

Six Ways Ministers T.H.R.I.V.E. ... during a pandemic

The national ministry team of the Church of England is conducting a ten-year research project, *Living Ministry*, exploring how ordained ministers flourish in ministry. The THRIVE model provides six strategies encapsulating some of the key findings from the first wave of this study. Although they have emerged from the specific experiences of clergy, we are also concerned for the wellbeing of lay ministers and hope they too will find these helpful. Given that, during the Covid-19 pandemic, many people will see most or all of these six areas disrupted, it is hardly surprising that our physical, mental, spiritual, vocational, relational and material wellbeing will be threatened. The challenge is to find ways to recreate these elements as we adapt to the current circumstances. To read more about Living Ministry Research [click here](#).

Tune your life to healthy rhythms

Even when we are not in the middle of a pandemic, the unbounded nature and immense variety of much of ordained ministry mean that structured routines can be elusive. To maintain spiritual, physical, mental and relational wellbeing and to flourish in ministry, clergy often develop their own life-giving rhythms of work, rest, prayer, exercise and nutrition. These operate at varying frequencies – daily, weekly, monthly, yearly or any other – and may involve a combination of adapting existing routines (such as travel and dog-walking) and designating specific time to particular activities.

If it is hard enough to find healthy rhythms during normal times, in the midst of a national emergency we will likely see even the structures we do have dissolve before our eyes. Activities we usually take for granted, as basic as shopping for food, suddenly become deeply challenging. Closed buildings and restrictions on movement remove our accustomed travel routines and keep us at home. Relational rhythms, whether work meetings and services, family conversations or time out with friends are all curtailed in their physical forms. Alongside all this disruption, new demands and priorities emerge, including caring for people who are sick, alone or afraid; managing and communicating drastic and distressing changes in the way funerals,



weddings and Eucharists are conducted; grappling with technology to sustain church communities; and attending to family members and our own anxieties.

Amid the almost total disruption to every part of our lives, we need somehow to establish new rhythms that will sustain us and give us life. A good place to start is by looking at our lives as they are now and identifying patterns that are already there, some of which will be determined by other people, especially close family. Whether that's the order in which we get ready in the morning or the time we eat meals, what do we already do regularly, even if it's not every day or not precise? Recognise that, even when life seems chaotic, we do have some structure to build on.

The way we approach rhythms of life is different for different people. First, the context will vary. Some of us may be feeling overwhelmed with new demands over which we have limited control, while for others life may suddenly have become emptier as we self-isolate at home. Each of these poses both challenges and possibilities for discovering and establishing healthy rhythms and structures. Second, people are different and now is no better than any other time to compare ourselves with others. Think about your own needs and preferences: do you find it helpful to plan the day and week ahead in as much detail as possible, or do you thrive on spontaneity? How much sleep works for you?

Above all, be kind to yourself. Wellbeing itself becomes a burden if we feel pressure to be well. Routines intended to be life-giving can quickly become oppressive if forced, and healthy rhythms can emerge naturally as well as through design. Human beings are incredibly adaptive, so allow yourself to settle, avoid planning more than a few days ahead, try out different things and be flexible. To quote wisdom from flower-arranging: build in structure but always leave room for the butterflies.

H Handle expectations

One of the most common causes of stress in all aspects of wellbeing is unclear expectations. In 'normal' times, this may be about specific mis-matched expectations such as in the context of a new relationship between training incumbent and curate, a clergy family navigating the expectations of congregations, or tensions between a Vicar and her PCC over expense claims, or it may relate to differences between anticipated and actual experiences of ministry, whether financial, vocational, relational, physical, mental or spiritual. During such a time of heightened uncertainty and rapid change, it is especially important to



manage expectations: what we expect from ourselves, what others expect from us, and what we can expect from others.

First, we need to recognise the situation we are in and the obstacles and pressures we face and adapt our expectations accordingly. Some of these pressures will be work-related and some will come from other sources, whether family, government restrictions or personal health concerns: it is important to view our lives holistically and acknowledge that we may not be able to achieve as much as we are used to when we have to home-school children or queue for an hour just to buy food. What are the absolute priorities? What is realistic? What is sustainable without risking your own physical and mental health? Now is not a good time to start comparing oneself or one's ministry with others.

Other people will be facing their own challenges, some similar and some very different, and they may not approach them in the same way. As well as an extra dose of kindness and grace and flexibility, clear communication is important. Even more important than communicating expectations themselves – which may be difficult amid such uncertainty – is the capacity both to express one's own limits and perspectives and to hear and be heard by others.

R ecognise times of vulnerability

Along the journey of ordained ministry there are certain times when clergy are likely to be more vulnerable to dips in wellbeing, for example the move from curacy to first incumbency which is often experienced as overwhelming in level and scope of responsibility, combined with the loss of IME 2 support structures. Wellbeing is also threatened at moments of personal or ministerial crisis, whether a health issue, family bereavement, financial difficulty or congregational problem. For some, the current circumstances will entail all of these and more, and it is important to recognise both the issues themselves and the implications for our wellbeing.

These are enormously challenging times. Whether we are supporting others or are ourselves in need, it is helpful to recognise and name the pressures and anxieties that burden us, and to acknowledge that such an enormously difficult time will inevitably have an effect on our wellbeing, however strong we are or would like to be. No one is unaffected and everyone needs extra support in one way or another.



Vulnerability can play out across different aspects of wellbeing. While the designation ‘vulnerable’ has taken on a very specific meaning in relation to Covid-19, we can also be vulnerable in terms of our jobs, our relationships, other aspects of our physical health and safety, and our mental health, some of which will interrelate and feed into each other. People are vulnerable in different ways, depending on context, circumstance and personal characteristics. Anxieties about pre-existing pressures, such as managing a difficult relationship, entering incumbency or approaching retirement, may have been compounded by the pandemic. When Archdeacons were asked which groups of clergy they were most concerned about during the first weeks of lockdown, they mentioned an enormous range, including clergy with health concerns, clergy caring for sick or vulnerable relatives, clergy living with families, clergy living alone, clergy in specific roles or challenging ministry contexts, clergy at transition points, clergy who are extroverts and clergy who are introverts.

Simply naming the difficulties can itself relieve some of the burden. Learning about normal human responses to trauma can help us understand and anticipate our own and other people’s reactions. The authors of *Tragedy and Congregations*, for example, describe a ‘heroic phase’ typically followed by a ‘disillusionment phase,’ and during the pandemic you may experience both. Self-care is vital and in such a challenging time it is important to be extra kind to yourself as well as to others. Finally, there is only so much we can do for ourselves. This is a time when we are likely to need more support than ever, but it is also easier than ever to disappear from view. Even if it’s not your natural inclination, reach out to the support structures around you: diocesan officers, peer networks, colleagues, family and friends. This is a time when your wellbeing is vulnerable, so keep connected.

[*Tragedy and Congregations*](#)

I dentify safe spaces to be heard

Partly because of the problems of relational boundaries in pastoral ministry, ordained ministers often have to look beyond their immediate context in the search for authenticity. Safe, honest and supportive relationships are typically (not always) found in other clergy, whether individuals, longstanding peer groups, diocesan-facilitated reflective practice groups or networks of people in similar circumstances. They may meet on a regular basis for deep sharing and prayer, or communicate via social media for instant



support, and often combine both. Groups built into ecclesial structures, such as deanery chapter, may or may not provide such support.

Isolation has taken on a new meaning since the beginning of the Covid-19 pandemic; however, the crisis has brought a particular risk of undesired or unhealthy isolation as well as strategic self-isolation for health purposes. The restrictions on movement and required social-distancing has meant that many groups and relationships that provide support are no longer able to function in the same way. Amid all the other meetings and groups moving online, it's important not to forget these. Especially during times when we may be trying to maintain a non-anxious presence for others, it is essential to have safe spaces where we can be honest about our own burdens and feelings. This may mean keeping the same relationships going but over the phone or internet instead of in person. We may also find that new spaces open up as physical proximity becomes less important.

V alue and affirm

Of utmost importance to wellbeing is the need to be recognised and valued at a human level as well as by God. Beyond a pandemic, in the context of a declining church and pressure to increase attendance and ensure financial viability, and alongside huge financial investment in specific initiatives, clergy can feel unappreciated, devalued and demoralised. The implications of this cut across all aspects of wellbeing, from the perceived need to reduce personal expenditure to support a struggling church, to physical and mental stress, isolation, guilt, vocational doubt and a strong sense of marginalisation. It is vital that senior clergy and national and diocesan officers are aware of the implications for clergy wellbeing of dominant messages from the church. Where clergy receive personal interest in and support of themselves and their ministry, especially by senior clergy, they feel less guilty and isolated, and more known, understood and valued.

Active valuing and affirming can take place at all levels and in all directions, and the importance of this increases during times of uncertainty and pressure. While a crisis such as a pandemic may initially bring a renewed sense of purpose and energy to some, this will be difficult to sustain over several weeks or months. Other factors that may contribute to demoralisation include the isolation that comes from mandatory social-distancing; the potential for misunderstandings through inhibited communication and accentuated stress; and frustrations and moral injury arising from the inability to minister as normal in accordance with one's personal moral or ethical code, especially relating to funerals, the Eucharist and pastoral care.



There are many ways to let people know they are valued, from a birthday or thank you card to a request for advice or assistance in an area in which the person is skilled. People feel better when they have a sense of agency – something to do that is valuable – but they also may need to be given permission not to achieve as much as they think they should. We can also affirm ourselves, by realistically recognising the challenges of the situation and the things we are doing (and being) well. Finally, it is important to receive affirmation when it is offered, rather than self-deprecatingly resisting it.

E_{stablish healthy boundaries}

Ordained ministry has few formal borders. Clergy, especially those in parish ministry, struggle with work that impinges on family time, intrudes into private space, invades rest and sleep, complicates relationships, inhibits expense claims and expands into all the minutiae of church life. To some extent, then, clergy are well-equipped to manage the blurring of work and home currently being experienced by so much of the population. As well as nurturing healthy rhythms of living, many clergy can draw on their experience of developing life-giving boundaries in time, space, mind, role, relationships and even finances.

Even for clergy, however, such demarcations are likely to be increasingly challenged as church buildings are closed and movement is restricted. Boundaries are always negotiated with other people or between conflicting priorities and interests and, for some, the terms will change as we adapt to different ways of working and living, for example managing work alongside family at home, or balancing being sufficiently contactable by colleagues or congregations with maintaining time off work. The challenge is to protect the most important things while also being flexible and kind both to others and to ourselves. We will almost certainly need to adapt our normal boundaries and expectations, both because of imposed restrictions and because of changing priorities and values. Diocesan support in this is vital in providing guidance, examples, validation and permission.

