

How much are clergy worth?

January 12, 2018 January 10, 2018 by Ian Paul



Just before Christmas, Alan Bartlett's [moving comments about clergy stress](#) were published in the Daily Telegraph.

As a vicar, I know better than anyone why so many clergy are close to the edge...In my last three months in the parish, for example, I conducted the funerals of three young women: one died of a drugs overdose; one of alcohol addiction; and one of addiction to painkillers. Two left children behind, all three devastated families.

As the local vicar, I was part of the primary care team working with these and other local families in distress. I was also one of the very few professionals whose home was in the parish. The medics and the social workers and teachers, for perfectly proper reasons, almost all commute in. Vicars live in their parishes. What that meant last Easter – and please don't read this as a hard-luck story – is that we had our car bricked three times in a week. The windows were smashed. We had to have CCTV fitted to the vicarage.

Alan's reflection does not aim to be a sob-story looking for sympathy, and he is very open about what a rewarding experience parish ministry has been, even in a deprived and demanding context:

Yet being a vicar is also, for many of us, hugely rewarding. In research done by the Cabinet Office in 2014, vicars came out as the happiest of all professions. My nine years in Gilesgate, Sherburn and Shadforth was one of the best jobs I will ever do. It was a privilege to be with people at those immensely important moments, when they open up and share their lives with me and with God.

This correlates with a consistent phenomenon at the back of the Church Times: I have often been struck by how consistently the obituaries of clergy list their ages on death as in the late 80s or 90s. This contrasts with what I noticed amongst those

retiring from factory shift-work when I worked at Mars in Slough, many of whom died in their 70s or even 60s, only a few years after leaving work. Clergy seem to be disproportionately gifted with long life, and there is a very obvious reason for this: even though it sometimes does not feel like it, we have security, freedom and control over our own time like no other occupation. Johann Hari puts his finger on this in his [personal study of depression](#) and its causes:

It turns out if you have no control over your work, you are far more likely to become stressed – and, crucially, depressed. Humans have an innate need to feel that what we are doing, day-to-day, is meaningful. When you are controlled, you can't create meaning out of your work.

[Not everyone agrees](#) with Hari's overall analysis, but this observation appears to be very well founded. And it touches on the paradox of the work of ministry and its rewards: for every factor which suggests one truth about ministry, another suggests the exact opposite. And this, in turn, stymies effective discussion about the level of the clergy stipend, which is reviewed every year by the Archbishops' Council. The very context of discussion demonstrates what an odd thing it is; I would be in a room, without a stipend myself, alongside many with a regular stipend, a few with a differential stipend because of greater responsibility (being a bishop or archbishop), and civil servants paid [a good deal more](#) than any of the clergy present. I confess to finding it very strange sitting in a meeting, discussing investment ethics and strategy, next to someone who had the previous week been [given a £200,000 bonus](#).

The Church of England last attempted a serious overhaul of stipends in 2001, when the report [Generosity and Sacrifice](#) came to Synod. This was my first year as a Synod representative (for Salisbury diocese) and I liked the fact that the report tried to combine some serious theological reflection (particularly on the meaning of 'double honour' in [1 Tim 5.17](#)) with putting the clergy stipend into the context of current pay for other professions. What was less impressive is what appeared to be the skewing of the theology to [defend the idea of differentials](#) in stipends between 'senior' and 'ordinary' clergy. I cannot now remember the details of the debate, but the main recommendation on stipend levels was that stipend and housing together should be '80% of the starting salary of a head teacher of a large primary school' and this was not implemented. At the time, that would have moved the stipend from around £16,000 to £20,000, an increase of 25%. Now, it would move it from around £25,000 to somewhere near £40,000, more like a 60% increase—which is a reflection on the way that salaries for professions have moved away from median salaries nationally. Over the last 10 years, the incumbent stipend has slightly drifted from around the 47%-ile of national median salaries to around 44%-ile, which is why annual decisions need to be made on a long-term and not an annual basis. But, with various financial pressures coming up for dioceses, including the impact of the growth in new ordinands, no-one is going to welcome another reason to increase budget spending.

The paradoxes of the stipend arise from at least these six areas, in no particular order.

a. Responsibility Do clergy do a responsible job? No, of course not, in terms of decision-making and financial management, in comparison with any senior professional lay person within the congregation. One of the ordinands that I taught had come from a job where he was sent to Brazil on his own with £10 million and told to recruit staff and build a factory. Thinking about the annual church budget must have seemed a bit of a come-down. When I was 22 I was running a £22m production line and responsible for the lives of those on my shift. It always puzzled me when people talked about ‘big jobs’ in church leadership by comparison. And yet, if I had made a silly mistake in a business presentation, then my error would have been forgotten the next day. If I get the deceased person’s name wrong at a funeral, I will be reminded of it for decades. Can there be anything more responsible than shepherding the people of God out of danger and into safe pasture by refreshing streams?

b. Housing Long gone are the days when clergy lived in a grand rectory which was the most splendid house in the town or village. There are still some impressive vicarages (which usually just makes them difficult to heat), but most people’s experience of clergy housing hovers between the grateful and the resentful, depending on relations with the diocesan staff member responsible for maintenance. As I found in my decade of living in a college tied house (built in rather miserable 1970s breeze blocks) there is something rather infantilising about having to ask permission to make minor alterations. A clergy friend recently confessed to not doing anything with his garden, since ‘well, it’s not mine, is it?’ even though he has lived twice as long there as we have in our current house, which we (or rather the bank) ‘owns’ (see [Ps 24.1](#)). The main issue for my generation is that living in a tied house meant having nowhere to live on retirement, in contrast with the majority of others of the same age. That has all changed for the generation that follows, where house ownership is a distant aspiration.

c. Work hours Putting appropriate boundaries around work time has always been a challenge for clergy; the age of hyper-connection and the ability to read emails late at night on one’s phone has perhaps extended that challenge to others. But parish clergy need to live with the loss of weekend freedom in a way that others do not. There is a sense in which ‘the job is never done’, but there is also a lack of direct supervision which means it is easy to be lazy or inefficient or both. A retired bishop once told me ‘Half my clergy were lazy; the other half were workaholics.’ It summed up the dichotomy rather well.

d. Education In times past, the clergyman, along with the lord, the lawyer and the doctor, would be one of the most educated in the local area. Until the expansion of Higher Education under New Labour, there was still a noticeable difference, in that around two-thirds of Anglican clergy were graduates, compared with perhaps a quarter of the wider population. (Such measures are less obvious now that there are so many graduates.) Given that many clergy come from well-paid roles in their previous occupation, should that affect the level of stipend?

e. Context With the rapidly growing levels of financial inequality in the country as a whole, there are increasing contrast for clergy in different settings. Those working in poor urban estates might be some of the few actually in employment, and will usually

be the most secure and best paid in the parish. Those living in a wealthy London suburb will be the lowest paid by some considerable way. But abandoning a national structure for the stipend level would add to the difficulties of filling clergy posts in poorer parts of the country.

f. Theology The paradoxes of clergy remuneration go all the way back to the roots of ministry in the New Testament. On the one hand, some of the most important parts of Paul's ministry took place when he was earning his own living in another way, as a tent-maker. But when a gift was made which allowed him to devote his whole time to ministry ([Acts 18.5](#)), this opened up a new phase and new possibilities—and the giving of a gift to set him free to minister remains the theological basis for clergy being paid a stipend rather than being given pay as remuneration for a job done or an office held. Paul never held on to this as a right, even though it was assumed to be his to claim for him and family members ([1 Cor 9.5](#)). Christian leaders should indeed be held in 'double honour' ([1 Tim 5.17](#)), and the Greek word for 'honour' *time* is commonly now used for the price or monetary value of something. And yet Paul also recognised the hardships and suffering involved in ministry of any kind ([2 Cor 3–4](#)).

However these paradoxes are resolved, the question of clergy remuneration and provision will continue to be part of discussions both about the affordability of ministry in diocesan budgets and issue of clergy welfare.