

LIVING **ministry**

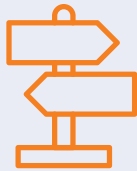


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Tune your life to healthy rhythms

The unbounded nature of much ordained ministry, along with the immense variety of clergy lives and contexts means that structured routines can be elusive. To maintain wellbeing and flourish in ministry, clergy often develop their own life-giving rhythms of work, rest, prayer, exercise and nutrition. These may involve a combination of adapting existing routines such as travel and dog-walking, and designating specific time to particular activities. They may be daily, weekly, monthly or yearly patterns – or any other frequency – and will be more or less fluid and flexible depending on activity and context.



Handle expectations

One of the most common causes of stress in all aspects of wellbeing is unclear expectations. 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 ordained ministry or particular roles, whether financial, vocational, relational, physical, mental or spiritual. Clear communication is important, both the capacity to express one's own limits and perspectives and the capacity to hear others.



Recognise times of vulnerability

Along the journey of ordained ministry there are certain times when clergy will be more vulnerable to dips in wellbeing. It is important to recognise such moments, both to put in place preventative strategies and support structures and to maintain perspective. Moments of transition are especially challenging, in particular the move from curacy to first incumbency. First incumbents describe feeling isolated and overwhelmed by level and scope of responsibility, mitigated for some by mentors, proactive and approachable archdeacons, and training for new incumbents. Wellbeing is also threatened at moments of personal or ministerial crisis, whether a health issue, family bereavement, financial or congregational difficulty or a global pandemic, and both personal resilience and diocesan support are important at such times. The latter varies, partly according to whether help is sought (and whether the minister feels they can seek help), and may include financial assistance, counselling provision, professional cover, advice, guidance and pastoral care.



Identify safe spaces to be heard

Partly because of the challenges 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 often (not always) found in other clergy, whether individuals, longstanding peer groups, diocesan-initiated 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, and clergy also draw on spiritual direction, mentors and counsellors as well as family and friends.



Value and affirm

Of utmost importance is the need to be recognised and valued at a human level as well as by God. In the context of a declining church and pressure to increase attendance and ensure financial viability, 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. Awareness of the implications of dominant messages from the church for clergy wellbeing is important, and 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.



Establish 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 address this, as well as nurturing healthy rhythms of living, many clergy also seek to develop life-giving boundaries in time, space, mind, role, relationships and finances. Diocesan support in this is vital in providing guidance, examples, validation and permission, to nurture an environment in which clergy are able to be kind to themselves as well as to others.