

## Living Ministry Research Briefings

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

# 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.

