

5. Ministry at Times of Deepest Need

Introduction

The aim 'to provide safe and effective boundaries for clerical ministry'¹ is particularly difficult at times of deepest need. Most clergy know colleagues whose health has given way under the strain of providing this kind of pastoral care, or from trying to do so while they themselves are experiencing a time of great need.

Priests are called to 'resist evil, support the weak.... minister to the sick and prepare the dying for their death'² but quite how this is to be done is worked out on the ground, and in lived experience there is a particular need for 'faithful improvisation'³ at times of deepest need. This needs to be spelled out because it is virtually impossible to evaluate this work objectively. More work on evaluating Church practice authentically⁴ might help with this but meanwhile the starting-point for clergy work with people at their most vulnerable is that priests are equipped to fulfil their calling and trusted to do it.

Many priests have harrowing stories to tell of caring for people in extreme need. It is hard to speak about this kind of work without recourse to stories because such ministry is usually private, and so exacting that it tests the limits of the priest's own vulnerabilities. This work is a core function of priestly ministry and approaches the heart of what the priest believes about the significance of their own life and calling.

To prevent ministry at times of deepest need from damaging clergy well-being the clergy of today need resilience, the ability to maintain personal boundaries, support from the wider Church, spiritual direction, tools for the work, and (I believe) a better use of their time:

Resilience

'Weeping with those who weep'⁵ may break in, without warning, on a working week that is already – and due to changes in the working context, increasingly - filled with routine demands that cannot be delegated or easily shelved. The priest starts burning the midnight oil and feeling 'trapped' by the perceived requirements of their role. This puts them at risk of burn-out and reduces the effectiveness of their ministry. Resilience helps a priest to balance the 'other-directedness' expected of their role with self-care, so needs to be a major concern of ministerial formation. It is also important that they invest in mindfulness, spiritual disciplines, and develop the ability to juggle different *kinds* of work.

It will not help if clergy feel criticised for being unavailable to order, or unable to hold it together, or disappointing in regards to what other people expect of them. Clergy are

¹ Guidelines for the Professional Conduct of the Clergy (Revised) (2015) ISBN: 978 0 7151 1096 6

² The Ordinal.

³ Alexander, Loveday and Miek Higton (Eds) (2016) *Faithful Improvisation: Theological reflections on Church Leadership*, Church House Publishing, London ISBN: 978-0-7151-4738-2

⁴ Battye, Lisa K. (2013) 'In Three Dimensions: Evaluating Church Practice More Authentically' in *Practical Theology*, Vol 6, issue 3, pp304-318

⁵ Romans 12:15

professionally reluctant to share the pressures on them, so it needs to be admitted that as their numbers fall the pressures on them are mounting. Meanwhile it is also becoming more important for them to identify the models of pastoral care⁶ that inform their practice.

The ability to maintain person boundaries

Clergy work requires emotional intelligence⁷ and spiritual compassion in the face of very painful experiences of loss, such as the grief experienced on losing a loved one, health, employment, relationships, safety, self-confidence, love of life, or faith. The priest may find themselves required to exercise authority in an encounter with real evil, or to be a healing presence within communal trauma such as schism, a burned Church or betrayal by a Church leader. Particularly when multiple crises occur in tandem the duty of confidentiality alongside certain kinds of self-abnegation can conspire to make it easy for a priest to lose track of just how tired they are, and the wish of others to show respect can even hinder colleagues from challenging them to attend to self-care. Preventing clergy burn-out can be easier in a clergy team but working in a non-collaborative 'team' can be more stressful than working on one's own. In all these situations the priest needs to pay careful and sustained attention to their personal boundaries and to be empowered to do so by the wider Church.

Support from the wider Church

Those bearing responsibility for churches need access to a familiar range of support-mechanisms involving the wider Church, such as Reviews, Chapter meetings, clergy support groups⁸, Spiritual Direction, Cell Groups and mentoring. Spiritual needs at times of greatest need are usually attendant upon other needs, and priests need to know when and how to signpost those they serve to other agencies, and how to access care for themselves. They also need the support of being accountable to others, and clarity about professional behaviour, with regular review of professional guidelines⁹. It must also be acknowledged that there will be times when the guidelines feel distant (such as when senior church leaders die in office, or the priest finds himself handling an unplanned exorcism during the adult baptism of an asylum seeker).

Ministry at a time of deepest need needs to take precedence over regular work, and can consume time without warning. This impacts on others' time if the priest is not adequately supported by people who will assume responsibility for the regular meetings and the work of leadership in Church life when the priest is needed elsewhere.

Spiritual direction

⁶ E.g. Battye, L.K. (2000) Thesis 'Care in Trinity', which proposes a simple Trinitarian Model for Pastoral Care supported by contemporary models of the Social Trinity and Counselling theory.

⁷ Goleman, Daniel (1996) *Emotional Intelligence* Bloomsbury Publishing London ISBN: 0-7475-2830-6

⁸ Such as the Sheldon Hub, professional interest groups, Forward in Faith or New Wine leaders' networks

⁹ See '*A Time To Heal*' Handbook (2013) ISBN 9780715110706 and *The House of Bishops' Guidelines for Good Practice in the Deliverance Ministry* 1975 (revised 2012).

There are particular 'deep needs' associated with working as a member of the clergy. Moving posts or retiring from paid service can bring the experience of bereavement on a grand scale. Sometimes another's 'Time of Deepest Need' will challenge the minister's theological convictions. Loss of their own faith, even only temporarily, can be a terrifying experience for someone who has accepted the Church's commission to build and nurture others' faith, and hold a community together.

Perhaps the adrenaline that once they steer their community through a traumatic situation has left them.... Perhaps, having thought that they had already encountered every degradation possible, they discover it is still possible to be shocked, or plunged, suddenly and inexplicably, into delayed grief or reactive depression.

At such times clergy break-down may only be averted through having maintained one key relationship in which it feels truly 'safe' to 'be oneself'. It is therefore extremely important that all clergy receive regular Spiritual Direction that may become vital to their well-being at some point in the future.

There should also be easy access to the support of senior clergy when a priest is appointed to other roles in addition to parochial duties. An Area Dean, for example, can experience dissonance when the interests of deanery and parish appear to conflict, becoming intolerable if they are also the sole point of communication.

Tools for the work

A priest needs to know how to signpost people to other services because deep needs are usually complex, for example, where addiction is a factor. Empathy is a slippery friend when working with people in times of deep need, so the priest also needs to be aware of their personal woundedness¹⁰ and refer people to colleagues if the presenting need is likely to trigger an emotional response in them that could skew their judgement. It will also help if they are equipped, not only with a willingness to listen, pray, and be a conduit of God's Love and Word, but also a basic awareness of some of the simple tools that can be used in relational therapies, such as Transactional Analysis, the Enneagram¹¹ and Mindfulness.

Time

Emma Percy has likened priesthood to mothering¹². This analogy admits the relentlessness of the priestly role, but breaks down in that it tends to change over time. With congregations ageing, and patterns of working changing at parish level, the relentlessness of contemporary ministry can feel more like that of psycho-geriatric nursing, with no prospect of alteration or respite. Busyness easily becomes a chronic response to urgent demands and hinders strategic thinking. It can also mutate into a personal defence mechanism against the expectations of self and others.

¹⁰ Nouwen, Henri J.M. (1994) *The Wounded Healer*, Darton Longman and Todd, New York ISBN: 0-232-52102-6

¹¹ E.g. Zuercher, Suzanne (1993) *Enneagram Companions: Growing in relationships and Spiritual Direction*, Ave Maria Press, Notre Dame ISBN: 0-87793-510-6

¹² Percy, Emma (2014) *What Clergy Do. Especially when it looks like nothing*. SPCK ISBN:978-0-281-07024-4

This is true however effective the priest is within their context. Effective work with people attracts others seeking care, which in turn creates more work, even when that work mutates naturally into the work of delegating well. The pastoral care of clergy must therefore be constantly in preventive mode, lest over-work become a chronic problem.

Meanwhile, the current shape of the clergy working week is a problem for ministry at times of deepest need. Accompanying people through times of trauma, extreme vulnerability and grief takes its toll on the priest, and providing clergy with only one day a week for relief from the sense of obligation to be working does not provide long enough for the impact of such work to fade. I therefore propose that to truly attend to clergy well-being in our time the clergy working week should be five days rather than six. This would not prevent clergy from volunteering on the sixth day (which is in any case what most lay members do) but it would free them to be the judge of how best to use their time to service their 'being' for the sake of providing the Church with priestly ministry. It would also be a move in the direction of promoting the well-being of the Church as a whole: it would promote ways of working that involve more effective collaboration between clergy and lay people and assist with the task of setting *all* God's people free¹³.

Conclusion

So, what can we do to safeguard the well-being of the clergy as they minister to people at their most vulnerable? One obvious answer is to devise a Covenant for Clergy Well-being to set a bench-mark for expectations. Other responses include investing in ministerial formation that equips clergy with reflective practice skills¹⁴ and providing clergy with the kinds of support referred to above.

Crucially, I believe, the wider Church needs to accept that to protect the clergy it now needs to find ways of creating more 'slack in the system'. If it cannot do this it will continue putting individual priests at risk and may even risk the loss of the gift of ministry at times of deepest need. I would argue that protecting clergy well-being is a key function of protecting their ability to minister effectively to others at times of deepest need. Finally, I have argued above that to meet their needs, and to promote the greater health of the Church as a whole, the time has come for the Church to reduce their working week to a five-day week.

¹³ GS 2056 (2017) A Report from the Archbishops' Council: "Setting God's People Free"

¹⁴ E.g. Bolton, Gillie (2010) *Reflective Practice: Writing and professional development* SAGE Publications, London ISBN 978-1-84860-212-0