

# Clergy Wellbeing Changes During the Covid-19 Pandemic

Living Ministry Wave 3 Panel Survey

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# Clergy Wellbeing: Changes During the Covid-19 Pandemic

## Summary

This report explores the impact of covid-19 on clergy wellbeing by presenting analysis from Waves 2 (Spring 2019) and 3 (Spring 2021) of the Living Ministry research project, representing approximately 500 participants ordained since 2006.

### Key findings

- The aspects of wellbeing hit the hardest during the pandemic were mental wellbeing and relationships, with 42% of clergy reporting their mental wellbeing to be worse and 44% reporting feeling more isolated in their ministry since before the pandemic.
- More clergy reported an improvement than a fall in their financial and material wellbeing. Some were financially affected by family situations; some reported concerns about parish finances.
- Parochial clergy were most likely to report a drop in vocational fulfilment. This may be partly temporary, e.g. due to restrictions on sacramental ministry, and partly longer-term reassessment.
- Beyond this, no groups across role, remuneration, tradition, gender, age and household structure appeared to fare significantly worse than others for any aspect of wellbeing. Responses varied within these groups, suggesting highly contextualised experiences and contrasting preferences regarding working practices.
- Certain groups, including curates, chaplains and clergy families, have faced specific challenges.
- Disengagement from work has been difficult: more than half of respondents (54%) did not take all their annual leave in 2020, compared with 34% in 2018, though a similar proportion (74% in Wave 3 and 78% in Wave 2) normally took at least one day off each week.
- However, spiritual wellbeing has fared better: the proportion of clergy reporting they had adequate time to pray increased from 68% in Wave 2 to 76% in Wave 3, matched by an increase in those who spent adequate time in prayer, up from 38% in Wave 2 to 47% in Wave 3.

### Implications

- Mental health challenges and isolation should be seen as priority issues.
- Broad-brush strategies are likely to be less effective than detailed listening and contextually-informed responses.
- Space and resource should be made available to enable:
  - Vocational reflection;
  - Lament, processing and learning from the pandemic (including counselling as appropriate);
  - Holiday away from the parish.

## Introduction

Living Ministry is a mixed methods, longitudinal research project following four cohorts of clergy through ten years of their ministry to explore what helps ordained ministers to flourish. Clergy ordained in 2006, 2011 and 2015, and those who entered training in 2016 are invited to take part in an online survey and qualitative interviews every two years. The first (Wave 1) survey took place early in 2017 and the most recent (Wave 3) in March 2021.

This short report focuses on the impact of the pandemic on clergy wellbeing, based on analysis of the Wave 3 survey data. The analysis is able to explore this in two ways, firstly through comparing wellbeing responses in Wave 3 with those in Wave 2, completed in February-March 2019; and secondly through analysing responses to questions that asked clergy whether they thought their wellbeing (physical, mental, relational, financial and vocational) was better, about the same, or worse than before the pandemic.

Over the period considered by the Wave 3 survey, clergy have clearly experienced a number of significant challenges. During the pandemic clergy faced restrictions in the use of church buildings, attendance at occasional offices, and a very different pastoral context. Statistics for Mission 2020 included questions about the ‘Church at Home’ services – online, by phone, post, email, and other means – offered by local churches. The report, unpublished at the time of writing, states that 90% of benefices offered some form of ‘Church at Home’ services during the March-July lockdown and, in October 2020, 61% of churches both offered ‘Church at Home’ services and reported onsite attendance at church services.

Whilst the pandemic is of course a big factor in the change in wellbeing between Waves 2 and 3, it is also important to note that a number of other things have happened in the church context that may have influenced wellbeing, including the Black Lives Matter movement, engagement with Living in Love and Faith, and safeguarding concerns. It is not possible from the survey data to be able to say what impact these other issues have had on clergy wellbeing, and how that has interacted with the impact of the pandemic.

## Method

Living Ministry incorporates a large-scale quantitative panel survey alongside qualitative longitudinal research and discrete, focussed qualitative studies. The online panel survey is scheduled to run every two years over a ten-year period, and this report presents findings from its third wave. Around 500 clergy responded to the Wave 3 survey in 2021, and about 340 of those had also completed the survey in Wave 2 in 2019. The findings of the panel study are based on self-reported data and represent respondents’ perceptions. Living Ministry does not include participants ordained before 2006 and is therefore not representative of all clergy.

## Survey instrument

The Wave 3 survey comprised 5 sections:

1. Details about the respondent's current ministry;
2. Flourishing of the person (wellbeing): physical & mental, relationships, financial & material and ministerial experience (including spiritual, vocational and participation wellbeing);
3. Autonomy, accountability and support;
4. Flourishing of the respondent's ministry (effectiveness);
5. Demographic information about the respondent.

The Wave 3 survey included both questions repeated from Waves 1 and 2, and a number of new questions. This report focuses on the impact of the pandemic on wellbeing, looking specifically at the following questionnaire items:

**Demands of the role:** Clergy were asked how far they agreed their role was physically, mentally, spiritually and emotionally demanding (five tick boxes ranging from 'strongly disagree' to 'strongly agree').

**Wellbeing** was measured using a number of items across multiple domains providing detailed information about physical, mental, and financial wellbeing, alongside information about relationships and sense of vocation. To aid in the analysis in this report, a selection of summary items has been chosen: the questions are detailed below.

- **Physical wellbeing:** 'Over the last twelve months, would you say your health has on the whole been...?' (four tick boxes ranging from 'excellent' to 'poor').
- **Mental wellbeing:** The 14 items of the Warwick Edinburgh Mental Wellbeing Scale (WEMWBS) can be combined to give a single score of overall mental wellbeing. A low score can indicate depression.
- **Relational wellbeing:** 'Thinking about your relationships in general, would you say: I feel isolated in my ministry' (five tick boxes ranging from 'strongly disagree' to 'strongly agree').
- **Financial wellbeing:** 'How well would you say you are managing financially these days?' (five tick boxes ranging from 'living comfortably' to 'finding it very difficult').
- **Vocational wellbeing:** 'I feel that I am fulfilling my sense of vocation' (five tick boxes ranging from 'strongly disagree' to 'strongly agree').

The main variables considered in relation to these aspects of wellbeing were: role, remuneration, age, gender, tradition and household structure. For other aspects of diversity, including ethnicity, sexuality and disability, numbers were too small to allow meaningful analysis.

The Wave 3 questionnaire also included a question for each of the five areas of wellbeing, asking if wellbeing was **better, about the same, or worse when compared with before the pandemic**, and an open-text box was provided to allow for further comment. Open-text comments supplementing closed (tick-box) questions were invited in the following areas:

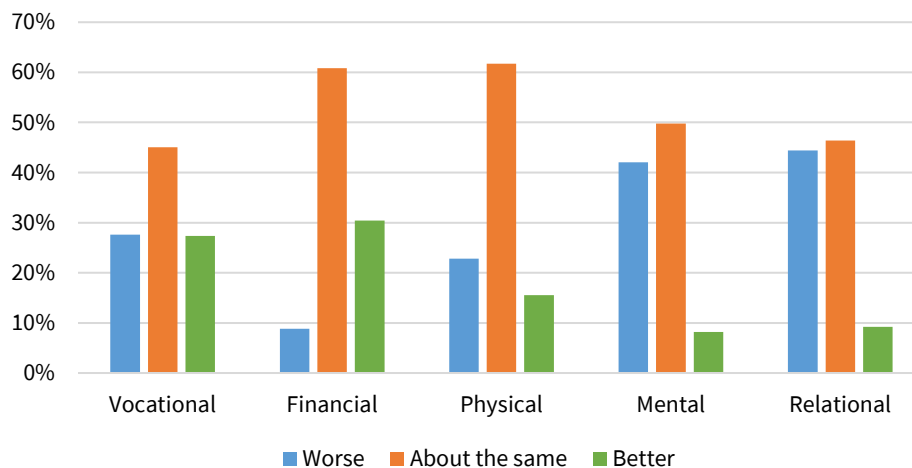
- Physical and mental wellbeing (172 mentions of the pandemic)
- Relationships (92 mentions)
- Financial and material wellbeing (12 mentions)
- General comments (12 mentions)

There were 288 comments referring to the pandemic from 215 respondents. Implications were identified for the following areas: ministry, financial and material wellbeing, and physical and mental wellbeing; and for the following groups: curates, chaplains, and families.

## 1. Overall change

Clergy were more likely to note the negative impact of the pandemic on their mental and relational wellbeing than on other aspects of wellbeing, with 42% of clergy reporting their mental wellbeing to be worse and 44% reporting feeling more isolated in their ministry. Conversely, 30% of clergy reported managing better financially and 27% felt they were fulfilling their sense of vocation more. In the main, the responses clergy gave to the questions that asked them to compare their wellbeing to before the pandemic reflected the change in their scores to wellbeing questions asked in both Wave 2 and Wave 3.

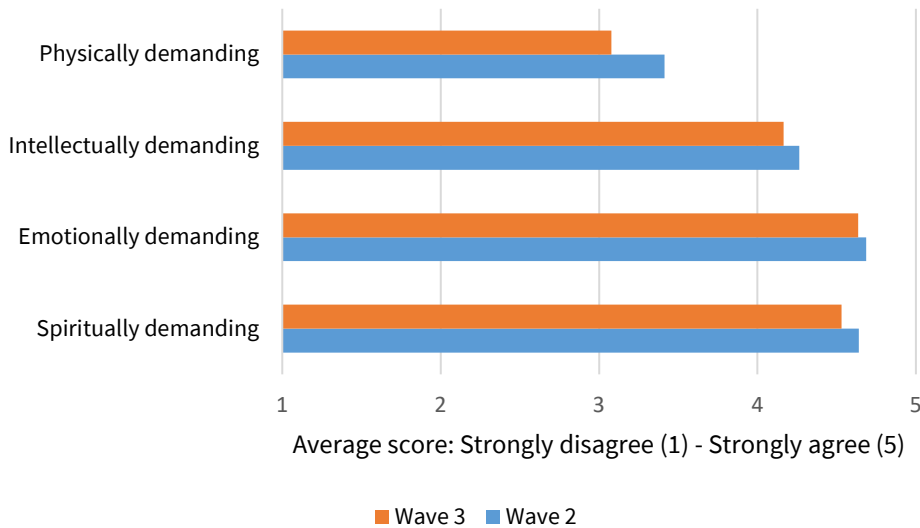
Wellbeing compared to before the pandemic



## 2. Ministry and vocation

Clergy were asked about how far they agreed that their role is physically, intellectually, emotionally and spiritually demanding. Their responses in Wave 3, as compared to Wave 2, indicated that they perceived their roles to be a little less demanding, physically, intellectually and spiritually, but not emotionally, with similar responses given in Waves 2 and 3. However, more respondents reported not taking all of their annual leave in 2020 (54%), compared to 34% in 2018. A similar proportion (74% in Wave 3 compared to 78% in

Wave 2) normally took at least one day off each week. Open-text responses suggest that lower rates of annual leave may be related more to the lack of ability to leave the parish and take meaningful leave than to workload.



Over a quarter of clergy (27%) felt they were fulfilling their sense of vocation more compared with before the pandemic, and nearly half (45%) felt it was about the same. However, 28% of clergy felt they were fulfilling their sense of vocation less, and this figure rose to 42% of clergy when comparing responses to identical questions between Waves 2 and 3. Further analysis found that those in parochial roles (for example incumbents, associate ministers and curates) were more likely to experience a drop in vocational wellbeing (45%) compared to those in other roles (26%). In Wave 3, 65% of clergy felt their bishop valued their ministry, which was very similar to responses to Wave 2.

Despite the change in service provision to online services, there was no big increase in clergy reporting they lacked the tools or resources they needed to do their job between Waves 2 and 3, with around a sixth of clergy answering negatively. Nor was there change in how far clergy felt their role utilised their training and capabilities. There was, however, an increase in the proportion of clergy who agreed they have adequate time to pray, from 68% in Wave 2 to 76% in Wave 3, matched by an increase in those who also spend adequate time in prayer, up from 38% in Wave 2 to 47% in Wave 3. This was reflected in a study by York St John in the first three months of 2021, where 48% of ordained respondents reported an increase in frequency of personal prayer since before the pandemic, compared with 19% reporting a decrease, while 35% reported better (and 23% worse) spiritual health.<sup>1</sup>

Responses to the open text questions included:

<sup>1</sup> A. Village & L. Francis, 'The Church of England in the 2021 Lockdown: Clergy and Churches,' <https://www.yorks.ac.uk/media/content-assets/document-directory/documents/CoE-Covid-19--Church-21-Churches-and-Clergy-report.pdf>

## Challenges

- Intensified: pastoral work, IT, congregational demands
- Less involvement: lack of IT skills, self-isolation/shielding
- Exacerbation of existing relational issues
- Difficulties forming relationships in new roles
- Sense of inadequacy: inability to minister, remote pastoral work, scale of issues/disconnection
- Online worship not as good/ not everyone engages
- Barriers to helping others – frustration
- Working from home: lack of commute (space), lack of connection with colleagues to bounce thoughts around
- Constant innovation required
- Dependent congregations
- Vocation – questioning role

## Benefits

- Creative opportunities
- More time for pastoral care
- Increased engagement between church and community

## Potential issues

- What are the contrasting preferences in working practices and how to manage these?
- How much is the impact on vocation temporary, for example regulatory challenges to sacramental ministry, and how much is longer-term reassessment of vocation, calling, or vision?

## 3. Financial and material wellbeing

About three fifths (61%) of clergy reported that they were managing financially about the same as before the pandemic, with nearly a third (30%) reporting this had improved. Fewer than one in ten clergy (9%) reported their financial situation had worsened and no common factors were found within this group. There was no significant difference between those who had additional employment or not, or between those who were in receipt of a stipend or not.

Responses to the open text questions included:

## Challenges

- Loss of spousal income
- Redundancy
- Additional costs of providing financial support for children who had lost jobs
- Reluctance to claim expenses because of worsened parish finances

## Benefits

- Reduced outgoings

## Potential issues

- Which kinds of churches have seen their finances hit most and how does this affect their clergy?
- Statistical analysis suggests that SSMS (potential loss of employed/self-employed income) and women (more likely to rely on spousal income) have not been disproportionately impacted financially.

## 4. Physical, mental and relational wellbeing

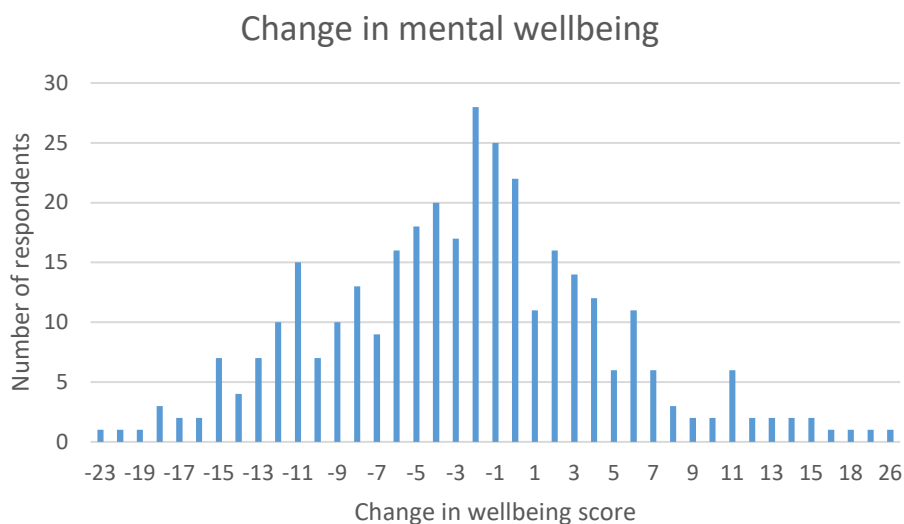
### Physical wellbeing

About three fifths (62%) of clergy reported that their overall health was about the same as before the pandemic, with a sixth reporting it had improved (16%). Nearly a quarter of clergy (23%) reported that their health was worse than before the pandemic. The York St John study reported higher proportions for both improvement and decline in physical health, at 24% and 30% respectively.<sup>2</sup> In the Living Ministry data, no specific groups seemed more likely to report a drop in physical health than other groups when looking at the role, age, gender, remuneration, household structure or tradition of clergy.

### Mental wellbeing

However, over two fifths of clergy (42%) reported their mental wellbeing was worse than before the pandemic. A small number of clergy (8%) reported an improvement in their mental wellbeing, and half (50%) reported it to be the same as before. These figures are similar to those in the York St John study, where 13% reported better and 37% worse mental health.

339 clergy answered 14 questions comprising the Warwick Edinburgh Mental Wellbeing Scale (WEMWBS)<sup>3</sup> in both Waves 2 and 3. The average score for the group as a whole dropped from 50 to 47.5 (see figure below).



<sup>2</sup> A. Village & L. Francis, 'The Church of England in the 2021 Lockdown: Clergy and Churches,' <https://www.yorks.ac.uk/media/content-assets/document-directory/documents/CoE-Covid-19--Church-21-Churches-and-Clergy-report.pdf>

<sup>3</sup> Mental wellbeing was assessed using the Warwick Edinburgh Mental Wellbeing Scale. Whilst there is no cut-off score that can indicate good or poor mental wellbeing, scores below 40 are generally thought to indicate low wellbeing. The average for the UK population is 51.



There are no figures for the change in wellbeing for the population in England, but a study of a sample of the adult population in Wales<sup>4</sup> suggested a drop of around 6 points between the summer of 2019 and summer of 2020. A UK-wide study led by the Mental Health Foundation using different measures has found that overall mental health improved leading up to February 2021, with 42% of the population reporting anxiety or worry, compared with 49% in late July 2020 and 62% in March 2020.<sup>5</sup> Although these studies differ in approach and population, taken together they suggest that overall levels of mental health may have fallen sharply in the first part of 2020 and then recovered slightly by the time of the Wave 3 Living Ministry survey, indicating that the drop for clergy could be consistent with that of the population in general. Other vocational occupations may have been harder hit (although again measures vary). A NASUWT survey reported in April 2021 found that 79% of teachers felt their job had adversely affected their mental health and 48% their physical health in the previous 12 months, with 27% needing to seek medical help as a result.<sup>6</sup> Similarly, a poll of 211 social workers by the Social Workers' Benevolent Trust, reported in June 2021, found that 70% had worried about their mental health during the course of the pandemic, 20% had taken time off due to stress, and 24% had sought professional help for their mental health.<sup>7</sup>

Further analysis of the Living Ministry data sought to explore whether any particular groups of clergy had been particularly affected. Whilst role, remuneration, household structure, age, gender and tradition did not seem to influence the change in mental wellbeing, how spiritually demanding clergy felt their role to be did. Those who were most likely to report a drop in mental wellbeing were most likely to strongly agree that their role was spiritually demanding.

### Relational wellbeing

Over two fifths of clergy (44%) reported feeling more isolated in their ministry, and nearly half (46%) reported no difference. A small number of clergy (9%) reported feeling less isolated in their ministry. The change in score did not seem to be influenced by whether clergy lived alone or with others, with both groups on average reporting a similar drop in score. The Mental Health Foundation study suggests that clergy are not alone in experiencing higher than previous levels of isolation, with 26% of respondents reporting feelings of loneliness (10% in March 2020 and 21% in July 2021).

<sup>4</sup> [Frontiers | The Influence of the COVID-19 Pandemic on Mental Well-Being and Psychological Distress: Impact Upon a Single Country | Psychiatry \(frontiersin.org\)](https://www.frontiersin.org/articles/10.3389/fpsyg.2020.01121/full)

<sup>5</sup> Coronavirus: Mental Health in the Pandemic, <https://www.mentalhealth.org.uk/our-work/research/coronavirus-mental-health-pandemic>

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.nasuwt.org.uk/article-listing/covid-impacts-on-teacher-mental-health-exposed.html>

<sup>7</sup> <https://www.communitycare.co.uk/2021/06/07/three-quarters-social-workers-emotionally-mentally-exhausted-back-covid-19-finds-survey/>



Responses to the open text questions included:

### Challenges

- Mental health symptoms: anxiety, depression, PTSD, burnout, indecision, less focus, 'up and down', reduced emotional capacity, reduced resilience, reduced motivation, reduced imagination, lack of hope, 'shrivelled', 'muted', tearful, overwhelmed
- Physical health symptoms: exhaustion, reduced energy, fatigue, 'drained', 'depleted', surviving day to day, insomnia, headaches
- Impact of bereavement, including effects of restrictions (separation, inability to grieve)
- Inability to get away from the parish or take meaningful leave
- Uncertainty re national/church announcements
- Exacerbation of existing issues (depression, bipolar, PTSD, stress- or desk-related physical issues etc.); cumulative or knock-on effects (reduction in treatment (cancer), shielding, unable to minister in same way)
- Less healthy lifestyle: less exercise, eating more, excessive desk-based work and online meetings
- Contracted covid (18 respondents), including long-term effects
- Isolation: social/personal (especially people living alone), collegial/congregational, lack of holidays
- Concerns about opening up: expectations, pressures, increased busyness, current tiredness, fear people won't return to church

### Benefits

- Healthier lifestyle: fewer meetings (easier online), fewer congregational demands, more exercise, less busyness, more rest, more intentional re physical/mental wellbeing, fewer bugs, homeworking good for some health conditions
- Increased support from and depth of relationship with colleagues/chapter
- Increased connection (online resources/webinars/meetings, ability to connect with people further away)

### Potential issues

- Inadequate time and provision for processing, lament and recovery before and during re-opening.
- Widely varying experiences.
- Need for counselling: is there adequate provision in all dioceses?



## 5. Role

While role only seemed to be a particular factor for the change in vocational wellbeing (not physical, mental, financial or relational wellbeing), the open-text responses did reveal some specific challenges for those in different contexts:

### Curates

#### Challenges

- Difficulties forming relationships (for those who started their curacy during lockdown)
- Difficulties building and maintaining the relationship with the training incumbent
- Additional stress of TI leaving during the pandemic
- Anxiety about the future of the church nationally and finding a post after curacy

#### Potential issues

- Impact on curates experiencing significant change during the pandemic (starting/ending curacy; training incumbent leaving).

### Chaplains (health/care sectors)

#### Challenges

- Changes to working practices, increased hours
- Highly challenging ministry
- Risk of catching covid
- Isolation from parish ministry

#### Potential issues

- Need for recovery time and provision.

### Families

#### Challenges

- Additional strain of home-schooling and supporting children emotionally
- Supporting elderly parents (including bereavement)
- Strained family/marital relationships

#### Benefits

- More time with family and closer relationships developed

#### Potential issues

- Mental health issues for children and young people in clergy families.
- Marital strain and breakdown.