

## The Pressure on Ministry

*Ministry is changing. We need to adapt and we need to be faithful.*

### Introduction

This paper is the final version of a document that has been through several stages in a short time. This final version is a reworking of the paper issued to clergy in January as a consultation document and it takes careful account of the responses the clergy made, mainly through their Area Deans. I am grateful for those responses, all of which have been carefully noted. Not all the ideas within them have been incorporated into the final text, since one of the requests was for a shorter sharper paper, but all the points that were made have been heard.

There have been substantial amendments to the text and the material has been substantially reordered.

The very helpful theological reflection by Canon David Hoyle, which was the way in to the earlier draft, having served that purpose has been moved to an appendix. It is retained there, as a free-standing contribution, for it is worth returning to more than once, even when the immediate and practical issues have been resolved and the rest of the paper rendered redundant.

The practical proposals for action by the Bishop and his staff and the Bishop's Council have been simplified. They provide an agenda for those concerned for delivery over the coming months.

A new and revised text of *Bishop's Occasional Paper 005* on Clergy Holidays and Days Off has been produced, responding to comments from the clergy and this constitutes the first appendix.

One or two clergy suggested that the draft was a "top down document". I do not believe that it is so. For one thing it is a response to remarks by the clergy at the October conference. Secondly it does lay emphasis on the fact that much depends on the clergy themselves in creating a better life/work balance, though it does not attempt to be too directive about how they should achieve that. Thirdly the very specific proposals that it does make are not a series of actions laid down for the clergy to follow, but a series of actions that the Bishop's staff will themselves take in response to the pressures points the clergy have identified.

My hope is that this paper will help us to go on working away at the challenges that face us, never losing sight of the joys of ministry, nor of the call to sacrificial living, but ready to identify pressure points and to see the need for change.

### The issues that challenge us

Most clergy know that there is a problem in relation to the pressures on ordained ministry and they know that it is serious. If they don't experience it themselves, they know it to be affecting their colleagues in the diocese.

Yvonne Warren wrote about feelings of stress, anxiety and despair amongst the clergy six years ago, in *The Cracked Pot*. Two years later, Andrew Clitherow rather dramatically reached for Iris Murdoch to find words to do justice to the anguish endured by some of our priests:

*Spinning like a top, whirling away into invisibility... kitten limbed and crucified by centrifugal force.<sup>1</sup>*

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<sup>1</sup> Iris Murdoch, *The Black Prince*; quoted in Andrew Clitherow, *Renewing Faith in the Ordained Ministry* (SPCK 2004) p.13.

Defining what exactly the problem is has proved a bit more difficult.

We need to be wary of generalisations. Whilst many clergy struggle with stress and expectations they feel they cannot meet, others simply would not recognise the situation or the feelings they describe. In fact, one of the most subtle challenges we are dealing with is the fact that the work of the clergy is becoming increasingly specialised and particular. Working in different contexts, and in different ways, priests feel more isolated from one another and less well supported by the broad generalisations offered on training courses and in diocesan gatherings.

At the diocesan Conference in October 2007 clergy identified a range of challenges and pressures. The issues that were identified were various and complex, but some themes emerged:

1. The workload is big and seems to be growing and clergy are not always equipped to delegate and collaborate to meet this.
2. Resources are not equally distributed; some clergy have less help than others.
3. The role of the priest is changing; there is general agreement that it is becoming more 'managerial'. Some dislike the change; others accept it but do not feel properly equipped to meet the new expectations.
4. There is a feeling that too much is being left to individual initiative, big challenges need big solutions and the clergy wonder what the national and diocesan strategy is.
5. Some clergy do not feel supported - who cares for the carers?
6. There is a widespread feeling that clergy families are being made to suffer too.
7. The impact that the new Clergy Discipline Measure will make is still being assessed, but for some it does not feel like good news.

### **Managing Expectation**

The concerns expressed by our clergy are echoed in national reports and in the contemporary literature about priesthood. Falling numbers of clergy are spread more thinly and many priests now find themselves working in multi-parish benefices. The old relationship between a priest and a particular place is now collapsing (or has collapsed) in both urban and rural communities. Social change and the marginalisation of the church have radically altered the role the clergy play in the parish. Losing one community, clergy also face the loss of collegiality. Some find themselves working with curates, NSMs and OLMs, whilst others are very isolated. Some of our clergy chapters are now very small. There is an urgent need to ensure that clergy can have a good experience of collegiality.

Those that do work together find that colleagues arrive differently trained and with very different ideas about good practice; there is no single clerical culture any more. Emerging forms of ordained ministry and the proper encouragement of lay ministry are unquestionably things we should celebrate, but they have both required the clergy to adapt to changing expectations and push many into a managerial framework, which they never anticipated. Many clergy are working in a context in which there is little or no good practice to inherit. Many women find themselves in a pioneering role and so too do NSMs, and House for Duty clergy. Indeed no single paper can adequately address all the issues relating to different types of ministry and there will need to be more reflection on particular vocations and roles. Clergy couples face particular challenges.

Relationships change, bishops and archdeacons are closer at hand in a smaller clerical college that uses e-mail and expects to meet in conference. Yet, at the same time, the growing workload of the senior staff, the impact of the Clergy Discipline Measure and the processes of episcopal review make the contacts sometimes appear more formal. The new Discipline Measure and proposals to introduce Clergy Terms of Service are generating a good deal of uncertainty. There is a lack of clarity about what kind of change will follow in their wake but there is a concern that they will bring with them a more 'managerial' and possibly less sympathetic culture.

The clergy are faced with a real challenge in meeting changing and sometimes conflicting expectations. Older parishioners long for something we seem to have lost and want the vicar to visit, the un-churched need something radical, and secular organisations ask about chaplaincy. Financial pressure, the

burden of sustaining so many ancient buildings in a diocese very rich indeed in medieval heritage and the worry of trying to build congregations from what is sometimes a very small base are heavy burdens. Increasingly the clergy respond to the pressure by adopting a professional style. They think (and they are encouraged to think) in terms of targets, competencies and professional conduct. Ministry is now thought of as a series of tasks and the list of those tasks grows. The introduction of *Clergy Terms of Service* will be another step on this road. Increasingly, clergy see themselves as having particular responsibilities. PCCs, who are asked to be realistic about the costs of paying for their parish priest, are also thinking in similar terms and are quicker to criticise, if they think a priest does not match up to what is expected. We are entering a contract culture in which priesthood is measured as a service to be delivered. In this respect clergy are, of course, facing later than most a shift that many people have experienced in their working life. Expectations are hard to manage.

We should also note that we work in a world in which many others encounter feelings of stress and pressure. We minister to people who over-work and we worry when we ask them to attend meetings and share our burdens. This is not our problem alone and it may be that it is not simply our theology of ministry that needs some attention, but our theology of being human. We may need to challenge assumptions about life and work.

Facing the challenge of shifting and sometimes contradictory expectations, members of the Church in PCCs, in Deanery, and Diocesan Synods, in the Bishop's Staff, and elsewhere need to take their responsibilities seriously. We must not set up our clergy for failure.

### **Some Practical Steps**

There are steps that we can take as a diocese and as individual ministers to reduce the pressures and to make our lives and our ministries more fruitful. Some of these steps are already being taken, though knowledge of some of them needs to be spread more widely. Others require a fresh initiative by the Bishop and his staff, or the Bishop's Council or by individuals.

There is a slight concern that this may not be the time to be addressing this issue. It could be argued that we should wait and see what *Clergy Terms of Service* brings. In truth though, the problem already feels urgent for some and it will be some time before we see what *Clergy Terms of Service* look like and it will be even longer before its impact is fully felt.

Below are set out some initiatives and some better practice that can be brought about by the Bishops, the Bishop's Council, the Director of Ministry and the Bishop's Staff. But there is an equal responsibility on the local Church - the priest working with his/her lay leaders - to address the issues from their perspective and with their local insights. There is also a responsibility on every priest, working with his/her spiritual director and other support they have put in place, to find a healthy way of working that prevents the pressures of ministry from becoming too great.

#### **1. The Bishop will ask the Bishop's Council to**

- bring into a joined-up series of policies and a coherent strategy the many proposals, relating to ministry provision, deaneries organisation, church buildings and other matters that are already being explored across the diocese;
- approve and share widely a diocesan policy on the use of church buildings;
- approve clearer guidelines on how to create united parishes where a parish is unable to meet objective criteria of a viable parish.

#### **2. The Bishop, working with his staff team, will**

- ensure that there are realistic working agreements in place for associate and assistant clergy;

- help incumbent status clergy to think through workload issues and will put in place necessary support;
- work through the appropriate Archdeacon and Area Dean to ensure that parishes in vacancy face issues about what may reasonably be asked of a new incumbent;
- work with the Human Resources Manager to draw up and make available a resource document on Clergy Well-being and Support;
- ensure that the contents of a revised *Bishop's Occasional Paper 005, Clergy Holidays and Time Off*, and of *Bishop's Occasional Paper 008, Clergy Illness*, are widely known and understood by Churchwardens;
- issue a *Bishop's Occasional Paper* on protecting the domestic and family life of the clergy and on issues that relate to the parsonage house;
- review the effectiveness of the Diocesan Counselling Service;
- encourage the clergy to take advantage of the wide provision for regular medical check ups;
- ensure that mentors are appointed to all first incumbents;
- carry out a review of inequalities in deployment of clergy deployment across the diocese;
- ensure further briefing for clergy on the Clergy Discipline Measure.
- Continue to give priority to encouraging the clergy in holding on to daily disciplines of prayer and worship to nurture their spiritual health.

**3. The Director of Ministry, working with his colleagues, will**

- ensure that work consultancy is made widely available to the clergy;
- explore ways of extending the number of sabbaticals available to clergy;
- develop further Leadership Courses for clergy;
- ensure that reviewers during episcopal and ministerial raise as a serious matter issues relating to clergy holidays and time off.

**+Michael Gloucester:**  
*April 2008*

## Appendix I

### *Bishop's Occasional Paper 005 Revised*

## Clergy Holidays and Time Off

*These guidelines are intended for full time stipendiary clergy. Clergy working to different working agreements should interpret them in accordance with their own circumstances.*

The question of clergy holidays and time off is a complex one. Most clergy work very hard, putting in more hours in the week than is probably good for their health and family life and often take less holiday than recommended. On the other hand, because there is no employer with whom to negotiate dates and because there is an overlap between life and ministry, it is possible for clergy to slide unknowingly into indiscipline in relation to their work.

Time off for leisure, recreation, family and rest is important, both in terms of holiday and of a weekly day off.

Clergy should try to take 42 days holiday (in addition to public holidays) each year and should record what they take. There is a question about how many days holiday they have taken in the last year in the Episcopal Review form. Those 42 days should include their main holiday and any break they may take after Christmas and Easter or at half terms. Ideally 6 of those days will be Sundays. Parishes need to learn that services patterns may need to be varied to allow their priest proper holiday time. 4 Sundays off should be an absolute minimum.

Parishes should ensure that their priest can have adequate holiday, including Sundays, by one of the following means:

- The use of retired clergy and readers available in the deanery;
- The use of extended communion after careful preparation as set out in the Bishop's Guidelines;
- A modification to the usual service patterns for the weeks of the priest's holidays.

Obviously long term planning is advisable. Sometimes (by no means always) the lack of available cover is through a failure to seek it far enough ahead.

Making the necessary arrangements for holidays is something on which clergy and churchwardens should work together. It is not exclusively the responsibility of the priest.

Stipendiary clergy are expected to work a six-day week, which is part of why they have quite generous holiday provision. There should always be one clear day off in the week and, if at all possible, a second night off in the week, ideally the evening preceding the day off. But clergy should aim to work only two of the three "sessions" in a day and have the third free. It is impossible to reduce the ministry of a priest to how many sessions they work in a week, but, when a priest has on several occasions in a week worked morning, afternoon and evening, they are entitled to take the whole or part of a second day off to ensure sufficient time for family and for rest and leisure.

Guidelines can, of course, be ignored, but clergy and others need to know that guidelines are there to create a sense of healthy expectation. If clergy are not taking their holiday entitlement and not taking a proper day off, they are over-working, putting themselves at risk and also setting a bad example to others.

A number of clergy who work from a parsonage house nevertheless own their own property to which they withdraw for time off. It is certainly permissible for them to stay one night a week at that property, before or after their day off, and it may be possible to stay there two nights, at the beginning and end of the day off, but they should not stay there over-night away from the parsonage house at other times.

## Appendix 2

### The Nature of Ministry

Priests have the privilege of being stewards in the household of God. In changing circumstances, they need to renew their understanding of their calling and work out that stewardship in confidence and hope.

Years ago, Monica Furlong described her expectations of the clergy in a passage often quoted, rather wistfully, by clergy who feel harassed and overworked:

*I am clear about what I want from the clergy. I want them to be people who dare because they are secure enough in the value of what they are doing, to have time to read, to sit and think, and who face the emptiness and possible depression which often attack people when they do not keep the surface of their mind occupied ... I want them to be people who can sit still without feeling guilty, and from whom I can learn some kind of tranquility in a society which has almost lost the art.*

She was making an important point, and it was not just that the clergy ought to find time to sit and think. The heart of what she had to say was that she hoped for priests who might be sufficiently *secure* and *confident* in what they do to face all the challenges of ministry and still be able to use their time appropriately. In a culture where a changing of role and mounting anxiety is generating overwork it is the loss of the confidence in the nature and purpose of ministry that is doing us the greatest harm.

We need to be clear. Ministry in the church is a privilege, but it is also costly. All God's people are called to follow Christ and that means going the way of the cross. The ordained ministry has the peculiar and particular task of living in one community whilst always having eyes trained on another. Priests, ministers of word and sacrament, proclaim the coming of the Kingdom. They beckon people towards a different future. In the words of Herbert McCabe, 'their job is the subversion of the world through the preaching of the gospel'. They are restless for change and that will never make them entirely welcome. Strengthening his disciples for the task, Jesus reminded them that the world would hate them. There is an element in ministry that is sacrificial.

Deeply conscious of their own failings, and administering the rites of absolution and reconciliation to others, priests know that we all fall short of the hope that is in us. To be a priest is not to be a model of success it is rather to be a model of hope, patience, and redemption. Priests are reminded in the ordination service that *They are to set the example of the Good Shepherd always before them as the pattern of their calling.* For Jesus himself ministry was costly and did not look successful. In the tricky business of managing expectations, there is a very important lesson for priests to learn themselves and then teach to others. We should expect to give our very best to God, but we should not always expect to succeed. Constantly preoccupied with the attempt to represent sinful human beings to the holiness of God, and the holiness of God to sinful human beings, we are bound to struggle. It is not surprising that, in one of the best, recent books on ministry, Kenneth Mason describes priesthood as 'the impossible task'. That is not a counsel of despair, but a reminder that it is inevitable that the work will often feel difficult and never feel complete. It is permission to find it difficult and still persist.

So, the ordination service reminds clergy that this task is not one that depends on them. It is not hard work that is the solution to all our problems (though hard work is inevitable), but the constant remembrance that we live under grace. It is God, and not the clergy, who will bring in the Kingdom. Nurturing our spiritual life through prayer, worship and attention to the scriptures then becomes the central task; *You cannot bear the weight of this calling in your own strength, but only by the grace and power of God. Pray therefore that your heart may daily be enlarged and your understanding of the Scriptures enlightened.* Put another way, prayer is the one task that is never truly finished. We should hand back to God all our other jobs, from time to time, in order to take proper rest. We are only supposed to pray constantly, not work constantly.

And it is in that focus on what is truly important that there is another crucial lesson for us. The problem with the expectations we face is that they are so many and various. To manage our time and all the pressures to care for God's people we all need to know what our proper focus should be. Different priests will work out their ministry in different places, in very different ways, but at the heart of all ministry there is a very simple call to a life of holiness. Henry Liddon suggested that people have a right to *look in the lives of the preachers for something that shall stand for the mark of the Nails*. Richard Baxter writing for very different clergy at a different time kept returning to a central premise, *See that the work of saving grace be thoroughly wrought in your own souls. Take heed to yourselves, lest you be void of that saving grace of God which you offer to others...*<sup>2</sup> For clergy the task is to gather a community into the promise of the Kingdom and holiness is essential.

And however costly the work, there is delight to be had in being given the opportunity to deal daily with all that is most precious to God and joy to be found in the hope of the Kingdom. The introduction to the ordination service reminds clergy that part of the task is to share with the Bishop in the oversight of the Church, delighting in its beauty and rejoicing in its well-being. When Gregory Nazianzus reflected on the work of the ministry he put it like this,

*the scope of our art is to provide the soul with wings, to rescue it from the world and give it to God, and to watch over that which is in His image, if it abides, to take it by the hand, if it is in danger, or restore it, if ruined, to make Christ to dwell in the heart by the Spirit: and, in short, to deify, and bestow heavenly bliss upon one who belongs to the heavenly host.*<sup>3</sup>

Richard Hooker puts it like this

*The power of the ministry of GOD, translateth out of darkness into glory; it raiseth man from the earth, and bringeth GOD Himself from heaven; by blessing visible elements it maketh them invisible graces; it giveth daily the Holy Ghost; it hath to dispose of that flesh which was given for the life of the world, and that blood which was poured out to redeem souls... O wretched blindness, if we admire not so great power; more wretched if we consider it aright, and, notwithstanding, imagine that any but GOD can bestow it!*<sup>4</sup>

**David Hoyle**

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<sup>2</sup> Richard Baxter, *The Reformed Pastor* I.1.1 p. 53

<sup>3</sup> Nazianzus, *Oration 2*, 22.

<sup>4</sup> Richard Hooker, *Laws of Ecclesiastical Polity* V.77

