

Archdeacon David

It has taken me 36 years to get there; to have the privilege of giving the Presidential address at a diocesan synod. If only my training incumbent could see me now! Sadly, it is probably all downhill from here, but I shall thoroughly enjoy my moment in the sun.

The theme for our reflections and discussions this morning is well-being; the well-being of all of us with a special focus on ministerial well-being, both lay and ordained. To a person whose contact with the church is fleeting it might seem odd that we even have to address such an issue; surely well-being is at the very heart of the Christian life, something we might be forgiven for taking for granted. Of course, those of us inside the tent know that unless we attend carefully to well-being, both our own and other peoples', then it very quickly can become neglected and set aside. In truth the church, both big and small, has been careless of the well-being both of its members and of those it might seek to serve and minister to. Our recent history in dealing with the vulnerable and the victim is a sorry one, both individually and corporately. Our recent history in dealing kindly with debate and division over sensitive topics has also been deeply unedifying. Time and time again our words and our actions have fallen far short of gospel standards, and we have, quite rightly, been called out because of it both by those within and those out with.

To add to this challenging context there is now a lively and at times painful debate ongoing about how we treat our ministers, both at the parish and benefice level, and as an institution and I will return to this topic shortly. First, I want to reflect for a moment on

what well-being might look and feel like when we get it right. If it is true that we are indeed made in the image of God, and I do believe that for the avoidance of any doubt, then someone who comes to church might reasonably expect to find a space where there is a warm welcome and mutual respect; a space where our differences are respected and where disagreements are resolved with kindness and empathy towards all parties. They might encounter a willingness among fellow pilgrims to listen as much as to be heard as seek to grow in our faith and in our communal life as the body of Christ.

We would I think also expect to be safe. Safe from physical threat and emotional and spiritual abuse and to confident that we raise concerns in these areas those concerns would be taken seriously and acted upon appropriately.

There is much more I could say here today but as starting point for our work this morning perhaps we can all agree that it covers many of the bases when thinking about well-being and if all of the above was securely in place the church would be a better place.

This brings me to the more immediate issue of ministerial well-being. It is this topic which has been the catalyst for a much wider national debate around terms of service, stipends, pensions, and housing etc for our clergy and there is no doubt that there is a crisis in the well-being of clergy more generally. The Church of England's own research, using the Warwick-Edinburgh Mental Wellbeing Scale reveals that in March 2023,

“Over one in five incumbents (21%) had scores that indicate probable clinical depression, and a further 15% indicating possible or mild depression.... For context,

Office for National Statistics figures for Autumn 2022 suggest that around 1 in 6 (16%) adults aged 16 or over in Great Britain had moderate to severe depressive symptoms.”

The context for clergy, perhaps especially but not exclusively for stipendiary ministers, is perhaps a little more complicated than it is for his or her lay colleagues. Our sense of professional and personal well-being is not only dependent upon our lived experience in our parishes and benefices, and in the deaneries and dioceses, but is also affected by how we feel valued by the institution that does **not** employ us, namely the Church of England. Let me return to the big picture stuff in a moment but first let me start where most of us spend most of our ministries, in parish life.

We are told that the average member of the clergy, in a full-time stipend post, works between 50 and 60 hours a week. I, of course, work much longer but that is the average. In truth talking about hours worked is probably not helpful in this context as we do it as a calling which is a way of life 24/7 and I certainly don't begrudge God my time. But there is a cost both to the priest and to their families if they have them. In my 36 years of ministry and 15 years as an archdeacon I have seen how the pressures and demands of ministry can adversely affect the most resilient of ministers and I have experienced it myself in my own ministry. The work can be intense and there is an expectation, even of those allegedly working in part time roles, that one will be universally and eternally available. I was once told that becoming an archdeacon would be bad for my soul and I now understand the sentiment behind that. I get to see the underbelly of the institution and at times it is not an attractive sight. Indeed, much of an archdeacon's working ministry is spent trying to repair the damage we do to each other whilst trying not to add to the carnage. Too many of us, both lay and ordained, carry the burden of fellow Christians' unkindness and

intolerance but there is no doubt that clergy especially come under sustained fire much more often. Most pernicious of all is the abusive email masquerading as “constructive criticism”; the modern equivalent of the handwritten letter written in purple ink and block capitals from ‘outraged of Little Snoring on the marsh’. I don’t know any clergy who do not feel some sense of anxiety at as they present themselves before their Inbox each morning. Email is both a blessing and a curse and much hurt might be avoided if we all breathed in before pressing send.

Now to that bigger picture. Much of the recent debate around clergy well-being has been focused upon the institutional relationship between the church and priest with real pain being expressed by clergy at all levels who feel betrayed or at least let down by a system they trusted and believed in. The heat in this debate has inevitably focused in on money but in truth the real issue is trust. Significant damage has been caused by the breaking of the clergy covenant, that implicit and explicit institutional promise that clergy would be looked after in retirement in return for a lifetime of service and sacrifice. The growing disquiet from both laity and clergy over the terms and condition of service for clergy has gained serious traction in recent months and it has at last provoked a response. I certainly warmly welcome the very recently proposed improvements in clergy pensions, and hopefully also clergy retirement housing, but it is only a return to what was promised to me in the first place when I entered training 40 years ago. I am grateful but my gratitude has limits.

Now I am fully cognisant of the fact that for many in the pews and indeed perhaps for some of you sitting here this morning talk of clergy well-being is always in danger of

becoming self-indulgent, but the truth is that for the first time in my ministry I am seeing real clergy hardship that goes beyond simply being on a tight budget. I have been deeply touched by some of the stories I have heard, and I am also immensely grateful to those lay people who have spoken out in support of their ministers and clergy. There is another whole debate to be had about how the church treats its lay employees, and I pray that that debate is held sooner rather than later but at this moment in time I think that provision for our retired brothers and sisters is urgent and timely.

Hopefully no one goes into ministry to become wealthy (they will be very disappointed) or in a vain quest for status and power (they will again be somewhat deflated at the reality) but because they feel called by God. That sense of vocation will completely change the course of their lives and the lives of those who love and care for them. Their relationships with friends and family will be changed for ever and the world will forever view them as other and perhaps even a little strange. *(My Ulster Protestant father had to lie down in a dark room when I told him I wanted to be a priest; he took little comfort that the Church of England was also sort of Protestant.)* There will be sacrifice and heartbreak. Imposter syndrome will take up residence in your mind and you will daily feel that sense of inadequacy that all good ministers should feel. There has not been day in the last 36 years when I have not felt that God must have made a mistake and he will eventually realise it but he is running out of road! Being a priest has been the greatest privilege of my life and if I had to do it all over again I would in a heartbeat. I might even apply to be an archdeacon again!

So, to today's business. Thank you to you all for giving this subject your care and attention and I know that the clergy have been very touched by the warmth and depth of the lay engagement with this subject. I am very conscious that well-being is not just for the clergy or for ministers more generally but for us all. However, I remain convinced that healthy, happy, and fulfilled clergy are a sign of a healthy, happy, and fulfilled church and will speak of kingdom values to a world where so often human dignity and well-being is undervalued and on occasion of no value whatsoever.