Wellbeing: Lessons from the Covid-19 Pandemic

This analysis draws on a quantitative survey in March 2021 and qualitative interviews in Autumn 2021. While the context was the second year of the covid-19 pandemic, most of the underlying wellbeing challenges pre-existed the pandemic and were exacerbated by it. Both quantitative and qualitative analyses indicate varied experiences of the pandemic between participants and through time, but an overall decline in wellbeing since the previous wave of research in 2019.

Key observations

- **Mental health and relationships** were hardest hit, with 42% of clergy reporting their mental wellbeing to be worse and 44% feeling more isolated in their ministry than before the pandemic.
- In general, **incumbents not yet looking to retirement struggled more** than curates who, with less responsibility and less vocational disruption, were able to recover more easily.
- Experiences of **lockdown** were split between those who enjoyed a slower pace of life and ministry and those who worked harder than usual, including some hospital chaplains.
- The third, winter lockdown was the hardest due to **cumulative exhaustion** and **responsibility for decisions** regarding public safety. For similar reasons, along with increased workload, many clergy found the Autumn 2021, post-lockdown period even more difficult.
- Some clergy distinguished between **negative experiences of the diocesan institution** (including lack of voice in structures and suspicion of decision-making processes) and **positive personal support and care from senior clergy**. Perceived support from bishops varied. Gestures of care were only valued in the context of a wider and sustained supportive environment.
- **Colleagues**, including deanery chapter, local clergy, staff teams and other groups and networks were variously deeply supportive, non-supportive or absent. Some chaplains struggled to find support in local churches.
- **Family** relationships were emphasised, increasing in priority for some through the pandemic. Challenges included forced distance; supporting children at home or university; self-isolation with older or more vulnerable relatives; family health issues; and work boundaries during lockdown. Family also provided valuable support for many and some benefitted from spending more time with family. Some single clergy struggled with being distanced from **friends**, who were also important.
- **Spirituality sustains wellbeing** during difficult times, as does vocational fulfilment, although this may come at physical, mental and/or relational cost.
- **Contributors to vocational fulfilment** included pastoral ministry and funerals (for some); chaplaincy (along with immense challenges); valuing of previously deprioritised skills; becoming
more established in ordained ministry; and support from senior clergy in discerning and settling into new roles.

Challenges

- Contributing factors to **workload** in parish ministry included moving online, heightened pastoral demands and reduced participation by congregations.
- Other challenges of **lockdown** included impact on fitness; levels of pressure; distance from family; income concerns for some self-supporting ministers; and inability to leave one’s home or parish.
- Distance from **congregations** aggravated isolation although some found opportunities for deeper relationship. Some congregation members were highly supportive while others withdrew. Several clergy experienced challenges navigating widely contrasting perspectives regarding covid-19.
- For some, greater **diocesan uncertainty and turmoil** has meant less reliable support, breakdown in trust and relationship, and increased distance from the diocesan centre. For others, this period has led to greater participation (desired or undesired).
- **Challenges to spiritual wellbeing** included disrupted ministry; disrupted spiritual rhythms (e.g. retreats); and exhaustion during lockdown and/or reopening.
- **Vocational discouragements** included restrictions to ministerial practice; high workload; declining attendance; barriers for chaplains to parochial ministry; and concerns over the state of the wider church, e.g. jobs, cuts, restructuring, pastoral reorganisation, and leading parishes through change. Some expressed a sense of institutional anxiety impacting vocational wellbeing.

Suggestions for diocesan good practice

- Clergy need to know they are known, understood and valued. Take time to **listen** to them on a regular basis and understand their experiences.
- Invest in **spiritual wellbeing** and **vocational fulfilment**, both of which help sustain wellbeing. Listen to how clergy would like to participate in the life of the wider church.
- Avoid token gestures and consider how to develop a **culture of support and wellbeing**.
- Support clergy by providing **technical and other expertise** where possible.
- Always consider clergy wellbeing when developing **strategy or new initiatives**.
- Consider how to **combat isolation** among clergy, e.g. through peer groups, social events, buddy systems, and supporting rural/area deans and chapters.
- Provide access to **safe, non-judgemental spaces of support** with people who listen and understand the pressures of ordained ministry.
- Ensure support for **curates covering vacancies**.
- Ensure meaningful participation with **open communication channels**. When conducting consultations, always make clear how feedback is acted upon.