

Five years into retirement I am still conscious of the rapidly changing context in which clergy and others minister. Twenty-three years on the Bishop's staff (with different hats on!) led me to be deeply immersed in the shifts which have been taking place over the last few decades, and in the strategies to manage them. The changes happening even now are huge, and must be especially bewildering for those trained for different patterns of ministry from those which are currently required, particularly from the stipendiary clergy. As stipendiary numbers fall, and the cost of ministry falls increasingly on the local church, questions about the future of ministry abound. Those in the field still have to try and do the job, and balance traditional expectations from many of their folk against the realities of ministering in the contemporary Church.

One thing is certain: those realities cannot be wished away, and we need courage and clear-sightedness to find the right way ahead. It may be that a stipendiary ministerial workforce cannot be sustained even at the size it is now, and that we are moving to a time when self-supporting ministers will be as much, if not more, the norm in parochial ministry. Paid or unpaid, clergy and ministers need our recognition that they are working in a very fluid and sometimes uncertain context, and deserve every support we can give them.

During my time in office, one thing at least became clear – that the support available to clergy under stress was inadequate, and needed a total rethink. Previously, the common assumption was that the whole range of pastoral care for the clergy lay with the senior staff, and we accepted that responsibility. But we were not necessarily expert in every field of distress, and there was little other provision; and it is just a fact of life that dealing with such cases adequately demanded a great deal of time. We could occasionally call in other professionals but it could be expensive, even when the right person could be identified - and there was no budget. Further, the much-treasured independence of the clergy was linked to an ethos of self-sufficiency; and even where the relationship with the senior staff was good, it could be humanly difficult for an individual priest to admit a need for help. Priests often felt that this would put a black mark against them, and their chances of any decent further moves would be prejudiced. However hard we tried to counter that, it became increasingly clear that what was required was an independent source of help, professionally competent and skilled, freely available to those who needed it without reference to the senior staff.

Happily, there were sufficient clergy and laity who were of the same mind for us to obtain a budget; and with professional help we drew up a brief for a new service. Since 2003 the Diocese of Exeter has had a Pastoral Care and Counselling service for the clergy, their spouses and families, which is free and totally confidential. (It has now been extended to lay employees of the Diocese, and to licensed Readers). Those eligible may refer themselves, and the fact that they have done so is not known to the senior staff. The service is led by a qualified Adviser, who has available to her other professional expertise for those who may need it. There is no doubt in my mind that the creation of this service

marked a significant step forward in the pastoral care of the clergy, even though at the time there were those – even amongst the clergy – who doubted the need for it. In the succeeding years the service has been used by over 160 clients, and that tells its own story.

Another change in the support of the clergy was the introduction of a system of ministerial review, which has undergone several transformations since its beginnings. At the heart of it was a conviction that every priest ought to be able to discuss their ministry in a structured way at regular intervals with a bishop or archdeacon, quite apart from any other contacts which they might have. I think, in truth, that the value of this varied considerably, however good the intention. I understand that the practice is under review again, with the thought that the senior staff ought not to be directly involved in the process, but perhaps able to discuss the outcome with the individual priest. Whatever the changes may be, it indicates that the proper care of and support for the clergy in the field is still on the agenda of the senior staff.

Inevitably there are still questions, because the context is still shifting. Like it or not, the senior staff play a very large role in the management of a changing Church: how is this role to be balanced with the care of the clergy? Like it or not, the role of the parochial clergy, especially the stipendiary clergy, is changing: how is this to be clarified, and prepared for? How are traditional expectations of parishioners to be modified, and the ministry of Readers and other lay people to be thoroughly accepted? Like it or not, every diocese faces a time of financial stringency: is the heart of parochial ministry still to be stipendiary, or is a move away from that, however much part of our history, one of the changes we face?