

Care for the Carers

The care of those called to the priesthood is fundamental to the quality and longevity of their ministry. The changing nature of society, the expectations of those now entering theological college and the challenges to the role and practice of many clergy in post, all demand an effective response by the Church. Whilst inviting the clergy to actively embrace healthy life styles in support of their calling, the Church needs to offer care to the clergy that is commensurate with the demands of 21C ministry.

There is a growing recognition that care for the well-being of clergy, which has always been present but often dependent upon compassionate individuals, would benefit from being enshrined in a covenant. Well-being is where an individual, “realises his or her own potential, can cope with the normal stresses of life, can work productively and fruitfully, and is able to make a contribution to her or his community”. WHO

The Church’s responsibility therefore is to offer the highest standards of training and development, and where necessary reparative services, and in response the clergy need to take their well-being and resilience seriously. Where this commitment by clergy to self care is lacking the covenant will contain a reminder of their reply to the question in the Ordinal “Will you accept and minister the discipline of this church and respect authority duly exercised by it?”

This paper proposes three tenets of clergy care, prevention, authority and communication.

Ordinal

“Brothers and sister, you have heard how great is the charge that these ordinands are ready to undertake. Will you continually pray for them? Will you uphold and encourage them in their ministry?”

What does Care mean in this context?

Who is responsible for providing it?

How is care exercised?

Preventative Care

WHAT?

- a. Preparation. Ensuring that those accepted for theological training have a full understanding of the demands of ministry and the potential impact upon them and their families of being a public figure. They need to have sufficient inner resources, faith, self awareness and emotional intelligence to sustain their calling.
- b. Education. In Theological College clergy need to develop holy habits and the practice of reflection. Core competencies would include theological, liturgical, relational tools, legal responsibilities, (including Church law, safeguarding and GDPR), disability awareness, BAME, equal opportunities, conflict resolution, mental health, managerial and administrative skills. Ordinands at this early stage also need information on pensions and housing.
- c. Development. As a caring Church it is not enough for clergy to be offered education and skills training without the means of personal growth and development to sustain them throughout ministerial life. Spiritual direction and a discipline of reflective practice should underpin every stage of ministry. MDR can at its best be a valuable tool for reviewing practice and career planning should be part of this process.

Clergy are now responsible for carrying out the policies and procedures around safeguarding. There are elements of best practice, (boundary setting, awareness of unconscious processes, potential mental health issues), to be addressed in all pastoral care relationships hence the recommendation in the Practical Guidance for Safeguarding that, “the Church should ensure that consistent and sound learning of the highest quality is offered at every stage of ministry”, and “clergy should be offered appropriate supervision and support”.

- d. Reparation. The demands of ministry can create a vulnerability to spiritual depletion and physical or emotional exhaustion. As Bishop James Newcome says many clergy have faced disappointment in their ministry and some have not emerged unscathed.¹Clergy may experience debilitating grief from constant exposure to the distress of others or PTSD following a traumatic incident. Care in these cases may require occupational health services or specific resources for psychological clearance,(debriefing), therapeutic intervention and supported recovery.
- e. Support in Transition. Natural transitions in ministry may benefit from a period of mentoring or coaching but there are other transitions such as decline into ill health,

¹ Facing Disappointment The Challenge for Church Leaders – James Newcome

or caring for a spouse, or bereavement where quality care needs to be exercised even though the clergy may no longer be in active ministry. Jo Cundy's book *Surprised by Grief* has some good pointers to the needs of a bereaved clergy spouse.

Clergy retirement requires thoughtful preparation, provision and ongoing communication.

Example of the need for training: *A senior member of clergy embroiled in a safeguarding incident with a vulnerable adult claimed that his only education about mental health had been a half day visit to a psychiatric ward during his training. A recent survey by Ministry Division indicates that parish clergy believe 60% of their ministry involves working with those who are experiencing mental ill health.*

Commentary.

Clergy well-being is dependent upon the integrity of their calling, acquisition of core knowledge and competencies during their training IME 1 & 2, provision for further training and development in post and reparative and transitional support services as required.

Authority

WHO?

The Guidelines for The Professional Conduct of the Clergy in section 14 states:

The bishop takes responsibility for the welfare of the clergy when receiving the oath of canonical obedience.

Senior Clergy take responsibility for the welfare of clergy and this is shared with suffragan and area bishops, archdeacons and rural and area deans.

Diocesan authorities share this responsibility

PCCs and the laity have a particular and significant role in the pastoral care of the clergy.

Example of the need for oversight: *A new incumbent on joining a reflective practice group acknowledged to his colleagues that he had taken no holiday in the last 2 years.*

Commentary

Authority and autonomy in the Church

The changing culture in the Church referred to above means that there may be a value in addressing the balance of authority versus perceived autonomy in relation to clergy care. The clergy status of office holder rather than employee may be seen by senior staff as an impediment to promoting best practice in the face of clergy resistance to developing healthy ministerial habits. Equally clergy can present an entrenched 'you can't make me' attitude which is far from compliance with their oath of canonical obedience and calling to a shared and accountable ministry.

Autonomous working can quickly slide into isolation by accident or design where the priest comes to rely entirely upon his or her own assessment of their work and fails to receive valuable feedback on their successes or challenge to promote personal and ministerial growth.

Whilst some lament a growing managerialism in the Church no-one should promote unprofessionalism. The Church has embraced Guidelines for Professional conduct, professional describes a key to quality and efficiency that is about conduct, competence, honesty, responsibility and accountability. None of these words detract from the vocational calling to proclaim the Kingdom of God.

Communication

HOW?

The following statements can be found in the Guidelines for Professional Conduct for Clergy

Those who support (the clergy) should *be aware* of the Dignity at Work (2008 policy).

Clergy should *be encouraged* to develop opportunities for mutual support and if required help should *be given*.

Support and advice on practical, psychological and emotional issues should *be readily available* to clergy approaching retirement and their families.

The bishop and those exercising pastoral care of the clergy should by word and example *actively encourage* clergy to adopt a healthy life style.

Clergy should *be helped* to understand and overcome unrealistic expectations.

Example of the need for an identified person to exercise care: *The vicarage was flooded when the local river burst its banks. The ground floor was badly affected so kindly parishioners helped move the furniture and belongings upstairs and reported it to the Archdeacon because their incumbent was away on retreat. The Archdeacon emailed the Property dept who said they would send someone to assess the damage and take necessary steps to repair.*

At the end of the week the priest returned home to sodden carpets and a state of disarray. Property dept. had allocated the case but then the staff member had gone off sick and no one had picked it up. The AD thought it was being dealt with and the Church Wardens knowing that the AD and Property were involved assumed all was under control.

Nobody had taken responsibility.

Commentary.

Pastoral care flourishes when personal relationships at deanery and archdeaconry levels are rewarding, collegiate and focussed, it allows a free flow of mutual support which cascades down to the parishes and encourages the laity at parish level to engage in the care of their clergy. Conversely meaningful, informed, pastoral dialogue can appear limited and some lines of communication break down under the strain of relational distance or just the failure of an identified person in the chain of this 'shared responsibility'.

The Guidelines propose that the clergy should be 'encouraged' and 'helped' but leaves open the question of who is to provide this. Separately it seems totally insufficient to say that the Dignity at Work Policy is something to be 'made aware of' as it addresses core issues in clergy well-being of respect, bullying and equality in the work place and should be required training for clergy at all levels and be in the CMD provision in all dioceses.

The responsibility of laity for the care of their parish clergy would benefit from being made explicit and regularly reviewed.

Those called to ministry may justly expect to receive the preparation, education, development, reparation and transitional support identified above. These expectations from clergy should in turn be met with a requirement that they will have regular spiritual direction, have a disciplined approach to work/life balance, maintain healthy personal boundaries and take advantage of the training and supervision offered. These expectations and requirements may reasonably assume sufficient funding from the Church to support them.

Considerable benefits to the care and well-being of clergy and a reduction in conflict, stress and burn out will come from clear lines of communication and properly funded resources.

Jan Korris 2/4/18

