

GENERAL SYNOD

Reflections on the nature and role of ordained ministry

(A personal reflection following the work of the CDM Review Group, Rt Revd Tim Thornton, Bishop at Lambeth)

Introduction

1. Over two years ago I was asked to chair a group looking at the working of the Clergy Discipline Measure. The main driver for this work came from matters relating to safeguarding and the way issues had apparently been handled. Over the last two years I have had many conversations, read many letters and documents, met with a wide variety of people and heard a large number of very sad and heart-breaking stories. All of that from people involved on what you might describe as 'all sides' of the matters being discussed
2. As I have reflected on all that I have heard and read I am very clear that any reform of a Discipline Measure will not resolve the issues and problems that have been encountered and that there is a real and urgent need to consider and take action in a much wider area of work than simply addressing the CDM.
3. The stories I and others have heard were often about how people felt they have been treated and were not only relating to safeguarding issues but were about a much broader area of our life together as 'church'. Many people felt their voice had not been heard and that the processes in place were simply not appropriate or that they were badly treated. So much of what I have heard was about relationships and their apparent dysfunction and much of that came from what I perceive is a lack of clarity about the nature of the roles held and a changed understanding of the role and nature over the last 20 or 30 years of ordained ministry.
4. So much of the matters brought to the attention of the Working Group were issues to do with the relationships either between clergy and laity, clergy and clergy or in particular clergy and bishops. I suggest therefore that there is a need for a much larger piece of work to be done to consider again the nature and role of ordained ministry and how relationships are developed and overseen.
5. In a nutshell I suggest that the words 'accountability' and 'responsibility' need to be considered by us. Given the present situation of a world of increasing legislation affecting how we are and who we are and the ongoing tension and joy of understanding whether clergy are mutually accountable or responsible in all things only to God and the increased focus on every person having a right to be heard on every matter. Given all of that and much more there is a need to review again the role and nature of ordained ministry.
6. Having said that this is a bigger picture there is also a need for a new measure to deal with Discipline. The proposal of the group is to consider a new Measure, the Clergy Conduct Measure. There are changes that can and should be made and those are set out in the Measure we bring before Synod. This will make significant difference and, I am pleased to say, differences are

GENERAL SYNOD

already being made thanks to the very good work being carried out by the Designated Officer and others. However, whatever we do specifically relating to discipline issues will not make any impact at all on the much wider and far more complex matters that we all know exist which are to do with how we relate to one another and how we behave as Christian disciples.

The nature and role of ordained ministry

7. The understanding, nature and role of ordained ministry inevitably has changed and will change over time. It is and can only ever be 'provisional'. The way ordained ministry is inhabited and lived out also changes constantly. There are a variety of questions rightly being asked about the role, nature and understanding of ordained ministry at present. Many clergy in the Church of England are office holders. This is not a unique matter; other professions are also office holders. It is also not unique that some clergy are office holders, some are in employment and some are not either. That variety is also true in other professions. That variety does not prevent other professions having a clarity about what is expected of those in the profession. Others also have a body that cares for the profession and processes for affirmation, development and regulation.
8. The relationship between the Diocesan Bishop and the clergy in a diocese is complex. Much is written in the ordinal. However from what I have heard there is a lack of clarity about the relationship expected and that experienced by many bishops, clergy and laity. I also believe that expectations are now very different and there is a n urgent need to review the current situation and put forward a greater clarity for now. It will also be 'provisional'.
9. As well as perceptions and expectations it is also true that over recent years there has been an increase in external legislation (e.g. safeguarding and GDPR and data to name but two areas) which has an impact on both the role of clergy and their work, for example, in parishes and the relationship between Bishops and clergy and also between the Diocesan Board of Finance and clergy. Again expectations and perceptions lead to misunderstandings and a lack of clarity about relationships.
10. Work is needed to review the expectations on all sides and to set out as clearly as possible the role and nature of ordained ministry in general and then also to set out more clearly the expectations and relationships that pertain to specific roles and situations. Work has already started under Bishop Martin Seeley, Chair of Ministry Council to look at this wider issue
11. The purpose and scope of the work on ordained, authorised and commissioned public ministers is to propose:
 - a 'frame of reference' that expresses the responsibilities of the church's public ministers, and the church's responsibility to them
 - an understanding of appropriate 'standards' to assist all such ministers throughout their exercise of ministry.
 - to provide robust, clear and appropriate measures to oversee a variety of aspects of their life e.g. continuing ministerial discernment and

GENERAL SYNOD

development, MDR, support and 'supervision', grievance, complaints and discipline.

12. As part of this work significant questions will be asked, for example, where does responsibility lie for the care and development of clergy and how are they understood and how do they understand themselves whether office holders, employees or neither? Given clergy in the Church of England are public representatives of the Church of England there are a variety of matters that need to be reviewed regularly. How are clergy properly resourced and supported in order to be able to live out their lives as public representatives? How are clergy properly resourced and supported in their ongoing ministry to face the variety of issues and responsibilities they bear?
13. All of this is set in the particular and distinctive context of the Christian church and so work is needed to consider the theological and ecclesiological questions all of this raises.

Guidelines for the Professional Conduct of the Clergy and the Clergy Covenant

14. It has been very good to see in recent years several attempts to address some of these issues. The Guidelines for the Professional Conduct of the Clergy is a very important document. Sadly it is not as well known or used as it should be. In the work of the CDM Group it became clear that some registrars and others in the process use that document in reviewing cases relating to discipline. It is unclear whether that is fully understood or accepted by all clergy. It is also very good indeed that there is now a Clergy Covenant in place and that has been approved and supported by this Synod. However how the Covenant is used and resourced and developed, how it connects to other bodies and documents and who 'owns' it is far from clear.

Fit to Practice

15. Given the responsibilities and various new forms of scrutiny abroad for many professions it would be helpful to have a process before ordination to resource and assess whether a person who is to be ordained is 'fit to practise' As part of the initial training and formation there should be a focus on the Guidelines for the Professional Conduct of the Clergy (revised and reworked as suggested above).
16. Many professions have a code of ethics or a statement of foundational values or virtues that members or professionals need to understand and accept as part of their becoming a member of a particular profession. It would help if there were something similar in the Church of England and that can then lead to a shaping and a framework of what might be called 'Ministerial Standards' that can then be used throughout a person's ordained life to support, resource, develop and hold to account and ensure responsibility of the ordained person.
17. Given our character as Christian disciples it is crucial that we go back to our core documents and beliefs and we, of all 'professions', should be able to articulate the virtues and values that we hold dear and then find appropriate ways to hold each other to account. Accountability and responsibility are

GENERAL SYNOD

matters we should embrace warmly and form the core of how we relate to each other. As Christians we can and should frame our life using our language and values, yet I observe in this matter as in others it is often secular bodies who seem to have language and values that appear to be closer to our foundational thinking than our own.

18. To create an appropriate 'framework' for ordained ministry in the Church of England will liberate clergy to be both clear about how they are resourced and supported and also protect them in an appropriate sense as and when issues arise during their ordained life. In order for such a framework to be created there will need to be some agreed understanding of the nature and role of ordained ministry for now and to ensure this framework is robust and helpful there will also need to be a suite of measures to focus, support and provide clarity and structure for various aspects of it.
19. Matters such as fitness to practise, discernment and development, 'supervision', ministerial development review, grievance procedures, capability procedures and discipline will all need to be considered and obvious links or otherwise between them made clear.
20. Work to bring together all of these areas is best led by the Ministry Team and Bishop Martin (Chair of Ministry Council) which will ensure all the various aspects are covered. It will and should involve both the Development and Appointments Group and RACS. It would be helpful if there was more joined up thinking about some of these core issues relating to ministry generally and of course this work as stated will need to be done in partnership with FAOC to ensure a good theological and ecclesiological dialogue takes place.

Matters of Discipline

21. Within such an overarching frame and understanding of the nature and context of ordained ministry in the Church of England there is a need for a measure that deals with discipline relating to the ordained clergy. The proposal is to bring forward a new Clergy Conduct Measure.

Safeguarding Issues

22. As I said at the start of this paper, a key driver and motivation for the Group to consider possible changes to the CDM were and are safeguarding issues. We have heard from many people who have made complaints under the CDM that they feel the process has been taken out of their hands and have not found it a helpful or a positive experience. This is also echoed in the work the Sheldon Hub have undertaken with respondents and complainants. The Church owes a huge debt of gratitude to the Sheldon Community and especially to Sarah Horsman for her leadership in this area. If you are not aware of their work then I do encourage you to look at it and consider it carefully.
23. The reality is that if there is an allegation of misconduct then it is a matter of clergy discipline. An ordered church needs a clear, fair and independent process for dealing with those allegations. It must also be properly resourced, both at diocesan and national level. It is important that safeguarding elements

GENERAL SYNOD

in any matter do not confuse the proper process of discipline. It is equally important that any process of discipline does not undermine, undervalue, or prevent safeguarding issues being heard and dealt with properly and appropriately.

24. When the CDM was introduced, even though it is not that many years ago, it was at a time before safeguarding concerns were being addressed fully and properly. We need now a process that takes anyone who comes forward with a safeguarding issue seriously and that anyone who does knows they will be listened to and accompanied and supported properly.
25. There is therefore a need for a range of proposals at both a national and diocesan level to ensure safeguarding matters are treated properly and that as and when a matter moves towards a question of becoming an issue of discipline concerning a particular clergy person then the people involved in the safeguarding matters are not marginalised or side-lined but communicated with effectively and fully and supported well throughout the process.

‘Complaints’

26. It is also the case from many of the representations the Group have seen that a major confusion arises when what are matters of complaint or matters relating primarily to pastoral breakdown are attempted to be dealt with under the CDM. It is unfortunate that the word ‘complaint’ is in the existing Measure. It is clear that we need a robust and consistent process for allocating matters in all dioceses and that this process will both take all matters with the seriousness they deserve and ensure the proper resources will be allocated to them and the appropriate people will respond to the issues raised. Part of this work means that it is crucial that definitions are agreed for such words as ‘complaint’, ‘misconduct’ and ‘serious misconduct’ among others.

Lay people

27. In listening to the many people in this process I have heard and in reflecting on the present situation of the church there is one final very important point I want to make. The nature of the church of England has changed as it always does. In recent times for a combination of reasons lay people are being used more and more to either take the lead in parishes and other settings or are taking key roles of responsibility at all levels of the church and its organisation. Much of what we heard in our work was in fact issues that had arisen either between lay people or between laity and clergy. Sadly there are situations that arise where lay people disagree with each other and there are examples of lay people misbehaving towards other, lay people and clergy. None of this of course can be addressed by any Discipline Measure relating to clergy alone.
28. Given that more and more lay people are going to be involved in the life of our church at all levels thank God. It is important that we do more work on what framework can be put in place to protect lay people and to ensure good

GENERAL SYNOD

practice is in place for their own development and where necessary any grievance or discipline processes are clearly set out and understood.

Conclusions

29. All the above leads me to the following conclusions:

- a. A review of the nature and role of the ordained ministry is needed and timely. As part of this, consideration should be given to bringing in an overarching framework and the need for a suite of measures all clearly related to each other and all as part of a wider review of ordained life and its understanding and support. There will need to be some theological and ecclesiological work in this area and involving FAOC will be important. *(This work has already started and the Bishop of Edmundsbury and Ipswich as Chair of Ministry Council is taking the lead. Part of this work will include ensuring the work of Ministry Council, the Development and Appointments Group and RACS are working closely together).*
- b. The Guidelines for the Professional Conduct of the Clergy to be reviewed, updated and reinforced. Their use also needs to be considered and how they connect to other pieces of work and bodies and documents e.g. the Clergy Covenant.
- c. Further work needs to be done concerning issues relating to safeguarding and in particular how proper support is provided to those who come forward and raise issues of concern. *This work can be led by Bishop Jonathan and the NSSG.*
- d. A group should be set up to review how complaints made by lay people about other lay people are dealt with and how matters that are identified that are issues of lay people misbehaving towards clergy are identified and processed. A group should be formed to consider a range of matters relating to lay people not only church officers and the area of complaints and matters of concern.
- e. The Paper at this Synod introducing and explaining the Clergy Conduct Measure is in response to the work the group has done.

Rt Revd Tim Thornton

Bishop at Lambeth

June 2021