

Living Ministry Research Briefings

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Holding Things Together: Church of England Clergy in Changing Times

'Trust that God will Work His Purposes Out': Wellbeing and Change Management in Ordained Ministry

Post-Pandemic Clergy Wellbeing

This analysis draws on a quantitative survey in March 2023 and qualitative interviews in October 2023 to January 2024. It looks back through previous waves of Living Ministry to track wellbeing before, during and after the covid-19 pandemic. In general, after a drop during the pandemic, there was some recovery in mental, physical and vocational wellbeing. However, financial wellbeing decreased since 2021 and relationship wellbeing (measured in terms of isolation) continued to fall.

Key observations

- **Improvements to mental wellbeing** were mainly within the 2006, 2011 and 2015 cohorts. Many of the 2016 cohort moved into first incumbency during this period, which also affects wellbeing.
- Certain groups report lower of wellbeing than others, including:
 - **Stipendiary incumbents:** low levels of mental health and widespread financial difficulties associated partly with the cost-of-living crisis.
 - **Long-term sick or disabled** respondents: anxiety about their financial situation.
 - Respondents **under the age of 40:** emotional exhaustion and depersonalisation (two dimensions of burnout) and financial struggles.
 - Those who **attended state schools**, those of **global majority heritage**, and those in **poor health:** less able to be fully themselves in their main ministry role.
- **Diocesan participation** can bring connection, information, voice, prospects and support, but also increased workload and tension with parishioners. Clergy can feel **connected with or disconnected from their diocese** based on the quality of individual relationships, diocesan communications, and their (dis)alignment with predominant diocesan theology or strategy.
- The **culture and process of appointments to diocesan roles** may lead a wide range of people to feel either affirmed or marginalised when they are invited or not invited to take up a role, with implications for their vocational wellbeing.
- It is important for clergy to be able to talk about their lives holistically. While crises are generally met with good diocesan support, **longer term issues** such as care for relatives and menopause are less openly discussed.
- **Physical health, mental health and ministry** interact in different ways, including: anxiety about health challenges; anxiety or frustration resulting from capacity to work being affected by ill-health; increased wellbeing from accepting limits to capacity caused by ill-health; addressing specific physical or mental challenges resulting in wider wellbeing and ministry benefits.



- **Support from other people** is crucial to wellbeing. This includes family, friends, networks, third-sector organisations, senior clergy, diocesan officers, local and deanery colleagues and staff, and ‘wise guides’ such as spiritual directors, pastoral supervisors, counsellors, mentors and coaches.

Challenges

- Key factors affecting **financial wellbeing** include: household reliance on a single stipend (noting that this is not usually an active choice); additional expenses such as costs relating to disability, supporting wider family, and higher bills; and expectations about standards of living. Inadequate finances have multiple implications for wellbeing, including mental stress, pressure on close relationships, and reduced time and energy. Many find current stipend levels insufficient.
- Relational challenges related to **Living in Love and Faith** (LLF) include: managing this within parishes; concerns regarding bishops who hold a different view; and tensions between colleagues. Within some deaneries clergy feel marginalised or disengaged, while in others clergy are able to work well across differences, suggesting that underlying tensions may have pre-existed LLF.
- **Workload** continues to be one of the biggest challenges to wellbeing, including difficulties taking time off, meeting expectations, and managing multiple vocational and administrative pressures. Time taken off work and in prayer fell back to pre-pandemic levels.
- The move into **first incumbency**, with its increased responsibility, pressure and isolation, continues to prove challenging.
- Other challenges to **physical, mental and relationship wellbeing** include: pressure on parish finances, leading to deeper feelings of isolation; high numbers of vacancies; and long-term implications of the pandemic.

Suggestions for diocesan good practice

- Consider how to support clergy to take **adequate time away from work**.
- Pay attention to how **younger clergy** are faring.
- Ensure support and connection is in place for **first incumbents**. Consider providing a structured programme/network of support beyond an induction event; ensure offers of mentoring are followed through swiftly; consider inviting new incumbents to participate in the wider life of the diocese.
- Consider how to ensure clergy **feel comfortable sharing challenges** they face, including, for example, age-related capacity levels, family circumstances and menopausal issues.
- Consider what **support networks and relationships** are available to your clergy, including those that help them to reflect on their situation and practice and to relate well across difference.
- Consider how you can use your **diocesan communications** to keep clergy informed, connected and engaged.

