

Living Ministry Research Briefings

Full report: *Covenant, Calling and Crisis: Autonomy, Accountability and Wellbeing among Church of England Clergy* www.churchofengland.org/living-ministry

Autonomy and Accountability

The primary basis of clergy working relationships is **covenant** rather than contract, characterised by mutuality and grace rather than by transaction and penalty. However, this is vulnerable to exploitation both by clergy (if they prioritise autonomy over accountability) and of clergy (if accountability is privileged over autonomy in excessive demands and/or self-sacrifice).

In Self-Determination Theory, **autonomy** is defined as when ‘one’s behaviours are self-endorsed, or congruent with one’s authentic interests and values.’¹ To be acting autonomously, therefore, a person must be acting in line with their interests and values. The highest levels of autonomy are reached when a person is intrinsically motivated, e.g. doing something because they find it fulfilling or enjoyable. Extrinsic motivations fall into four categories. Least autonomous are ‘external regulation’ or control, usually through rewards and punishments, and ‘introjected regulation,’ where a person acts, for example, out of guilt, fear of disapproval, or to avoid shame. However, extrinsic motivations can contribute to autonomy if the person identifies with them to some extent (‘identified regulation’) or, more strongly, if they are integrated with the person’s other beliefs and values (‘integrated regulation’).

Clergy have multiple, sometimes conflicting, **accountability** relationships, each comprising four key elements: expectations (of appropriate conduct and performance); information (that describes performance or conduct); discussion (assessment of this information, often with further questioning); and consequences/sanctions (formal or informal, and positive or negative).²

Key observations

- **Vocational fulfilment is intrinsic to a healthy sense of autonomy and to wellbeing.** Clergy wellbeing during the pandemic depended partly on how able they were to act in line with their values (i.e. autonomously), e.g. regarding opening churches and ways of working.
- Clergy seek **accountability that supports them to act in line with their values** and, therefore, to fulfil their vocation.
- **Parish clergy feel primarily accountable to God and their parishioners**, rather than to their bishop or diocese. They feel called by God but make little mention of being called by the church.

¹ R. Ryan & E. Deci (2018), *Self-Determination Theory: Basic Psychological Needs in Motivation, Development, and Wellness*, New York: The Guilford Press, p.10.

² G.J. Brandsma & T. Schillemans (2013), ‘The Accountability Cube: Measuring Accountability,’ *Journal of Public Administration Research and Theory*, 23(4): 953–975.



- **Collaboration** is a common value among clergy, so receiving input and being accountable can be integral parts of acting autonomously.
- **Trust is important to accountability**, especially in the context of covenantal relationships. Clergy feel more accountable to those with whom they are in good relationship, including those they respect, share values with, and feel supported by.
- Three spheres of accountability were identified:
 - **Formal:** legal responsibilities, finances, attendance, MDR etc. Quantifiable, structured, easily reported or monitored indicators; draws on a contractual framework. Clear accountability structures but low vocational engagement.
 - **Felt:** relationally and vocationally rooted; primarily God and parishioners (also senior clergy). Prayer, theological reflection, informal feedback, discernment, fulfilment of calling; day-to-day ministry. Highly vocational but accountability is unclear.
 - **Chosen:** intentionally set up or engaged with; reflecting on practice. Peer groups, spiritual direction, pastoral supervision, mentors, coaches etc. Put in place to provide accountability in areas of ministry most central to vocation but often unclear expectations and consequences and often squeezed out under time pressure.

Challenges

- Although most clergy have places to reflect on their ministry, many **struggle to measure their work performance**, leaving them unsure whether they are doing a good job.
- Attention can be diverted **from vocationally fulfilling activities towards more measurable, formal tasks**, with detrimental implications for wellbeing.
- Clergy may feel they have little accountability and high autonomy in **day-to-day ministry**, and high accountability and little autonomy with regard to **strategic and administrative expectations**.
- When responsibility for decision-making is moved to parish or incumbent level, clergy can feel **ill-equipped to make decisions** or **caught between conflicting accountabilities**.

Suggestions for good practice

- **Three gazes** are important to accountability: **God** (prayer and theological reflection), **self** (mind, body, soul) and **other** (spiritual direction, senior clergy, MDR, supervision, congregations etc.), brought together in constructive conversation. Difficulties arise from absence of an external gaze or lack of trust.
- **Supportive supervision**, whether supporting fixed goals and measures or, ideally, working with **co-created, qualitative and regularly reviewed objectives**.
- Ongoing consideration of how far clergy **fulfil their calling and vocation** can contribute to wellbeing.
- **Ministerial Development Reviews** that help clergy reflect on their performance, consider their wellbeing and vocational fulfilment, and are followed up with action.
- Clergy need both **to maintain critical distance from and to accept challenge and criticism**.
- When clergy are given **responsibility to make decisions**, this should be accompanied as far as possible with sufficient information to guide them and assurance that they will be supported in their decisions.

