges, and the importance of this role should not be underestimated.

Ministry impact

The third source of encouragement participants mentioned was that of seeing some impact from their ministry. The 2011 and 2015 cohorts were most likely to cite this as something that sustained them. It is interesting to reflect on why this might be the case although, with relatively small numbers, caution precludes from drawing firm conclusions. The 2016 cohort had limited ministerial experience to reflect on, although some spoke about their hopes for small ministries they were initiating. However, the 2006 group had the most experience and did not mention this theme in any meaningful way. Perhaps their concerns with wider structural issues meant they were less likely to cite specific local encouragements? Without further exploration it is only possible to speculate. Nonetheless, among the 2011 and 2015 cohorts,



participants spoke about the ways in which seeing the impact of their ministry was sustaining them. Seeing God at work bringing change in individuals, congregations or communities was enormously encouraging. One explained, ‘away from the building, ministry is growing.’ Church engagement with courses and projects were cited, as were people coming to faith and congregation members taking initiative as they grew in confidence. Similarly, feeling that they were making a difference to people’s lives in difficult times was an encouragement, for example parishioners and service users expressing gratitude for their efforts, and growing connections (and trust) with the local community.

Conclusions

Overall, when considering a specific challenge or concern, participants appeared to draw first on personal spirituality: their relationship with God, prayer life, and sense of calling or vocation. It is crucial then, that these continue to be fostered throughout ordained ministry regardless of stage and position. Time to invest in their own faith underpins capacity to manage the challenges they face. Secondly, the wisdom, advice and encouragement of colleagues cannot be underestimated. In what can be an isolating role these relationships are crucial. Peers, elders, spiritual directors, ecumenical colleagues and others in a similar position or life stage are all important. As mentioned previously, new incumbents—particularly in their first post—have not yet had the opportunity to develop these relationships and it is important for dioceses to pay attention to the induction and networking of such clergy. Finally, seeing signs of success and feeling that their ministry is making a difference encourages clergy. This is no surprise as everyone likes to see their efforts having impact. However, in challenging times, as religious adherence declines in the UK and many of the challenges clergy face relate to this, taking note of where there is life, of the small signs of God at work and celebrating those, provides an important counternarrative.

For those involved in training and ongoing support of Church of England clergy, recognising the importance of these factors and both encouraging and facilitating the establishment of rhythms, relationships, and the celebration of even small successes, rather than just huge ones, is crucial. These are cultural factors which TEIs, diocesan officers, and those involved in spiritual direction and other forms of clergy support can help shape, in order to encourage clergy to develop resilience for the demands they face.



5. Suggestions for good practice

It is obvious that issues which occupy the mind of clergy are likely to be those which stretch their capacity, ability, or experience in some way. Many are personal, complex, or difficult. Nonetheless, despite their diversity there are potential takeaways from what they shared. Below are some that might prove helpful in terms of best practice for those concerned with clergy wellbeing.

Diocesan environment and support

This has a huge impact on the wellbeing of clergy as they consider the challenges they face. Best practice is where **individual priests feel known and valued**, where **senior officials are available and communicate well** with realistic optimism. Provision of, or signposting to, those with specific expertise means that clergy **know where to turn** when faced with issues they are unequipped for. Similarly, for those who are minorities, or who face specific personal challenges, knowing that senior colleagues are **sympathetic and supportive** has significant positive impact. The **relational and communication dynamics** of dioceses should not be underestimated.

IME 2 & CMD

Situated within diocesan contexts, **training and ongoing development** are related to the above. In a fast-changing culture, high quality training is not a luxury but a necessity, and where dioceses invest in it well, clergy are more likely to thrive. As busy professionals they need to see **relevance and value** in the training that is offered to them since it will take them away from daily ministry. From the perspective of clergy, best practice is when training is **flexible and focussed on needs they identify**. These may well be different at different stages of ministry for example: **induction and networking** of new clergy (especially those in their first post); the additional needs of **young priests** without a previous career to draw experience from; the specific challenges facing **SSOMs or OLMs**; those **approaching retirement**; and the **training of training incumbents**.

IME 1

An important recognition is that **personal formation** is among the most significant learning ordinands experience during IME 1. Best practice includes **valuing the skills they come with** from former professions as well as **establishing rhythms**, particularly of **prayer, personal spirituality**, and the capacity to continue to **learn and grow**. Similarly, in addition to academic study, **leadership development** done well, exposure to a **diverse range of Christian expressions** and growth in **confidence of their own vocation** are



beneficial long term. Finally, ordinands are better equipped for ministry where TEIs recognise and address the **diverse reality of the contemporary shapes of ministries** they are likely to inhabit.

Developing healthy boundaries

A final reflection parallels the finding of the Living Ministry Wave 1 qualitative report on realistic boundaries and clergy wellbeing, in particular the significance of **time management**.¹² Time to **rest**, to **invest in their own faith**, to **think and to pray**, to **imagine and be creative**, to build mutually beneficial **collaborative networks**, to seek **advice and personal support**. It is easy to laugh wryly given the increasing rather than decreasing pressure on clergy. However, rather than following cultural trends of overwork, there is scope for the Church to be a prophetic voice, modelling thriving rather than drivenness. Working towards an environment where individuals develop **healthy boundaries**, including around time, is a crucial and **shared responsibility**. Clergy are responsible for developing personal rhythms which are sustainable, but this is either encouraged or disabled by wider diocesan culture. Best practice is where senior clergy both expressly **give permission and model healthy time management** themselves. Likewise, regular MDR, CMD and spiritual direction can all empower clergy to develop strategies which address these issues. Clergy will do best and be most enabled to manage challenging issues when they are able to take time to **rest well**, to **deepen their own faith**, to **form life-giving relationships** and **care for their own, as well as other people's souls**.

¹² *Negotiating Wellbeing*, pp. 29-34. <https://www.churchofengland.org/sites/default/files/2018-10/Living%20Ministry%20Qualitative%20Panel%20Study%20Wave%201%20Report.pdf>



Authors:

Ruth Perrin and Liz Graveling

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For further information or enquiries about this report please contact
liz.graveling@churchofengland.org

National Ministry Team
Church House
Great Smith Street
London SW1P 3AZ

<https://www.churchofengland.org.uk/living-ministry>



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