

THE COVENANT FOR CLERGY CARE AND WELLBEING CONSULTATION

Response of the English Clergy Association

The English Clergy Association, as the successor to the Parochial Clergy Association, was founded in 1938 and exists to support in fellowship all Clerks in Holy Orders in their Vocation and Ministry within the Church of England. The Association seeks to be a Church of England mutual resource for clergy, patrons and churchwardens requiring information or insight; to support Clergy serving under Common Tenure as well as those still enjoying Freehold of office; to monitor ever-burgeoning bureaucracy and continued legislative and other processes of change; and to promote in every available way the good of English Parish and Cathedral Life and the welfare of the Clergy. Membership is open to all who support the aims of the Association, including retired clergy, and clergy of the Church in Wales, the Episcopal Church in Scotland, and the Church of Ireland, as well as lay people.

Clergy wellbeing is at the heart of our formation and, over the years, we have built up considerable knowledge of situations and events and legal or pastoral structures which promote wellbeing or cause it to suffer. Our commitment to clergy wellbeing can be seen in practical terms by the administering of a charitable benefit fund to provide holiday grants for hard-pressed clergy who would not otherwise be able to afford the rest and recreation they and their families need. We have a dedicated voluntary almoner for this and the current expenditure is in excess of £25,000 per annum. Last year we helped some 70 recipients. We would urge the Commission to reflect upon some of our conclusions below and in view of our long experience as an Association give them due weight in the present exercise.

We were extensively involved some years ago in the debate about Clergy Terms and Conditions of Service with the resultant abolition of the Freehold and establishment of Common Tenure. At the time we had some serious concerns about the direction of the legislation that treated clergy more like employees with the introduction of a capability procedure with little clarity or safeguards as to what might trigger such a procedure where the “grounds for concern” are undefined and may fall well short of any behaviour necessary to establish an offence under the Clergy Discipline Measure. This has had an adverse effect on morale. We are concerned too that the Clergy Discipline Measure itself adopts the balance of probabilities “civil” standard of proof. It is a cumbersome and lengthy process that may put an accused person under much stress and involve them in considerable cost. There is a danger of many trivial, misguided or malicious complaints being made by parishioners which could cause devastation to clergy and their families while the lengthy and stressful formalities are being played out. We believe our fears have been proved well founded in practice and increasingly and significantly such concerns have been echoed by some Registrars, Archdeacons and Bishops.¹ The vulnerability of the clergy in a parish needs to be recognised. It is, we believe, time to rethink the effect of the Measure. As an Association we wish to uphold and promote the highest professional standards, but we believe that the whole legal basis and ethos of such standards has been changed in a way which introduces elements that are deeply unhelpful to clergy and their ministry and to the detriment of their wellbeing. We believe that such concerns have not been given due consideration in the draft document “A Covenant for Clergy Care and Wellbeing” and their effect should be examined more fully.

Since clergy are now treated more like industrial workers it is unsurprising but significant that many have joined the Unite union and other unions in order to protect themselves. They have missed the previous pastoral support systems that appear no longer to be in place and it is felt that in many cases

¹ See *The Church Times*, 18 October 2018, “Clergy Discipline Measure: a harsh discipline?”

those exercising authority within the diocese are so busy as administrators that they are not able to offer the personal pastoral support that had been forthcoming in the past. It is unfortunate that the Diocesan Bishop is now required to make legal judgments at an early stage in any disciplinary process and is thereby precluded from exercising the traditional role of “father in God” with respect to the clergy in his or her care who are in difficulty. If recent legislation makes clergy more vulnerable to stressful procedures, it also introduces a new culture which can unconsciously legitimise the bullying of clergy in everyday parish life. With the unfortunate decline in congregations, some of those laity left in positions of power and authority in parishes have in our experience not always exercised it sensitively or wisely and are failing to support their clergy. Indeed, some consciously or unconsciously attribute fault to the clergy for their declining congregations. Their frustration can easily be transferred to clergy who are considered paid officers and responsible and accountable for the growth or otherwise of the church community. This misguided view of ministry and mission can sometimes be seen especially in retired professionals who take it upon themselves to monitor the effectiveness of clergy according to the standards they previously employed in the workplace, in effect treating clergy as their employees.

Good and supportive laity and Churchwardens are a treasure and a huge resource but sometimes even Churchwardens themselves can become a source of stress, made all the more real because they are perceived to be officers of the bishop. This can create particular difficulties where both husband and wife are wardens and there are no checks or balances within the parish. Likewise, members of PCCs and lay officers can become “indispensable” and at worst are a source of division within a parish. We believe there is a need for greater training for the laity about the role of the clergy and how to work creatively with them. It is our view that Bishops and Archdeacons should be far more aware of bullying of clergy than they are and that this is a major detriment to their wellbeing.

Another major source of clergy anxiety arises from safeguarding. Again, the effect of the remorseless increase in these demands has been largely ignored in the draft Covenant. The Association accepts, of course, the absolute need for effective safeguarding procedures and practices, and is conscious of the tragic repercussions of failures in this respect, both for individuals and for the Church as a whole. It recognises with great sadness that in the past some clergy themselves have not been blameless. But in more recent years, as the need for safeguarding has become a paramount concern within the Church of England, not only have the requirements and the system kept changing, but also the responsibility for the carrying out of this very much higher standard of safeguarding has increasingly fallen on incumbents. This is particularly onerous in multi-parish benefices where the incumbents cannot be in all places at all times. Although there should be lay safeguarding representatives in every parish, there is a very heavy duty placed on Clergy who may be expected to monitor offenders in the congregation, or make arrangements so to do, without breaching confidentiality. This in itself is time-consuming and stressful and makes for a conflicting pastoral situation. Often such offenders are by their nature devious and damaged individuals. There are occasions when local agreements work well and the current training of laity as well as clergy is to be welcomed but all too often the practical operation of schemes and supervision is a source of constant anxiety to clergy and affects their ability to concentrate on the spiritual side of worship. Acting both as a policeman and a pastor is no easy or desirable task. Dioceses need to take on a far greater responsibility for agreements with offenders and monitoring such agreements, perhaps delegating some of this to Deanery Officials. Where a safeguarding issue occurs in a parish, there must be real pastoral support as well as practical support offered to the incumbent.

It must also be borne in mind that increasingly incumbents are required to have the responsibility for a large number of parishes, often with little assistance. It is not unusual, for example, to require a 20-minute car journey to go from one church to another. Not only does this significantly increase the workload on an incumbent and the stress of rushing from one parish to another, but the incumbent

does not feel he or she has sufficient time to spend in each parish and the pastoral care cannot be carried out to the required standard. This has a direct effect on job satisfaction. It is well established that there is a close correlation between job satisfaction and mental health. A number of clergy have remarked that this was not the ministry they signed up for and would have had second thoughts had they known this was to be the future.

The Association endorses the provisional conclusions of the working party that advertisements for vacancies and expectations of clergy need to be realistic. It is from unrealistic advertisements for appointments and the person profile that the expectations of laity are raised and when these cannot be met the disappointment and bullying described above starts as well as a deterioration in the sense of worth of the clergy person concerned. Dioceses can also be unrealistic particularly in the growing number of part-time or house for duty positions which previously have been full time. Where an incumbent is responsible for a number of parishes it must be recognised that it is not reasonable for each parish to expect the same level of ministry as if it were the only parish for which the incumbent was responsible. Parishes are increasingly resentful at being asked for more and more money for less and less clergy resources on the ground. Parishes with large numbers of worshippers feel that they are being penalized for their success in having to contribute more to central funds while small (often rural) parishes cannot afford to make the required contribution and may suffer considerable financial hardship. The English Clergy Association believes that there is a fundamental and growing problem of lack of direct resources for parish ministry, and this inevitably impacts on the wellbeing of an incumbent trying to sustain an active church life under such circumstances.

The working party talks in terms of “the vital need for pastoral supervision”. It is unfortunate that the word “supervision” is used and not the word “support”. This is envisaged by the working party as “a structure process with a frequency and regularity, where clergy take time out to reflect upon their experiences and pay attention to their feelings... We recognise that this will take expertise and funding.” However, although the provision of counselling is to be welcomed, this must be done sensitively and not seen as yet a further obligation imposed on clergy. Any *requirement* that clergy undergo group therapy may be regarded as counter-productive. There needs to be clarity that this supervision is not understood in the sense of line-management but as an opportunity to discuss some of the difficult and painful parts of our professional life in much the same way as reflection space is given to workers in the NHS. Early in the draft consultation there is a stress on prevention rather than cure. The Association would wish to ensure that such a provision of support is not at the expense of putting resources into systems that lessen such stress and burdens in the first place and where it does occur to offer real pastoral support rather than potentially placing additional burdens on clergy. Care must be taken that this does not appear to be an institutional approach and that any such additional expense incurred or time spent does not detract from parish ministry. What is intended by such a provision of “pastoral supervision” and its practical implementation as it will affect clergy, needs to be clarified. In our view, the primary need is not so much for “pastoral supervision” or frequent group therapy, but for a sensible workload and pastoral support as well as a greater understanding from the laity of the role of clergy and the need for encouragement.

In addition, there could perhaps have been more discussion by the Working Party of the concept and practice of Ministerial Development Review which, at its best, should accompany good pastoral support to the mutual benefit of both clergy and parishioners. When used well and sympathetically this can be very positive and beneficial.

The Association believes that the working party may have looked at this issue too much from an institutional point of view and needs to take greater account of how much the introduction of institutional structures in the past have contributed to a deterioration in clergy wellbeing caused by stress and over work. In our experience clergy want to be themselves and get on with their calling

and be supported in so doing. There is a wide perception that this is not the case in many dioceses. The subject matter of the report is indeed of vital importance and we are glad that it has been undertaken. It rightly encourages what it calls a “big conversation” between the clergy and the whole church, lay and ordained. It would, however, be a great shame if the result was yet more legislation and the introduction of more bureaucratic structures that will take the clergy away from their parishes and ministry. Clergy need to be freed for the Gospel and not shackled to systems.

It needs to be borne in mind that the Church of England is undergoing change in respect of falling overall numbers particularly in rural parishes and a lack of stipendiary clergy, so that parishes are becoming increasingly dependent on non-stipendiary part-time clergy, and a declining financial position where difficult decisions will have to be taken in the near future about the viability of many churches and the nature of ministry. This is bound to cause uncertainty and anxiety in the clergy, especially younger clergy with a lifetime of ministry before them, who are beginning to wonder what future they may have in the Church of England. The Association takes the view that these changes need to be managed. This will be from diocesan level to the smallest rural parish. The brunt of such changes, however, will fall largely on the parochial clergy and many clergy complain (especially those on common tenure) that there is now uncertainty as to their future and the future of their parish(es). It is in our view vitally important that the clergy are actively involved in the management of change and are fully consulted in any planning that may have to take place. Change must not be imposed from above on clergy but embraced as a partnership. Clergy need to be particularly reassured and supported in this uncertain climate of change.

We would therefore conclude that revisiting legislation and practice which puts clergy under additional pressure, listening to actual causes of clergy stress and vulnerability and concentrating on encouragement and local and Diocesan support would be a good start. Interestingly in the early part of the draft covenant this is recognised, and a comparison is made with the military covenant:

“Furthermore, we were struck by the comments of Forces’ Chaplains to our Chair that one unforeseen effect of the Military Covenant was to demand more of servicemen and women, rather than to demonstrate the nation’s support for them. We are therefore very aware that, in order for this Covenant to be a gift to the church and its ordained ministers rather than an additional burden, the context in which we set covenantal expectations needs to be one of encouragement rather than demand.”

We would very much support such an approach.

There are good things in the Report and it is hoped that it may contribute to more effective clerical support. The concern expressed by the Association is that, while the Report has identified a problem, its emphasis is too much towards addressing the symptoms rather than the root causes of stress, namely overwork, insecurity, low job satisfaction and loss of personal esteem, experienced by many clergy in the Church today. It is important that this major opportunity to improve the wellbeing of clergy is not wasted. It needs to be recognised that all clergy are concerned to carry out their ministry as a priest and pastor within their cures to the best of their ability – that is at the core of their vocation. If they are prevented from so doing they will become entirely frustrated, there will be no job satisfaction and their wellbeing will suffer. This will only contribute to the decline of the Church as a whole. It is therefore even more important that any proposals in the Report must be supportive of the clergy in their ministry and have the effect of minimising obligations and structures on them that have an adverse effect on their ability to carry out their ministry.

Peter Smith
Chairman, on behalf of the English Clergy Association