

Clergy Wellbeing Report: Who Cares for the Carers?

Come to me, all who labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest.
Matthew 11:28

Background

A survey on clergy stress was conducted by Rev Bruce Pierce and Canon Daniel Nuzum after the Dublin and Glendalough Diocesan Clergy Conference in February 2013. This survey was carried out in conjunction with the University of Toronto, which had done similar research in Canada and beyond. Generalised feedback to the survey was presented at the following year's clergy conference, highlighting significant negative comments. However, the authors of the survey acknowledged that it was not designed to reflect overall clergy "wellness", as it focused on the negatives of ordained ministry and none of the positives.

In response to these results, the Archbishop set up a working group to research the issues involved and to make recommendations for best practices in personal and communal self-care. This group consisted of: Rev. John Tanner, chairperson; Archdeacon David Pierpoint, honorary expert senior consultant; Canon Aisling Shine, chaplain; Rev. Ruth Elmes, external consultant; Rev. Alan Ruffli; Rev. Ian Gallagher; Rev. Sonia Gyles and Rev. Gary Dowd.

For reasons of confidentiality, the full survey results were never circulated and were not available to this working group. In addition, the group was not allowed to interview diocesan clergy, individually or collectively. So first it looked at the four areas of significant stress identified as being particularly problematic in the feedback provided by Rev. Pierce and Canon Nuzum and here suggests ways that may help to alleviate them.

Sources of stress

1 Administration and management

The level of administration and management now required is an increasing burden and therefore a cause of stress, particularly for those who lack basic skills in this area and for those who feel inundated with forms, surveys etc. The extent of legislation and bureaucracy that now governs most aspects of parish life is a constant source of worry, if lack of training, time, preparation or awareness could lead to mistakes that might have legal and profound pastoral implications.

Recommendations

- Clergy should be made aware and regularly reminded of supports already available and be urged to use them.
- Ongoing in-service training and refresher courses should become the norm.
- While not every parish can afford administrative/secretarial support for clergy, it should be possible for neighbouring parishes to collaborate in hiring at least a part-time administrator that each could draw on. They may also be able to share expensive office equipment, such as photocopiers and printers, and to negotiate better rates as a group from suppliers of consumables.

2 Lack of work/life balance

Modern methods of communication have become a two-edged sword. People increasingly expect an instant response to their enquiries and some clergy feel the need to be contactable 24/7. This is unrealistic and, ultimately, unhealthy.

Recommendations

- Time management should be a priority and clergy need to be trained in how to achieve and maintain a healthy life/work balance.
- Education of clergy in how to set and maintain boundaries and how to identify the best way to care for parishioners, while also looking after their own and family needs, is also required. Clergy often suffer from feelings of guilt when they are away from the parish on a day off, or while enjoying family time or leisure activities. This ultimately leads to tiredness and burn out.
- Clergy annual holiday entitlements should be clarified by the dioceses and widely publicised, as should the maximum hours clergy can reasonably be expected to work per week, outside emergencies and crises. Surely clergy are entitled to more than one day per week off?

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Cover in the event of emergencies during time off should be easy to arrange between neighbouring clergy.

3 Financial insecurity

Some clergy may be under considerable personal financial pressure, especially if they have dependents in full-time education and their spouse is not in paid employment. Making provision for accommodation in retirement can also be an issue.

Many parishes are seeing a decline in their annual income and now struggle to meet their ongoing commitments. As the cost of providing and maintaining stipendiary clergy is usually the main annual outgoing for any parish this can bring additional stress. Clergy can be made feel guilty if constant fund raising in the parish is perceived as being solely to pay them. It may also lead parishioners to expect a “performance related” return from clergy on their “investment”.

Recommendations

- All clergy should be made aware of the numerous grants and subsidies that are available. They should not be made feel guilty for applying for these and this process should be transparent and straightforward.
- Advice about the options in planning for accommodation in retirement should be available to clergy from the beginning of their ministry.
- Unfair attitudes of parishioners towards payment of clergy need to be discouraged.

4 Changing roles and attitudes

Clergy with longer years of service have seen a huge change in attitude towards the Church and clergy themselves. Once they had a clearly defined role in society and, rightly or wrongly, this gave them a certain status. This is no longer the case. Many people are no longer regular church goers and some are indifferent, even hostile, towards the institutional Church and those who work on its behalf.

There is now a large constituency who find they are “time poor”. Coupled with this is a lack of commitment to, and understanding of, the Church’s need for volunteers and financial support. Contemporary society demands new skills of clergy who now find themselves in a mission and outreach situation, often even within their own parish.

Recommendations

- Regular in-service training to help clergy to develop and/or acquire the skills that they need to relate to a society where many are no longer

familiar with the language and traditions of the Church and of what it represents or what it needs.

- Clergy must be urged to support one another, share ideas and to dispel any notion that they are in competition with each other.

Further findings

In the course of its research, the working group identified additional, related stressor issues, which significantly contribute to the four already identified above and an attempt is made to address these in the further recommendations of this report. The main focus of these recommendations is on preventative, early intervention structures that need to be considered. However, in recognition that even with excellent “best practice” structures in place things can still go wrong, there are also suggestions for late interventions that should be considered.

The working group investigated existing Church and secular caring professions models. These included the existing position in Dublin and Glendalough diocesan structures, best practices in other dioceses of the Church of Ireland, and supports elsewhere in the Anglican Communion, including the Church of England, Church of Wales, the Episcopal Church in Scotland, Episcopal Church in the United States of America and the Anglican Church of Canada. The support structures of other Christian denominations, including the Methodist Church, the Presbyterian Church and Lutheran Church, were also considered.

There was an attempt to engage the Roman Catholic Archdiocese of Dublin in a collaborative approach to this issue, as it is currently undertaking a similar exercise. However, after some promising initial engagement, it would appear that the Dublin Archdiocese is approaching this issue from a different perspective and the unanimous consensus of those involved in these exchanges was that the Dublin Archdiocese would prefer to work alone on their project. Amongst the secular caring professions, the guidelines of the Health and Safety Authority (HSA) together with the policies of the Health Service Executive (HSE), Veterinary Ireland, An Garda Síochána and the Defence Forces (the latter two as far as were made available) were reviewed.

It would be difficult to adapt the practices of most of the secular caring professions due to a difference in structures. In most of the secular models reviewed, there is a clear hierarchy of line management. If issues arise at any particular level, there is always an attempt to resolve those issues at that level first – up to and including counselling and independent arbitration, which is funded by the employer. If this fails, it is referred upwards in line management where attempts are made, at each stage, to find a resolution. Finally, if this system becomes exhausted without resolution, these issues are referred either to further independent arbitration or a legal route as a last resort. By contrast, the

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majority of clergy see themselves as “self-employed” under the authority of their Bishop. Although rural deanery structures exist and archdeacons play their role as the senior clergy of the dioceses, these are not considered to be line management structures *per se*.

Current position

The existing structure in the united dioceses of Dublin and Glendalough caters only for late intervention and is therefore a reactive one. It comprises a panel of three individuals, two ordained and one lay, who are available if a cleric or a member of their family is seeking help. It was set up around 1990 by Archbishop Donald Caird and, according to Canon Cecil Hyland (one of the original and existing panel members), it has never been contacted or used. At this stage, as it has not been advertised in recent years, many clergy in the dioceses are not even aware of its existence. This is similar to the situation in both the Presbyterian and Methodist Churches in Ireland who have a Society of the Manse to provide help if required. According to our sources they also have never been used.

A way forward

Within the united dioceses nobody has ever answered the question who cares for the carers? The first step is that the clergy must care for themselves, with awareness and recognition of stress in their workplace. Secondly they should be helped to acquire the skills to deal with stress and the practical support needed at the time.

Clergy have no job description, nor indeed can they, but added to the routine ministries there are sometimes huge expectations from both parish and diocese. With family life and the need for time to relax added to this mix, clergy should take an honest look at what and who will suffer. How clergy handle all this is very individual but there is an ongoing need for training and discussion, both at parish and diocesan level. There appears to be a lack of understanding and appreciation in the dioceses of what clergy do on a day-to-day basis. There is constant pressure to take on what is new and imported from elsewhere, with little thought given to what is a match for the Church of Ireland.

It is important as a part of this report to consider the traditional understanding of the roles of the officers of the Church. The committee understands that the role of a Bishop is closely aligned with the pastoral care of the diocesan clergy, as a priest in charge of the priests so to speak. From the declarations at the Ordination of a Bishop: *“They are to know their people and be known by them. They are to ordain and to send new ministers, guiding those who serve with*

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them and enabling them to fulfil their ministry.” Therefore the presence, support, concern, care and accessibility of the Bishop must be assured and positively affirmed.

The role of an Archdeacon is understood to include “assisting the Bishop in pastoral care in the archdeaconry, from time to time visiting the clergy and churchwardens in the archdeaconry to provide advice on problems and to be pastor to the clergy”.¹ The Rural Dean is an officer through whom the Bishop can be kept informed of any clerical illness, or any clergy family matters or bereavements.² It is the committee’s understanding that this three-layer care of the clergy, through interested pastoral oversight, is somewhat different at the current time and this in itself is a source of stress. Needless to say, the requirement of support and consideration also extends to the office holders listed above.

A culture needs to grow throughout the united dioceses where the wholeness and wellness of clergy is fostered and valued by each other as well as management, both lay and ordained. This should be respected and affirmed, firstly between clergy and the Bishop, and flow both ways.

Communication is an essential component to clergy wellbeing. It is felt that this is poor in the dioceses at this present time, with much use of the rumour mill. This is no way to hear about what could affect clergy lives and ministry. However, good communication does not mean being bombarded with information that is often irrelevant or too late. This is a source of at least annoyance, if not stress.

Further recommendations

- A clergy “**handbook**” should be produced and updated annually. This could form part of the Diocesan Directory or be published separately. It should include information such as a skills “matrix” i.e. the names and contact information of those within the dioceses who offer areas of special expertise/knowledge, such as schools, graveyards, child protection, heritage property maintenance, legal etc. Knowing that there is a wealth of experience and help to call on if required can be very reassuring when stressful situations arise for clergy. .
- This handbook should also highlight the **signs and symptoms of stress** and ways of preventing and dealing with it. It should include a section on clergy wellbeing with clear guidance on annual leave and rest periods. It is also suggested that a list of outside independent helpline/contact

¹ Diocese of Ottawa website

² Rural Dean – Guidelines January 2006

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numbers be included, with the assurance that these services are totally confidential. The cost of using these independent services would, it is suggested, be covered by the dioceses (for example, six sessions would be paid for, with extra funding available following negotiation). To this end, it is further recommended that the services of a counsellor(s) would be negotiated and retained. Consideration would have to be given on how this could be kept confidential.

- Another option would be to consider setting up a **Clergy Support Team**, based on those operating in the Dioceses of Connor and Derry and Raphoe. This support team, which would include a trained counsellor/psychotherapist, would offer confidential support to clergy and their spouses and children, funded by the diocese. This team may agree to refer the attendee to a specialist counsellor, where six sessions would be paid for by the diocese. If more sessions are required a request would be put to the Bishop for additional financial assistance.
- Clergy should be encouraged to seek “**spiritual direction**” and/or **supervision**, provided by suitably qualified and accredited individuals. It would probably be of benefit if these individuals were from outside the Church of Ireland. It would also be helpful if a list of suitable directors/supervisors was made available and that financial assistance would be offered by the diocese.
- As part of **Continuing Professional Development (CPD)** for all clergy, it is recommended that courses on stress, time management and boundary issues be included. These should be provided on a regular basis, preferably at neutral venues and led by speakers who are professionals in these fields. In addition, in-service training courses should be organised to deal with the evolving culture within our united dioceses. These should be run by experienced people who are intimately familiar with both the context and culture of these dioceses. It should be noted that speakers unfamiliar with this context and culture may be inspirational but more often than not contribute to clergy stress, as they raise more questions than clergy can hope to answer.
- It is recommended that **Rural Deanery** meetings should be held at least once a month (except during the summer). These should provide an opportunity for informal interaction, prayer, Bible study, open discussion on local, topical items as well as welcoming visiting speakers on diocesan issues. These do not always need to be formal meetings but may sometimes consist of just a cup of coffee and a chat. Full attendance at

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these regular meetings should be strongly encouraged, so that a strong spirit of trust and collegiality can be fostered at a local level.

- A **mentoring system** for new incumbents and clergy should be introduced. Mentors should be selected and appointed from those who have an aptitude for this form of ministry and should be professionally trained to an acceptable standard before assuming their role.

In conclusion

The working group anticipates that it will be extremely difficult to formalise a budget for the above recommendations. The retention of an independent counsellor(s) can only be costed if, and when, formal negotiations take place. The cost of CPD courses as outlined would depend on venue, content and duration. The training of suitable mentors would also need to be investigated, as would the costs associated with spiritual direction/supervision. Most of the other recommendations should be covered by volunteers and existing diocesan structures.

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