

Lay group responses to the clergy care report

The group of five lay people included a lay reader, a local church employee, an institutional church employee, a volunteer with a leadership role in a church organisation and an expert on care in education connected to ministerial training. All but one are regular church goers and actively involved in their own Church of Ireland parishes.

Each member of the group read the report on a confidential basis and engaged to discuss their responses to it, and their wider concerns about the area of clergy care. There was a good deal of sympathy expressed for clergy by some respondents who noted that it can be a lonely role, that many parishioners have inappropriate expectations of clergy and that there are financial pressures on clergy. There was also a strong sense that clergy need to adapt to changing times, that they need to engage with the help offered by laity (especially lay readers and parish readers) and work in partnership with them, and that they need to take responsibility for self-care.

They made quite wide-ranging recommendations, some based on the report they had read and others based on their own experience, expertise or insight. Their recommendations were as follows:

1. Role for central church

- (a) clear published information for both clergy and laity as to the nature of the role, the rights and responsibilities of clergy in a parish
- (b) clear published information for clergy regarding existing support structures, for clergy. This should work in conjunction with *Dignity in Church Life*
- (c) There should also be clear information about the kind of professional supports or external structures that clergy can recommend to troubled parishioners and others (these are not those funded by the church)
- (d) Provision of a funded counsellor (e.g. through CITI) accessible to individual clergy on a confidential basis for an agreed number of sessions per year
- (e) Provision of a funded mediation service / expert available to individual clergy or parishes for an agreed number of sessions per year
- (f) There needs to be discussion about how the administrative burden in parishes can be better managed both within and across parishes

2. Mentoring of early years clergy

- (a) Clergy in the early stage of ministry (e.g. first five years of an incumbency) should have access to a more senior clergy colleague who would act as a confidential mentor or 'critical friend'

3. Education

- (a) Initial clergy education needs to include more practical skill development as well as including training on stress management, dealing with conflict, understanding the nature and limitations of professional caring roles, boundaries in professional care relationships, confidentiality in professional caring roles. They also need education in time management, financial management, administration

- (b) Clergy need ongoing education throughout their ministry with a particular focus on personal development in areas such as stress management, conflict resolution, understanding caring roles, boundaries and confidentiality. Such education should be offered on a regular basis (e.g. every 3 years) and clergy should be incentivised to participate
- (c) Clergy need ongoing education throughout their ministry in time management, administration and financial management

4. Peer support

- (a) Critical friend-style pairings of clergy should be established (within dioceses or beyond) with a clear agreement to maintain confidentiality, to enable individual clergy to share concerns, bounce ideas, listen to each other. This model is often used among teachers and other caring professionals
- (b) Rural deaneries should ensure that there is space for people to talk about their own spirituality
- (c) Spirituality should be at the core of these engagements together by clergy, in pairs or in larger formal / semi-formal groups

5. Personal development

- (a) Clergy need both education and self-development to understand the nature of care in the context of a caring profession
- (b) Clergy need both education and self-development to understand the nature of care as service
- (c) Clergy need both education and self-development to develop skills around confidentiality and setting & maintenance of boundaries
- (d) Clergy need both education and self-development to develop conflict resolution skills
- (e) Clergy need both education and self-development to develop empathy
- (f) Clergy need both education and self-development to develop skills of self-care and to recognise their own responsibility in this regard

6. Changes in attitude and behaviour of clergy – individual and collective responsibility

- (a) Clergy need both education and self-development to learn how to delegate responsibility and work to willing lay people in their parishes, especially but not exclusively lay readers and parish readers. It was noted that many clergy are unwilling to utilise trained lay readers or parish readers and refuse to delegate any of their work load to willing and trained laity. One respondent also noted that more senior clergy tended not to delegate to more junior clergy working with them and to exclude them from information and decision-making
- (b) Clergy need both education and self-development to reflect on and change the existing peer culture between clergy as a group. The participants independently noted a tendency for there to be a negative culture among clergy, characterised by bullying, a lack of spirituality and adding to the pressure felt by individuals.