

Wellbeing of clergy and lay ministers during the coronavirus pandemic.

Introduction

Clergy and lay ministers need to keep well.

That is true of all leaders. We lead out of who we are, and well-being underpins caring, confidence-inspiring leadership. And it is particularly true for clergy and lay ministers, for two reasons. On the one hand, because spiritual leaders are lightning conductors, particularly prone to receive a share of whatever torments the community for which they care. And then, we cannot operate from inside a safe shell: the open pastoral heart; the attempt to speak truth about the deepest truths are particularly challenging forms of leadership and care.

Therefore, taking care of ourselves is a priority - especially in times of crisis, so that we can respond well to the demands of the current situation. A full response to the crisis will take time. But - so that you neither burn out nor feel paralysed by the enormity of the change demanded of us - your well-being is an urgent task for today, every day.

Each of us will face different challenges; depending on our church context, social circumstances and personality. For some it is providing pastoral care remotely that is painful, especially in the context of bereavement support, for others reaching the more isolated church members and for many gaining and transmitting social media skills. Many of us will not have the technological means at our disposal to reach our parishioners via social media or holding services electronically. It is difficult to hear of other churches holding their services via Zoom or YouTube and not having the know-how to do it oneself. It's easy to feel particularly isolated but also isolated from our calling.

We may all struggle as leaders to recognise that obeying guidance that withholds us from our church buildings can bring us freedom from the virus' worst impact and reveal new possibilities. Old habits of competitively vying to do well and to keep busy will still need to be addressed. Some feel a pressure to have already sorted live streaming of services from home, pastoral care of all in church, run a local volunteering scheme, foodbank and care of the homeless whilst planning exceptionally creative resources for worship. And in all this we seek to hear God's calling; to 'Ask for the ancient path, where the good way lies; and walk in it, and find rest for your souls' (Jer. 6:16b).

We will have concerns and anxiety for our own loved ones who are at risk, be adapting to home schooling or be living alone and missing physical and visual contact with others. Extroverts will long for company and introverts be struggling with the demand to provide it. -

Here are a few simple pointers for supporting well-being. In this task, our friends in monastic communities, new and old, have much to teach us. The Rule of St Benedict¹ offers helpful insights as to how to live with oneself, those around you, and those in authority.

Well-being and mental health are separate dimensions and guidance on managing our mental health challenges will follow.

¹ https://www.solesmes.com/sites/default/files/upload/pdf/rule_of_st_benedict.pdf

Well-being and the Bible

What do we mean by well-being?

Your well-being is your personal (subjective) evaluation of how well you can function, including responding to the problems you face. Those problems might be health-related, social or spiritual.

Well-being is not the same as good mental health. Those who have health problems, mental or physical, can find ways to live with them and be well, even if they cannot be cured. However, it is harder to maintain well-being as our difficulties mount up. So well-being and mental health are related to each other, even though they are not the same thing.

The Bible could be regarded as a handbook of well-being as it provides both a beautiful vision of well-being and practical guidance

Shalom in the Old Testament expresses a holistic sense of well-being. It places us at the heart of a network of 'right-relationships'. God's promises that it is possible to be in right relationship, not only with him, but with the world and its strengths and weaknesses, the environment in which we live, and the people with whom we live. It is even possible to live in *Shalom* with our enemies; such is the love of God. *Shalom* includes, but goes far beyond, the inner contentment which 'passes understanding'. Yahweh wanted, not only 'holy individuals' but also 'a holy nation'; a community which had *shalom* at its heart. *Shalom* is both a personal and social vision.

One title of God is Yahweh-shalom (Judges 6:24): The God of well-being. He makes a covenant of well-being, "a covenant of *shalom* that shall not be removed, says the Lord, who has compassion on you" (Isaiah 54:10).

Jesus renews that covenant and restores our well-being. He speaks of peace, which is to say well-being – *eirene* in Greek. His gift is of well-being: "I leave well-being with you; I give you my own well-being" (John 14:27).

Jesus is realistic. He knows our lives will not always be easy and straightforward. In fact, Jesus tells the disciples that they will have troubles, but the peace of God transcends anything that troubles us in the world and gives comfort even in the darkest times.

So, how can we emulate St Paul, learning to be content whatever the circumstances (Phil. 4:11)? The danger comes when we think that we are masters of our own well-being. God said to Paul, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness" (2 Corinthians 12:9).

Rather we should cling to God as our refuge, for we are held in God's everlasting arms (Deuteronomy 33:27). We shift focus from our current difficulties to a deeper reality where there is always consolation and hope. From God's perspective we are beloved children. Christ's redemptive act secures our eternal salvation (Romans 6:23); we are co-heirs with Christ (Romans 8:17). We are also God's co-workers; called to respond to the plan and purpose God has for us (Jeremiah 29:11). The church is the holy temple of God, in which dwells the Holy Spirit (Ephesians 2:21-22). Who knows but that God has placed us where we are for 'just such a time as this' (Esther 4:14)?

From principles to practice

We see three Biblical principles of well-being:

- Rootedness in God, to which we develop our attention through prayer and contemplative practices;
- Relationships: intra- and inter-personal, and with the rest of creation;
- Rhythms: daily, weekly and seasonal, as typified in God's gift of the Sabbath. These rhythms can have a spatial as well as temporal dimension.

Rootedness

Most of us have well-established prayer patterns. Now is a good time to develop our practices of prayer, fasting and contemplation. That might mean digging deeper into patterns that have served you well. Return to spiritual classics that have nourished you in the past or seek out new ones. Use the time that self-isolation brings to return to the deep regularity of prayer that was part of your ordination charism. Take time to read and study the Bible.

However, the new circumstances might call us to pray in new ways. This may be a time of unusual stress and trauma; whether it comes from our own stress or from empathising with the stress of others. Carrying the burdens of stress has the potential to draw us away from prayer. But, on the contrary, they can be the raw materials of a deeper and more urgent life of prayer.

- You might express turbulent emotion through art or writing. Pray that the Holy Spirit will be in your creativity. Having created, interrogate what sits before you. Where is God in my painting? What is God saying to me here?
- You might feel called to pray more systematically than before for members of your congregation who are vulnerable, or are health-workers or in other key roles.
- You might use a map, walking in imagination down each street of your parish.
- You might pray in a new way for the future of your community. Can you imagine a re-birth of community life – stronger links between neighbours, more engagement, more sharing? Imagine yourself into such a future, and pray as you go.

Clergy and lay ministers are used to the dangers of professionalism. When preparing and leading liturgies, services and prayers, we can focus so much on what will work well for others, that we fail to enter into the prayer ourselves. We bring ourselves before God as part of the offering of our lives, and pray to be protected from its dangers. However, worship at this time takes on a new dimension, being undertaken at home, alone or through electronic media. Embrace the new-ness as a change from a familiar diet. *Relationships*

With God. Being rooted and established in the love of God generates the love that overflows to our other key relationships.

Rowan Williams² talks of the need for self-scrutiny, patience and conversational engagement.

Before journeying within, ask God to be your guide as you may be travelling to a place you would rather avoid; willing to find a deeper healing that may become a gift to others.

It is to look outwards to discern what God is calling you to; both now and in the future.

It is to look up to find God, immanent and transcendent; discerned in creation, worship, contemplation and study; to offer praise and adoration.

With ourselves. We are called to love others *as* ourselves so we need to tend our bodies, minds and spirit. .

Our bodies need a healthy daily pattern of exercise, diet and sleep. The temptation can be to respond to boredom or stress by drinking too little water and overindulging on food, caffeine and alcohol. Consumption should still be less than fourteen units of alcohol a week.

It is good to establish an exercise routine; whether a daily walk, gardening or by following a programme on the television or YouTube.

A good sleep pattern is enhanced by having a set bedtime routine; going to a darkened, quiet, cool bedroom at the same time and minimising alcohol, caffeine and nicotine in the evening. Electronic devices should be avoided in the preceding hour and phones ideally kept outside the room.³

We seek to align ourselves to God's perspective, not to present God with ours. Nicola Slee expresses this beautifully:

Give me the resolution to say 'No' to the good so that I will be ready to say 'Yes' to the better.

Give me the courage to keep living in the open-endedness of the future without foreclosing the mysterious work of your Spirit in my haste or fear.

Give me the persistence to stay in the wilderness of unknowing until I am ready to receive your call.

Give me the strength to keep still and keep waiting when all about me is pushing towards movement and activity and choice.

Give me the acceptance to live these days in uneventfulness, simplicity and hiddenness, without craving excitement, distraction or change.

Give me the grace to live in the emptiness of not doing without the rewards of achievement, fulfilment or success.

Give me the wisdom to discriminate between my own impatience to move forward and your Spirit's deep stirring of my spirit when the time is right to move.

Give me the faith to trust in your obscurity, the obedience to stay faithful to your mystery, the courage to keep trust with your inscrutability.

²in his lecture 'Theology as a way of life': Rowan Williams, 'Theology as a Way of Life' (St Mary's Seminary and University, 2014) <<https://youtu.be/lqBqwPIVSOM>> [accessed 27 March 2020].

³ 'Doctors' Wellbeing: Self Care during the Covid-19 Pandemic', *BMJ Blogs*, 2020 <<https://blogs.bmj.com/bmj/2020/03/16/self-care-during-the-covid-19-pandemic/>>.

We care for our minds by being attentive. We are frequently distracted, but are less happy when we are⁴. Our minds can often drift to worrying about hypothetical future possibilities; the ‘what if’ scenarios. Contemplation, meditation and mindfulness techniques can help us overcome this.

A simple mindful approach is to focus on your breathing and to allow it to go slower; using a mantra such as ‘Maranatha’ or ‘Come Lord Jesus’ or by counting slowly to five as you inhale and exhale and focussing on counting more slowly and breathing more deeply and regularly. The NHS offers simple guidance on this and mindfulness techniques.⁵

It is also important we guard what we feed our minds on, thinking about what we ‘consume’ in the way of television programmes and media. We are encouraged to fill our minds with all that is good, excellent or praiseworthy (Phil 4.8). Studies have also shown that how long we watch television can be an issue - with longer than 2 hours leading to feelings of depression.

Many of us will be worrying more. It is important to distinguish the helpful identification of problems to be resolved and the worries about hypothetical issues (the ‘what if’ scenarios that run through our minds.) but for which there is neither solution nor resolution, The latter can be addressed by recognising the concern but deferring and confining such anxiety to a set time of day so that it does not control and overwhelm.

We need to be aware of our bodily and emotional responses. We can scan our bodies; becoming aware of each part in turn and identifying areas of stress and tension. Scanning regularly helps us to recognise our normal bodily aches and pains. It is too easy to assume any symptom is a sign of our worse fear; currently the coronavirus.

We need to pick up on our thought patterns; are they driven by our insecurities or by God? What determines what is on our to do list? We need to be aware of busyness as avoidance of fear. Some of us struggle to compete with churches which are conducting their services technologically, with ease. God calls us to be secure in our calling. He wants us to name our fears knowing God equips us for what he calls us to. We need to recognise what we are doing; not only focus on what remains to be mastered.

Equally it is helpful to notice and own our emotional responses of fear, doubt, tiredness and unreality. These are all normal and it can be good to share but not dwell on them. We can learn to be aware without needing to respond to them. That is to have a self –compassionate gaze, aligned to that of God. Paul owns and reframes his situation writing ‘We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not driven to despair; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed;’ (2 Corinthians 4.8).

So we tend to our spirits as we tend to our relationship with God, sustained by God’s mercy and grace.

⁴ Matthew Killingsworth A and Daniel Gilbert T, ‘A Wandering Mind Is an Unhappy Mind’, *Science*, 330 (2010), 932.

⁵ NHS, ‘Breathing Exercise for Stress’, 2018 <<https://www.nhs.uk/conditions/stress-anxiety-depression/ways-relieve-stress/>> [accessed 29 March 2020].

With others. Most of us benefit from regular contact with family and friends and, whilst we miss the physical presence and contact, we can benefit from IT and social media for keeping in contact.

When we are confined with others for long periods, tensions are likely to flare up at times. People describe feeling overwhelmed when others regularly share their anxieties or from excessive talk about coronavirus. It's a question of monitoring and regulating what is and is not helpful.

Likewise we need to regulate our use of social media. Whilst much is supportive and helpful strong opinions can result in harmful responses. If annoyed it is good to wait a while before posting and potentially adding fuel to the flame of insensitivity.

We are called to intentional care: looking to find the Christ in others and to make the most generous interpretation of what others say. These are disciplines we will likely need to foster and practice.

With the rest of creation. There is research evidence of the gain in spending time being attentive to the natural world. Both looking at vegetation (the 'green') and water (the 'blue') space is healing. Can we use our daily walk to do so?

Time in daylight improves our sleep patterns too.

Rhythms

There is a need to develop new patterns and to be willing to adapt these as our circumstances change. Below is a possible structure that needs adapting if caring for children or leaving home to work.

It helps to have set blocks of time of one hour or less and certainly no longer than two hours and to stick to your plan as it takes time to establish a new pattern.

Getting up and dressed at a set time helps to reinforce these rhythms. Daylight communicates with our biological clocks and helps us become alert. So it is helpful to rise early and at the same time each day. Equally getting dressed is giving a message to ourselves that we are now ready to face the day.

Plan a Daily rhythm with

- Set times of prayer to form a framework.
- Blocks of worktime for contacting people, developing resources etc.
- A realistic set goal(s) for the day
- Set time for social media; resisting the temptation of this providing a constant distraction in the background.
- Many people find it helpful to have 'corona-free time' when they neither read nor discuss it.
- Physical activity – gardening, daily walk, exercise routine etc.
- Rest periods
 - to socialise – personal phone calls, emails etc. and with those in house (but also good to have times apart)
 - hobbies
 - new activities
 - spending more time preparing and eating meals together
 - time to maintain normal routine activities
- Treats - a little caring gift for yourself and others. Maybe it is a piece of chocolate or listening to a piece of music. Maybe it will be something frivolous such as a light hearted TV - programme.

Weekly pattern

- Retaining Sabbath – how will that day be set apart, only dealing with work emergencies as before?
- Different activities or treats for different days. This could be a pattern of social contacts, special meals, playing games, having a film night or music night etc.

Using space creatively

If you can, you might allocate rooms or areas for specific functions; e.g., for work, prayer and leisure. Closed communities are used to having such functional demarcations. Lings⁶ reminds us of the monastery's seven areas; the cell as quiet space, the chapel for corporate prayer, the Chapter House for discussions and decision making, the cloister for exercise, prayerful reflections and quiet conversations, the garden as a place of manual work (but also where we appreciate God in creation),

⁶ George Lings, *Seven Sacred Spaces: Expressing Community Life in Christ*, Encounters on the Edge, 43 (Sheffield: Church Army).

the refectory for socialising over a meal and the scriptorium for mental work. This might form a basis for useful structure.

Additional guidance on activities drawn from sociology and psychology

The Foresight Report offers five ways to well-being,⁷ these are: to connect with others, to stay active, to learn a new skill, to give and to be attentive. Christians might like to add gratitude as the Bible has so much to say about the blessing of thanksgiving. Reviewing the day helps us pause to identify and thank God for them.

It is also good to have activities that bring pleasure, those that offer us a sense of achievement, (including housework as well as new skills!) and social contact.

Making it happen

Much of the advice will be very familiar; but that doesn't mean we are good at following it!

It is helpful to consider which aspects we are managing well and where we are falling short. That is to question, *'Where am I doing well and can that be enhanced? What is the most important change I need to make to be better rooted, relationally secure and attending to my rhythms?'*

It helps to set out a daily plan the night before or first thing in the morning and to make sure you stick to the plan. It is easy to move off one activity before it is completed, to respond to new demands or due to inner restlessness. To do so limits our focus and achievement. If tempted, first ask yourself if it is the wisest course of action. Sometimes we will need to be flexible in response to a demand both urgent and important.

It is good to review each day, perhaps using the Ignatian *Examen* to do so. In relation to my well-being, I ask God to help me review the day. Where have I done well and give God thanks? What areas do I need to address? I ask God to give me the grace to enable me to do so tomorrow.

Nurturing well-being

Our well-being has a positive impact on others. So by caring for ours we offer a positive role model but how else can we help others develop and embed their own well-being practices? Could this be discussed in conversations and network groups or through written guidance?

As we reach out beyond our family, friendship and congregational networks how can we share the Christian practice of well-being more widely? And how can we prayerfully encourage those in authority with theirs?

Conclusion

In conclusion the current restrictions to 'normal' life mean we are pioneering a 'new normal' with very different associated benefits and challenges. However, the underlying call to well-being still rests on our primary relationships with God, others and ourselves. Whilst God will always be our

⁷ Foresight Mental Capital and Wellbeing Project Report, *Mental Capital and Wellbeing: making the Most of Ourselves in the 21st Century* (London: Government Office for Science, 2008), pp. 1–332.

priority, it is important we don't neglect ourselves in the equation, as all of our relationships suffer when we don't care for ourselves.

If you feel you need further help or advice in this respect, please contact your Diocesan Well-being lead. If you are unsure who that is, please ask your Area Dean.

For more advice and guidance see www.churchofengland.org/coronavirus