

## THEOLOGICAL REFLECTION ON CLERGY WELLBEING

**A draft discussion paper prepared  
by the Clergy Wellbeing Research Group**

### **Background to this draft discussion paper**

The Ely Diocese Clergy Wellbeing Survey in 2016 was undertaken as part of an ongoing programme of work to understand the nature of clergy wellbeing and to promote the good health of both clergy and congregations within the diocese. The Survey was commissioned by the Bishop's Clergy Wellbeing Forum and carried out by the Clergy Wellbeing Research Group (Sue Wyatt, Lynda Taylor and Jenny Gage). The report of the Survey – in both full and summary forms – was distributed to all Diocesan clergy and is freely available on the Clergy Wellbeing page of the Ely Diocesan website.

The findings of the 2016 Survey highlighted the potential benefit of undertaking some intentional theological reflection in the area of clergy wellbeing. The specific recommendation in the final Survey Report (see Table 4 of the Report) reads as follows: *Engage in some serious theological reflection in the overlapping areas of 'clergy flourishing' and 'church flourishing', and the potential to develop a covenantal relationship.*

After completing the Survey, the Research Group embarked on a process of theological reflection with a view to drafting a paper for wider discussion, initially by the Wellbeing Forum. This process began with a short retreat in May 2017 to pray together and to review some potential sources of input in order to discern what the content of a written theological reflection might contain.

An initial draft paper was presented to the Bishop's Clergy Wellbeing Forum for discussion at their meeting in November 2017. Following feedback from members of the Forum, the paper was revised and refined over several months in an attempt to provide a framework for further discussion and reflection among a wider group of those with a concern for clergy and congregational wellbeing. The final version of the paper is presented here for wider review and discussion.

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# **‘With joy and not sighing...’**

## **A theological reflection on clergy wellbeing and its impact on the wider church**

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### **References**

## 1 Introduction

This paper grew out of the findings from a Diocesan Survey into Clergy Wellbeing conducted in the Diocese of Ely in mid-2016. The Survey was undertaken as part of an ongoing programme of work to understand the nature of clergy wellbeing and to promote the good health of both clergy and congregations within the diocese.

The 2016 Survey Report was distributed to all Diocesan clergy and is freely available on the Ely Diocesan website in both full and summary forms (<http://www.elydiocese.org/ministry-and-training/clergy/clergy-wellbeing/clergy-wellbeing-survey>).

Among other findings, the report highlighted the value of undertaking some intentional theological reflection in the area of clergy wellbeing as follows: *Engage in some serious theological reflection in the overlapping areas of 'clergy flourishing' and 'church flourishing', and the potential to develop a covenantal relationship.*

The document that follows has emerged out of a process of prayer, reflection and discussion. Our aim was **to think theologically about who we are as priests and how we flourish as clergy so that we, with our congregations, may work effectively with God in building his kingdom on earth.**

## 2 Intended audience and purpose

In sharing our theological reflection through this paper, we hope and pray that it will provide accessible and helpful input for discussion of clergy wellbeing, and its impact on the wider church, in a variety of different contexts, at national, regional and local levels. We anticipate that, initially, the main audience for our work will be the Bishop's Staff and Senior Management at Diocesan level, as well as our fellow clergy and ministers across the Ely Diocese and those who have responsibility in this region for the training and formation of ordinands (e.g. in the theological colleges).

Beyond that, we hope that some of the content of this paper will be of interest and relevance to our lay colleagues, especially Churchwardens and PCCs. At a later stage, there may be some merit in extracting key sections from this paper into a shorter and more focused document specifically designed for PCCs and congregations.

Finally, we offer this paper to the wider church, regionally and nationally, given that clergy wellbeing is now firmly on the agenda of most dioceses in the Church of England as well as of General Synod. We hope and pray that our reflection will be a positive contribution to what is clearly a salient and timely debate in the life of God's church.

In terms of the sequencing of content, the next part of this document – Section 3 – explores biblical insights and imperatives upon which we have found it helpful to draw, from both Old and New Testament writings, in order to try and ensure that our theology and our praxis are biblically grounded.

Section 4 then explores and develops issues of clergy identity and wellbeing, drawing upon some of the work that has been undertaken in recent years with regard to the professional conduct of clergy, clergy wellbeing, clergy health, etc. We have drawn on these resources in an attempt to develop a theological frame of reference for our own thinking and action within the Ely Diocese.

A final section – Section 5, Conclusions – briefly draws together some key threads and suggests a possible direction for the future.

### 3 Starting from a Biblical Perspective

It is easy when thinking about wellbeing in church leadership to go immediately to the practical. But before looking into the practicality of what might promote (or prevent) flourishing for church leaders and their congregations, it is helpful to consider what theological insights and underpinnings Scripture offers us as a framework of reference for our thinking and our action.

#### 3.1 Insights from the New Testament

The four gospels, the book of Acts and many of the pastoral letters of the New Testament provide us with valuable pointers concerning the nature of church leadership and the impact of that leadership upon those who experience it.

Three particular New Testament texts may help us here:

**(i) Luke 10: 1** *‘After this the Lord appointed seventy others and sent them on ahead of him in pairs to every town and place where he himself intended to go.’*

It seems self-evident from the Gospels and from Acts that we are not called to minister alone. Jesus himself was accompanied by his disciples throughout most of his ministry and the gospels record how, after a period of ‘training and formation’, Jesus sent them out in pairs to do the type of preaching, teaching and healing they had seen Jesus himself doing (Mark 6:7-13; Luke 9:1-6). As Jesus attracts more disciples and followers, both men and women, so the ministry – ‘his Father’s work’ – is enabled to grow and spread, and Luke records a much larger number being sent out in pairs. In the Acts of the Apostles we see how this practice of ministering in partnership was continued by the early church (Acts 13:2; 15:27, 39-40; 17:14; 19:22). Ministry partnerships, such as those between Peter and John (Acts 3:1; 8:17), Paul and Barnabas (Acts 13:2-3) and Priscilla and Aquila (Acts 18:2, 18-19, 26) are well documented in the New Testament.

As Christians, we worship the triune God who is a partnership or a community in her/his/their own right. The Church Fathers, such as Gregory of Nazianzus, Maximus Confessor and John of Damascus (Fiddes, 2000, Moltmann, 1981) adopted the term ‘perichoresis’ to communicate the sense of interrelationship and reciprocal dynamism that exists between the three persons of the Trinity – Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Trinitarian images and symbols help to express visually something of this dynamic and reciprocal interrelationship.



Modern theologians, such as Jurgen Moltmann (1981), Miroslav Volf (1998) and Paul Fiddes (2000), have extended this original usage to cover other interpersonal relationships. Since human beings are made in the image of God, what can be known of God's activity and God's presence in human affairs can inform a Christian understanding of an adequate anthropology of human social relations where mutual giving and receiving are how we realise communion with one other. For us, mutual perichoresis is not possible as it is with God, but through the indwelling of the Holy Spirit we can become one in Christ and so participate in the divine perichoresis (Fiddes, 2000).

All the Gospels show us that Jesus called people to accompany him in ministry. He commissioned them to go out alongside him into all sorts of differing contexts, or to go ahead of him and prepare the way for his arrival – but almost always as part of a partnership. In the book of Acts, we see over and over again how the early Christians travelled and established churches *together* (see earlier references). In John 17 v21, Jesus compares the oneness of the intimacy (or 'indwelling') he experiences in relationship to his father with the oneness of the fellowship of his church – a remarkable analogy. As his disciples, we are called to continue Jesus' ministry - 'his father's work' – but we are not called to live or minister in isolation, and a sense of isolation, whether spiritual, physical or emotional can have a severe impact on our wellbeing.

**(ii) 1 Cor 12.26** *'If one member suffers, all suffer together with it; if one member is honoured, all rejoice together with it.'*

In the context of his lengthy letter to the early Christian congregation at Corinth in Greece, the apostle Paul is at pains not just to affirm the corporate nature of being followers of Christ, but also to stress the sovereign purpose of God in creating diversity in Christ's body on earth. The church, just like the human body, relies upon difference to work effectively as a whole, but with the different parts of the body united in one whole. Christians in the body of Christ are mutually dependent in the exercise of their distinctive gifts.

The interrelationship and reciprocal dynamism of the church, Christ's body, mirrors that of the Triune God, the community of the Trinity (as outlined above), such that what impacts one impacts all, without regard for status or position. Church leaders are no more and no less important than any other member of the body of Christ, but their wellbeing clearly affects others because of the nature of the interrelationship between clergy and congregation/wider church. In his letters the apostle Paul often refers to his 'partners' in the gospel (e.g. Titus 2 Cor. 8:23, Philemon 1:17), those who share his ministry of evangelism and churchbuilding. For this reason, church leaders have a responsibility to care for themselves, as they care for others, and to be supported in this endeavour by other members of the body, in order that *all* may flourish.



All adults carry prime responsibility for their own well-being and the cautionary advice of Bernard of Clairvaux is relevant for anyone who occupies a particular leadership role within a Christian group: *'It is laid down that we should love others as we love ourselves. But were you to love others as you have hitherto loved yourself, I for one would not wish to be entrusted to your care. Learn first to love yourself, then you can love me.'*

**(iii) Heb 13.17** *'Obey your leaders and submit to them, for they are keeping watch over your souls and will give an account. Let them do so with joy and not with sighing, for that would be harmful to you.'*

Having stressed the absolute supremacy and sufficiency of Jesus Christ as revealer and as mediator of God's grace, the writer of Hebrews closes his letter to Jewish converts of the day by exhorting them to a wide range of good and loving practices, largely concerned with human relationships: relationships with strangers, with those in prison, between marriage partners, and with church leaders.

The wellbeing of leaders in the church is clearly a whole church matter; congregational care for leaders matters, as the Hebrews passage suggests. God's desire is that clergy and all church leaders should thrive in their vocation, because such thriving, or not, has an impact on congregations and the wider church. The role of 'the shepherd' should be characterised by a sense of joy and fulfilment as they pastor their flock, rather than a sense of sighing and frustration.



For this reason, we need to explore how to encourage congregations and the wider church to realise their potential for improving the flourishing of their clergy and other leaders. Later on, this paper will discuss the role of 'structured conversations' as one means of achieving this.

### 3.2 Insights from the Old Testament

There are many examples in the Old Testament which offer important insights regarding leadership fatigue and the nature of support that may be needed for flourishing to take place. We have chosen three illustrative examples.

**(i) Exod 17:12** *'When Moses' hands grew tired, they took a stone and put it under him and he sat on it. Aaron and Hur held his hands up – one on one side, one on the other – so that his hands remained steady until sunset. So Joshua overcame the Amalekite army with the sword.'*

The life and experience of Moses as described in the book of Exodus provide us with rich material on the subject of what it means to be the leader of a community of people under God. In this particular incident in Exodus 17, Moses, who is God's appointed leader of his people, Israel, holds up his hands and his staff as a symbol of appeal to God for his help and enabling in the battle being waged by Joshua against the Amalekites. In the previous chapters in Exodus, we have seen Moses raise his hands and his staff on many occasions without any need of assistance from others, e.g. to summon the plagues of hail, darkness and locusts across Egypt (Exod 9 and 10), to part the waters of the Red Sea (Exod 14:15-22), and to strike the rock at Massah and Meribah so that the people have fresh water to drink (Exod 17:5-6). And yet, on this occasion, Moses clearly requires the support of others. On his own he cannot sustain the strength needed for God's power to prevail so that the battle is won.

**(ii) Exod 18** *'When his father-in-law saw all that Moses was doing ... he said: What is this you are doing for the people? ... The work is too heavy for you; you cannot handle it alone. Listen now to me and I will give you some advice and may God be with you ... Select capable men from all the people ... and appoint them as officials... That will make your load lighter because they will share it with you. If you do this and God so commands, you will be able to stand the strain and all these people will go home satisfied.'*

It is perhaps no surprise that immediately after victory in the battle against the Amalekites, Moses is visited by his father-in-law, Jethro. Jethro, himself a priest, notices the increasing demands that are being placed on Moses in his leadership role and he is wise enough to offer his son-in-law good advice about how to discern those tasks that he should prioritise for himself from those tasks he can delegate to others. He advises Moses to carefully identify and select well-qualified individuals to share with him in the burden of leading the people. Jethro is perceptive enough to recognise that Moses' personal wellbeing and the wellbeing of the community as a whole depend upon: (i) Moses being willing to share some of the leadership demands he faces; and (ii) others from within that community being willing to collaborate with him in these. The alternative, warns Jethro, risks leading to unbearable pressure and

extreme exhaustion for Moses, not to mention frustration and dissatisfaction among the people.

Moses sensibly follows his father-in-law's advice, appointing capable and trustworthy individuals to serve as 'judges' and to share with him the responsibility of leading God's people. The difficult cases they brought to Moses, but the simple ones they decided themselves (18:26). The point here is that Moses did not, from now on, seek to do everything himself – an approach which can be the unspoken and/or uncritiqued expectation of both a leader and the people they lead. The wisdom of Jethro's advice, and Moses' response to it, contributed to the wellbeing of all people in that particular situation, and it surely offers a helpful model for congregational life in our own times.

Another highly relevant example when considering clergy wellbeing is the account of the difficulties faced by the prophet Elijah, and their impact on him, in 1 Kings 19.

**(iii) 1 Kings 19** *'Elijah was afraid and ran for his life. When he came to Beersheba in Judah, he left his servant there, while he himself went a day's journey into the desert. He came to a broom tree, sat down under it and prayed that he might die. "I have had enough, Lord," he said. "Take my life. I am no better than my ancestors." Then he lay down under the tree and fell asleep.'*

Elijah's experience offers a picture of what Jethro perhaps feared would happen to Moses, and it gives us a graphic illustration of what 'burnout' can look like for a spiritual leader. Elijah is in deep trouble, to the extent that his life is under threat from Jezebel. But how can this be? After all, Elijah is a spiritual giant of his time and has enjoyed a successful ministry to date. Others will expect him to deal with this situation – not crumble beneath the strain. His behaviour displays some of the classic signs of depression and 'burnout'. Elijah isolates himself from others – even from his servant companion – and he retreats to a solitary place, physically, mentally and emotionally, away from the source of danger, but also away from any obvious source of support. He has come to the end of the road and he wants it all to end. He has had enough and he wants to die. Elijah perceives himself as a failure, no longer of any use to God.

What follows this passage in 1 Kings 19 is a poignant description of how God graciously sends his servants to enable Elijah's gradual restoration through refreshing sleep, and through the provision of food and drink and safe shelter. Only then, only when he is physically strong enough, does the necessary process of talking and reflection begin which will ultimately lead to Elijah's recommissioning for the task to which God has called him, a task for which he will no longer be alone but instead have the support of 7000 others as well as a dedicated apprentice-successor, Elisha.

### **3.3 Acknowledging the biblical imperative**

We have selected only a small number of texts from the Old and New Testaments to support the case we are making for the biblical imperative to prioritise the wellbeing of church leaders, so that they, their congregations and the wider church might flourish. Among others, the pastoral letters of Peter, and those addressed to Timothy, have much to say about personal relationships, including aspects relevant to leadership roles, suggesting that matters of whole-church wellbeing were a recurring issue for the early Christian congregations and were not easily addressed.

The wellbeing of clergy and congregations remains an issue in our own time and context as the topic of clergy wellbeing assumes a higher profile in various quarters (e.g. General Synod, at Diocesan level, in ordination training) and as efforts are made, both nationally and locally, to improve levels of support available to clergy (e.g. the Ministry Development Review process, the Sheldon Hub).

## **4 Exploring and developing what we mean by clergy wellbeing**

In this section, we explore and develop what we mean by clergy wellbeing drawing on some of the current literature and initiatives in this area. Specific documentation and information sources which we have found helpful include:

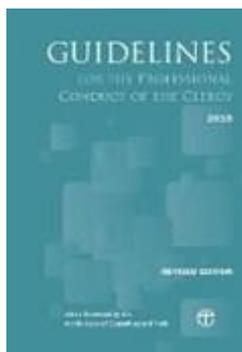
- *Guidelines for the Professional Conduct of the Clergy* (2015)
- *Clergy Wellbeing – HCSC Report for the General Synod House of Clergy (HC(17)1)* (2017)
- *The Clergy Health Initiative*, and the work of David Keck (Keck, 2014) and Duke University Divinity School

We have drawn on these resources as a means of developing a theological frame of reference for future thinking and action within the Ely Diocese. This framework is presented in Sections 4.1 – 4.5 below and it seeks to take account of:

- key pragmatic and theological considerations
- the importance of vocation and profession
- notions of relationship and covenant
- a theology of priesthood that underpins clergy wellbeing
- the role of agape and virtue

### **4.1 Pragmatic and theological considerations**

The 2015 edition of the Church of England's *Guidelines for the Professional Conduct of the Clergy* is a revised and extended version of the first edition, published in 2003 by the Convocations of the Clergy. While the document is not a formal code of conduct, it offers a principled and practical reflection on the words of the Ordinal addressed to clergy at the time of their ordination to the ministry of the Church. It draws on the wide experience of clergy on General Synod, with contributions from the House of Bishops and the House of Laity.



The *Guidelines* are offered as a means of sharing the fruits of accrued wisdom and experience with colleagues, especially those beginning a new life as ordained ministers, and with all who are engaged in the mission and ministry of the Church. They are designed ‘to help the clergy discover and experience how great is the freedom to which they are called and the joy that the gift of an ordained life brings.’ (p 22) This aspiration resonates strongly with the title of this paper ‘With joy not sighing...’ highlighting a desire that ministry, whether ordained or lay, should be a source of joy rather than frustration.

While all sections of the *Guidelines* have some direct or indirect relevance to the issue of clergy wellbeing, the final two sections on *Wellbeing* (Section 13, pp 19-20) and *Care for the Carers* (Section 14, pp 20-22) speak to the importance of having a good understanding of how responsibility for whole-church wellbeing is **shared** between local clergy and congregations (as well as with the wider diocesan authorities). The content of these sections resonates, implicitly if not explicitly, with some of the biblical imperatives we explored earlier in Section 3 above, e.g. shared authority, mutual flourishing.

Towards the end, the *Guidelines* publication includes *A Theological Reflection* (pp 23-31), written by the Very Rev Dr Francis Bridger. The author articulates the purpose of his theological reflection as twofold: firstly, to rehearse the **pragmatic reasons** why professional guidelines exist; and secondly, to set out a number of **theological principles** which inform them. Bridger observes that the pragmatics are straightforward in the light of contemporary society and current social attitudes towards public institutions and professional behaviour:

*‘The simple truth is that a great deal more public concern now exists about the integrity of previously-respected professions: no longer are people willing to give professionals the benefit of the doubt merely because they are professionals. They are properly subject to scrutiny and criticism in a way that was not true a generation ago.’* (p 24)

However, Bridger goes on to make the astute observation that pragmatic reasons in themselves are not enough: *‘They are a necessary – but not sufficient – justification for self-regulation by the Church if it is to be prepared for the sort of scrutiny presupposed by contemporary society. It is here that a ‘theology of professional responsibility’ becomes central.’* (p 24)

Bridger’s call for a ‘theology of professional responsibility’ chimes well with our own desire to develop a ‘theology of clergy and whole-church wellbeing’ rather than simply a set of **practical**

guidelines for clergy and/or congregational wellbeing based on primarily **pragmatic** considerations (e.g. to prevent clergy ‘burnout’, or to avoid church conflict). Pragmatic considerations are clearly important, as demonstrated by the Old Testament narratives of Moses and his father-in-law, Jethro, and of Elijah the prophet, and as the pastoral advice of Paul to the early church at Corinth suggests. But perhaps even more important is the underlying theological principle and practice instituted by Jesus himself according to which effective and sustainable mission and ministry required the commissioning of a team, sent out in pairs to continue his Father’s work in partnership, an approach which was emulated by the early church.

Within two years of the publication of the 2015 *Guidelines*, a working group reporting to the House of Clergy Standing Committee (HCSC) delivered a report entitled *Clergy Wellbeing*. During 2016 the HCSC, in consultation with the National Chairs of Houses of Clergy, had begun to consider whether it was time for the wider Church to explore ‘*what duties it owes to its ordained ministers, in terms of assuring that the clergy have proper support, guidance, practical help, and assistance in the conduct of their ministries*’. The report contained a specific proposal for review and discussion by the House of Clergy in February 2017. Some of the discussion and the proposals within the report are directly relevant to our own reflections on a theology of whole-church wellbeing and so will be explored here.

The *Clergy Wellbeing* report begins from the premise that the wellbeing of the clergy is crucial to the health of the Church at worship, in mission and in pastoral care, echoing the concerns of both the apostle Paul and the writer to the Hebrews as highlighted in Section 3 above. Following conversations and surveys with clergy, the report identified a number of specific issues and complex concerns associated with perceptions of clergy wellbeing, namely:

- *Self-management* (importance of promoting and encouraging strategies and patterns of selfcare)
- *Preventative education and training* (e.g. in resilience)
- *Supervision, life coaching and reflective practice* (especially opportunities to reflect upon one’s ministry)
- *Stress, counselling and mental health* (provision of appropriate services as necessary)
- *Occupational health* (promoting sustainable working life patterns)
- *Spiritual and theological resourcing* (access to spiritual direction/prayer accompaniment, plus opportunity to study)
- *Role of the ordained minister* (amidst changing society, contexts, styles and expectations)
- *Emerging priorities and perceptions in church life* (*Renewal and Reform* as a major thrust of missional energy for coming years, tensions in multiple clergy roles)
- *Clericalism* (lay vs ordained distinctions – a culture of unrealistic/unhelpful expectation and self-fulfilling prophecy of disappointment)
- *Particular groups of ministers and their needs* (SSMs, retired, bishops, archdeacons, chaplains, etc)
- *Clergy families and their needs* (spouses, civil partners, children, aged parents)

The HCSC report highlighted considerable variability in approach and provision across the Church of England, as well as some under-addressed topics. It also helpfully noted other national bodies or agencies currently undertaking initiatives in the area of clergy wellbeing,

including the Church of England's Ministry Division, St Luke's Healthcare and the Community of Martha and Mary at Sheldon in Devon.

As a small working group reflecting on clergy wellbeing matters at regional level within the Ely Diocese, we are encouraged by the synergy we have observed with the findings in this report and in other work across the country. It is good to see evidence at national, regional and local level that issues of clergy wellbeing and flourishing are now attracting systematic attention and dedicated resources (cf. Sheldon's new online hub, [sheldonthub.org](http://sheldonthub.org)).

However, it seems that the thrust of the *Clergy Wellbeing* report, and the work behind it, is primarily grounded in pragmatic or practical rather than theological considerations. Furthermore, its focus is largely confined to clergypersons and those closest to them, with little reference to the wider community of which the clergyperson is a member. This perhaps reflects the original remit of the working group, i.e. to consider *'what duties [the wider Church] owes to its ordained ministers, in terms of assuring that the clergy have proper support, guidance, practical help, and assistance in the conduct of their ministries'*. However, as previously discussed, pragmatic and practical considerations are in themselves insufficient; theological principles need to be added into the mix. The HCSC report helpfully makes reference to two theological concepts that could be worth exploring more fully when developing a theology of wellbeing: (i) the concept of 'life in all its fullness' which is touched upon in the Hebrews passage; and (ii) the concept of 'sacrifice' which echoes the texts in Exodus and 1 Kings.

An evolving and sustaining theology of ministry needs to recognise the importance of wellbeing and human flourishing ('life in all its fullness') as part of what it means to be a created, baptised and called person in relationship with God. The associated notion of 'vocation' is explored further in Section 4.2 below. To an exploration of what 'life in all its fullness' looks like, we might wish to add a deeper understanding of what it means to be called into being and 'made in the image of God' (Genesis 1 vv 26-27 and 2 vv 7-9), filled with the breath of God's life and commissioned to partner with God and with one another in sustaining the life of a world God has created in love.

In addition, the language of sacrifice (and self-sacrifice) may need to be understood more carefully and in a more nuanced way than has sometimes been the case. Both Moses and Elijah had to learn the challenging lesson that it cannot all depend upon us in isolation, however much we are willing or feel expected to give of ourselves. The HCSC report makes the following point: *'Sacrifice is always given, never to be expected, and it is important that the personal sacrifice of vocational living is understood and lived healthily, without ever denying the humanity and proper needs of the individual minister.'* (p 3)

The work being undertaken in the Divinity Faculty of Duke University, North Carolina, as part of their 'Clergy Health Initiative' programme: [www.divinity.duke.edu/initiative/clergy-health-initiative](http://www.divinity.duke.edu/initiative/clergy-health-initiative), stands in marked contrast to the more pragmatic and practical thrust of the HCSC report on Clergy Wellbeing. The 10-year 'Clergy Health Initiative' programme to assess the health and wellbeing of United Methodist Clergy in North Carolina seeks to be both theologically based and highly practical. According to the website, the programme *'underscores the theological reasons for caring for oneself and offers strategies to help pastors develop holistic health practices.'* This resonates quite strongly with the themes emerging from the accounts in Exodus 18 and 1 Kings 17. One of the resources the programme offers is

a ‘a six-session series for United Methodist staff-parish relations committees that ties the committee’s responsibilities back to their spiritual beginnings’. Further exploration of the theological dimension of this six-session series may be instructive since the experience in the North American context of combining theology and praxis may be helpful in informing future UK-based initiatives.

#### 4.2 The importance of vocation and profession

In his appendix to the 2015 *Guidelines*, Bridger takes the principle of ‘vocation’ as the starting point for his discussion of professionalism, noting that ordained ministry is first and foremost a calling that originates with the purposes of God, is intuited by the individual, and is then discerned by the Church. *‘The sense that they are engaged in a vocation rather than a career is fundamental to clergy identity and self-understanding.’* (p 25)

It is perhaps important here to remind ourselves that the principle of vocation is one that can be shared by both priest **and** people. As the Ordinal asserts, God **calls** his people to follow Christ, and forms us into a royal priesthood and holy nation so that we might declare his wonderful deeds to the world. The Church of England’s Baptism service makes this clear in its ‘Commission’ section: *‘Those who are baptised are called to worship and serve God...’*

In his written reflection for the Diocese of Ely Clergy Day in 2015, entitled *Profession, Covenant, Agape and Virtue*, Bishop David Thomson reminded us of the importance of reclaiming the root meaning of the word ‘profession’: *‘...we as Christians profess our identity as those who having wandered far from God turn and are found by him, declare Christ as Lord, are baptised and clothed in him, and receive his promise of eternal life. So to be a professed Christian is to remember and seek to live out our baptism.’* (See also Romans 10 vv 9-10, Hebrews 4 v 14 and 10 v 23.)

Sadly, for far too long the notion of ‘vocation’ within the church was reserved for those who were ordained priest or committed themselves to a religious life. Happily, the term has been reclaimed in recent years and has been extended to all who become aware of the call on their lives to worship and serve God and their fellow human beings. As Bridger astutely observes, such service is only possible through **relationship**. He goes on: *‘This, in turn, requires the teasing out of a cluster of concepts that shape the notions of relationship and relationality, and at the centre of this cluster lies the idea of covenant.’* (p 26)

#### 4.3 Notions of relationship and covenant

Bridger describes the concept of **covenant** as being the ‘wellspring’ from which a theology of professional responsibility flows: *‘Its significance can be demonstrated by contrasting it with the concept that governs secular models of professional relationship, namely that of contract.’* (p 26)

The biblical model of covenant – exemplified most powerfully by the covenant relationship established between God and his people in the Old Testament – is based upon grace. Bridger explains as follows: *‘The covenant members are bound together not by a set of legal requirements, but by the relational nexus of gracious initiatives followed by thankful response.’*

*Covenant goes further than the carefully defined obligations contained within a contract to the need for further actions that might be required by love.’ (p 26)*

We might wish to adopt a similar perspective when exploring a theology of wellbeing. The concept of a covenant relationship between priest and people, clergy and congregation, can provide the basis according to which **all** have the opportunity to exercise their ministry and flourish as members of the same body, for the blessing of **all** and to the glory of God.

The overall purpose of the 2017 House of Clergy Standing Committee (HCSC) report referred to above was not simply to provide a broad-brush picture of the current state of play concerning Anglican clergy wellbeing, but rather to begin to explore the feasibility of drafting *A Covenant for Clergy Wellbeing*. This would sit alongside the existing *Guidelines for the Professional Conduct of the Clergy*, as a commitment to some form of ‘minimum standards’ in the field of clergy wellbeing. The proposal for a Covenant draws explicitly on the content of Bridger’s theological reflection in the *Guidelines*, but it also echoes the Military Covenant which exists in respect of the Armed Forces and which has been refined in recent years by Parliament.

The tone of any such Covenant proposal is perceived to be vitally important. The HCSC advocates an approach that invites **the whole Church** to own the issue of the wellbeing of its clergy, combined with a culture of mature self-reflection. Equally important is that any Covenant that may be devised is owned by the **whole people of God**, not simply its clergy, bishops and dioceses, or its national institutions.<sup>1</sup>

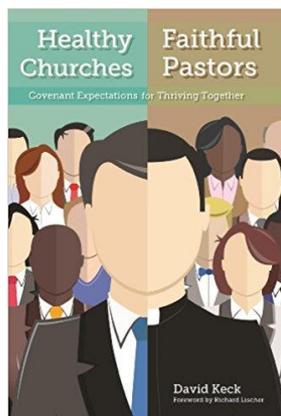
Two particular aspects mentioned in the HCSC report as meriting greater attention are: (1) challenges to clergy wellbeing faced by those ministering in rural contexts; and (2) the resourcing of parish churches and PCCs as potential partners in caring for the clergy. Both of these aspects are directly relevant to our own work at Diocesan level given that much of the ministry in Ely Diocese takes place in rural, multi-parish contexts. A particular strand of our own current wellbeing strategy involves actively exploring the role of PCCs and congregations and identifying ways to equip them in this role. Newly drafted materials to enable structured conversations with PCC and other church members on matters of clergy wellbeing have recently been trialled in several parts of the Diocese of Ely.

Similar work in the US context is reported in a book by Dr David Keck, a Presbyterian pastor and college chaplain, entitled *Healthy Churches, Faithful Pastors: Covenant Expectations for Thriving Together*. His 2014 book is the fruit of a research project entitled: ‘How Congregations can nurture the well-lived pastoral life?’ and it draws in part on typescripts from Clergy Health Initiative focus group interviews conducted in 2008. Through multiple conversations with both clergy and congregants, it became clear to Keck that essential to the flourishing of clergy and church is a sense of shared expectations along with a shared understanding of both the ordained role and what it is to be church. It also became clear that such expectations and understandings are rarely talked about in church communities. Interestingly, this seems to resonate with a 2017 UK publication by Elizabeth Jordan in the

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<sup>1</sup> We recognise that in this paper that we can really only speak to and for the Church of England. Strictly speaking, the whole people of God of course includes those from many non-Anglican denominations and Christian traditions.

Grove booklet series entitled *Honest Conversations in Churches: Exploring Expectations Together*.



Keck lists ten key principles that he considers to be foundational if pastors and congregations are to thrive together. One of these is **the principle of covenant**, echoing the earlier notions propounded by both Bridger and the HCSC. Keck writes as follows (p18 onwards):

*'Healthy churches have covenants with their pastors, not contracts. Mutual regard for the other's welfare, not mutual self-interest, is the basis for this relationship.'*

*'... in a covenant the two parties are deeply concerned about the welfare of each other. There is trust and shared goals, a common purpose. ...Covenants bring out the best in us as we come to realize the delights of loving and being loved. We willingly accept sacrifices when necessary because we recognize that covenantal relationships are deeply meaningful and life-giving.'*

Keck's research suggests that:

*'everyone wants the same thing – to thrive together in healthy, mutually beneficial relationships that allow the whole community to flourish'. (p3)*

He also comments

*'Churches do not always know how to cultivate a pastor, how to develop a good one in the first place, or how to make a good pastor better.'*

*'Many, probably most, congregants have little idea of what it is really like to be a pastor'*

The format of Keck's book is designed to allow it to be used as a discussion handbook by churches. The setting for this is that of US churches of several denominations, and some of the discussion relates more specifically to the US context and to a non-conformist context. However, the principles that promote the flourishing of both clergy and churches are theologically rooted and, it could be argued, have a universal application. It seems appropriate to find a way within the Diocese of Ely to provide a format for discussion involving both clergy and congregations in order to introduce concepts of covenant, shared purpose, mutual care, etc. and to allow a healthy voicing of expectations and understanding of the ordained role. The trialling of an approach to conducting shared conversations with

PCCs and other members of a congregation over the past 9 months has been one step in this journey.

#### **4.4 A theology of priesthood that underpins clergy wellbeing**

The covenantal model is profoundly Christological but the concept of a covenant relationship between clergy and congregation need not be taken as promoting or reinforcing an understanding of the ordained priest as standing in place of Christ.

During the 19<sup>th</sup> century the Oxford Movement re-asserted the understanding that the Church of England priest derived his authority not from the state but from the apostles, through the succession of laying on of hands from apostle to bishop, and from bishop to bishop (Hanson, 1969). When, in 1896, Pope Leo XIII declared Anglican orders to be null and void, Bishop Moberly wrote a response to clarify the question ‘What is Christian priesthood?’ (Moberly, 1969). Moberly stressed that that ordained ministry was more than simply a matter of good management and confirmed that priests were authorised not by the state, or by the Pope, but by Christ himself via his apostles. He advocated the view that the priest represents the laity, but is also special and set apart from the laity. His was a very influential voice over the decades that followed, culminating in the well-known quotation from Bishop Ramsey: “We are called, near to Jesus and with Jesus and in Jesus, *to be with God with the people on our heart.*” (Ramsey, 1985: 14).

Moberly’s and Ramsey’s perspectives proved influential throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Though carefully expressed, they risked endorsing and encouraging a view of the priest as directly standing in place of Christ, *in persona Christi*, reflecting the longstanding Roman Catholic belief that the priest acts in the person of Christ as he takes, blesses, breaks and gives bread and wine. We acknowledge that this understanding is shared by some Anglican priests today and we respect that view as part of the breadth of the Church of England.

It may be worth noting, however, that such an understanding of priesthood risks suggesting that the priest is separate from the rest of the community in a way that could imply a lack of humility or a sense of spiritual superiority. This in turn potentially leads to ‘clericalism’, not just in local churches and their context, but within the church hierarchy and in wider society. The 2015 HCSC report describes clericalism as ‘a culture of unrealistic/unhelpful expectation and self-fulfilling prophecy of disappointment’, and contributing to frustration, conflict and burnout at the local level.

More worryingly, perhaps, a culture of clericalism can mean that questions raised about the attitudes and behaviour of individual clergy are simply not taken seriously because such questions are ‘unthinkable’ where a priest is concerned. This reality has been demonstrated convincingly as evidence has emerged in recent months from the IICSA enquiries into historical child abuse and safeguarding failures within the Church of England over the past half century.

In a 2018 article in the Church Times, Professor Linda Woodhead writes of the ‘crazy idealisation of the clergy’ which leads to a culture of clericalism. She explains that in the church we simply do not expect priests to have feet of clay or to break the rules – to lie or to be unfaithful in marriage, to defraud their congregations, to sexually abuse children and young people, etc. It could be argued that such ‘idealisation’ of the priest is a subtle form of

idolatry which potentially allows the malign exercise of power by individual clergy, whether in the form of spiritual or sexual or some other abuse, to go unquestioned and thus unchecked by those in authority. Idealisation of the clergy has led to the voices of the powerless and of victims being ignored or discounted. Furthermore, the evidence shows that the Church of England and its hierarchy have often been more concerned with pragmatic matters of institutional reputation and damage limitation rather than with moral or theological matters of social justice and godly accountability. The IICSA enquiries have revealed the extent to which a sense of healthy mutual accountability to God and to one another has been grossly lacking in an institution which has inherited and maintained a priestly hierarchy. A priest is clearly not separate to the body of Christ when we consider the impact of abuse on those affected. As we know, the problem is not confined to the Church of England.

Several years before the IICSA findings entered the public consciousness, Bridger observed that the pragmatics are now straightforward: *The simple truth is that a great deal more public concern now exists about the integrity of previously-respected professions: no longer are people willing to give professionals the benefit of the doubt merely because they are professionals. They are properly subject to scrutiny and criticism in a way that was not true a generation ago.*' (p 24). If the theological understanding of priesthood has contributed to such disastrous moral failure, then it needs rethinking.

A trinitarian understanding of priesthood provides a way forward. If we model the church, and our ministry, on the Trinity, which of course includes Christ, then we bring in the relationality and *koinonia* of the Trinity. Ordained and lay colleagues are free to move in and out of roles, whether leading or supporting, in a fluid and dynamic way which has the potential to enable the ministry of the **whole** people of God, just as we saw in the Gospel passages and in the book of Acts. This also ensures that our theology of priesthood mitigates against identifying a single person, the incumbent priest, as the sole locus for ministry. This in turn helps to protect against the spiritual idealisation of the individual while still acknowledging the 'set-apartness' that attaches to the ordained person. Perhaps the paired nature of so much ministry in the early Christian church (see Section 3 above) was a form of protection against spiritual isolation and idealisation?

A trinitarian understanding of priesthood emphasises mutuality, community and interdependence, with the priest's role being one of pastoral oversight, *episkope*, and enabling people through trusting them, reflecting some of the principles that we noted in the Old Testament texts from Exodus and 1 Kings. This is surely good for the church generally and for the priest in particular. Rooted in the covenant love of God, the covenantal ministry of clergy **and** people mirrors that of Christ himself who gave himself freely, and graciously, for the sake of the world (Philippians 2 vv 6-7).

#### **4.5 The role of agape and virtue**

In his discussion of a theology of professional responsibility, Bridger explores the contribution of two additional concepts that shape notions of relationship and relationality – the concepts of *agape* and *virtue*. These additional concepts will not be drawn on further here, but they clearly have direct relevance to the outworking of any covenant relationship. In pastoral terms, for example, *agape* does not have a contractual nature but is '*a way of knowing the other, the ground of care for the other.*' (Robinson, 2001). Pastoral relationships are thus shaped by *agape*. We might imagine that this was the experience in Exodus of Jethro and

Moses and of Moses, Aaron and Hur. Agape and virtue may also have been the motivation underpinning the exhortation of the writer to the Hebrews in Chapter 13. Similarly, professional behaviour is shaped by character; all Christian believers (not just ministers) are exhorted to deliberately cultivate a Christ-like character and virtues by seeking to embody the fruit of the Spirit (Galatians 5 vv22-23).

## 5 Concluding comments

What has become clear to us is that the time is ripe for serious consideration of the theology that should underpin practical action and initiatives concerned with clergy/whole-church wellbeing and flourishing. This was a specific recommendation arising out of the 2016 Ely Diocese Clergy Wellbeing Survey (see Table 4 of the report). This draft paper seeks to begin that process in our own context.

In the early part of this paper, we articulated our own personal reflections in this area, underpinned by biblical study, seeking to draw out the importance of genuinely collaborative ministry and of corporate flourishing. Drawing on various documents and initiatives of national/international significance whose contents validate and confirm many of our own research findings and intuitions, we have explored and developed a framework for clergy wellbeing under some key subheadings in an attempt to develop a theological frame of reference for future thinking and action within the Ely Diocese. There are undoubtedly other sources which could be consulted and whose insights should enhance our thinking and reflection further.

The Ely Diocesan Strategy 2025 carries the title *People Fully Alive: A strategy for growth*. We seek to embed our work on clergy wellbeing within that longer-term initiative, in line with the imperative to ‘grow God’s church by finding disciples and nurturing leaders’ (p 5), as well as the lever of change reflecting the development of healthy churches and leaders (p 10).

Although the work on clergy wellbeing may have originated in a concern over growing levels of stress and ill-health among ordained clergy, the focus has broadened out more positively in recent years to understand what enables both clergy and congregation to thrive and flourish, and to discern what characterises a healthy church; hence our appeal to the scriptural phrase ‘with joy and not sighing...’ as a title for this reflection in an attempt to characterise *whole-church* wellbeing.

Like the authors of the HCSC report, and in synergy with David Keck and his colleagues, we believe the concept of a covenant relationship between church leaders and congregation could provide an accessible and meaningful frame of reference within which all have the opportunity to exercise their ministry and flourish as members of the same body, for the blessing of all and to the glory of God. Such a view acknowledges the interrelationship and reciprocal dynamism of the church body as a whole which in turn reflects the ‘perichoresis’ of the Triune God – a relationship in which what impacts one impacts all.

The account in Chapter 13 of John’s gospel of Jesus washing the feet of his disciples is often presented as a model for ‘servant leadership and ministry’. This passage is rightly understood as a Christ-inspired and Christ-mandated pattern for those who are in leadership roles to emulate among those who look up to them as leaders: ‘If I then, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another’s feet. For I have given you an example,

*that you also should do just as I have done to you.*' (John 13 vv 14-15). The account in John's gospel presents a moving illustration of interrelationship and reciprocal dynamism. But there is another passage located much earlier in John's gospel which illustrates a similar principle of interrelationship and reciprocal dynamism – though the passage is rarely presented as such in sermon or Bible study materials.

In John Chapter 4, we find the familiar account of Jesus meeting the Samaritan woman at the well. The details of the story are well-known, and typically centre on what Jesus says to the woman and what effect it has on her. Even when a preacher comments on the woman's responses to Jesus, it can often be in a slightly disparaging manner to highlight her lack of spiritual understanding or her dubious background! The verse that precedes the woman's arrival at Jacob's well is all too often overlooked completely. In verse 6 of Chapter 4 we read that *'... Jesus, wearied as he was from his journey, was sitting beside the well. It was about the sixth hour.'* Wearied (as a result of travelling all the way from Judea into Samaria), on his own (because the disciples had gone into Sychar to buy food), Jesus sits down beside Jacob's well in the heat of the midday sun. Tired and alone, Jesus has no resources to ease his weariness or quench his thirst – until a local woman comes along with her bucket to draw water from the well. Breaking all the social boundaries and religious conventions, Jesus asks the woman for a drink of water – and we can only assume that she obliges, either before or during their conversation.

Instead of reading this biblical account as 'an effective approach to evangelism' (which is so often how it is presented!), perhaps we can discern in it instead a powerful example of interrelationship and reciprocal dynamism. The two individuals in this scenario – one a Jewish rabbi tired from his journey but with a reputation to protect, the other a Samaritan woman of dubious reputation but with access to a precious resource – are generous and proactive in meeting one another's needs. Through their interaction with one another both receive what is life-giving and what will equip them for the next stage on their journey in life.



The wellbeing and flourishing of both clergy and the wider church must surely depend upon each being willing to share generously the life-giving resources to which they have access within a relationship that is characterised by mutual respect and care for the other, a relationship that is characterised by joy rather than sighing....

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