

15/05 Pastoral and practical support for clergy

(A report from the Standing Committee.)

Background

1. By resolution 15/05 the Synod requested that the Standing Committee or a committee appointed by Standing Committee to report to Synod on the following –

- (a) Is there a need to provide formalised pastoral and practical support for clergy within the Diocese?
- (b) If question (a) is answered in the affirmative, please identify the needs which need to be met?
- (c) What formalised pastoral and practical support in addition to current resources can be developed and offered to clergy and parishes to support the clergy.

2. In response to this request, the Standing Committee on 28 May 2007 appointed a committee comprising Bishop Ivan Lee, Archdeacon Terry Dein and Dr Greg Clarke to consider and report to the Standing Committee on the matters referred to in Synod resolution 15/05.

3. The Committee met on 12 July 2007.

Scope of the report

4. After consultation with the promoter of the Synod resolution as to his major concern the committee has limited its report to the pastoral support for clergy in circumstances of personal struggle and difficulty.

5. Clergy in need of purely practical support appear to be quite open about that need and are able to speak with parishioners, churchwardens, fellow staff, clergy friends, and the regional archdeacon, just to mention a few.

6. On such topics as financial management, management of people, strategic planning etc there appear to be courses and help available.

7. In contrast, when it comes to personal and private matters, members of the clergy are naturally reticent to discuss such things with someone unless there is an existing and non threatening relationship of trust.

8. Practical issues are often quite visible but personal issues can be largely hidden.

9. Personal issues and problems that are suppressed and not dealt may manifest in a more serious difficulty later.

10. Any attention, therefore, as to how we may better support clergy in their personal lives generally (preventative) and in times of personal difficulty (crises) in particular, is of great significance for both the minister and the ministry being conducted.

Sub-Committee on Pastoral Care of Church Workers

11. The Committee has made contact with the Sub-Committee on Pastoral Care of Church Workers. To a large extent the work of that committee duplicates our enquiries.

12. With their permission we produce below a précis of the discussion items identified in the interim report discussed by that committee on 20 June 2007 –

- A survey of church workers is planned to identify perceived causes of stress and serious concerns in ministry.
- Support needs to be of a preventative nature rather than a reaction to burnout or stress
- Confidentiality is a key aspect of pastoral support.
- An emphasis on the culture of ministry.
- A stigma seems to attach to those who admit to problematic struggles.
- Many ministers lack a personal life outside of ministry.
- Total health and wellbeing needs addressing.
- Post college training in relationships and ministry health.
- The legal structure of the Diocese makes a gracious separation from ministry difficult.
- Tension between the autonomy of the local congregation and the centralized authority.

- Expectations on wives – no defined role – pastoral gap.

Role of Bishops, Archdeacons and Area Deans

13. It should be noted that under the existing structures of the diocese personal support activity does occur. Many individual clergy, struggling with ministry or personal issues, have found support and solutions by working with their Bishop, Archdeacon or Area Dean.

14. This involvement usually originates from clergy making contact and asking for assistance, but may also be a natural outcome of a visit or phone conversation.

15. We note however that some personal matters may not easily be discussed within these structures for fear of such matters being perceived as career limiting or conflicting with the administrative responsibilities of such officers of the church. Some clergy do turn to their Bishop, Archdeacon or Area Dean, others choose not to, for a variety of reasons. We view this as quite natural and appropriate.

Confidential Survey of Clergy

16. Bishop Lee conducted a brief and informal confidential survey in July 2007. Approximately one hundred clergy from around the diocese responded. The thoughtfulness, vulnerability and honesty of many respondents were greatly appreciated. It was very encouraging to see how many had support networks in place. However, those who responded may be those who already have good networks.

17. The personal difficulties experienced by clergy include –

- The normal stresses in marriage and family, but with the added pressure of their relationships being in public view. Whatever issues arise in the marriage or family, the minister is expected to “show up” on Sundays and church events, and look positive. Clergy may therefore suppress or fail to deal with real issues, not from a motive of deception, but as a mechanism to cope.
- The weariness from supporting those with troubles such as mental illness, abuse, relationship problems, grief, financial difficulties, loneliness, suicide, loss of faith, etc.
- Personal difficulties include: retirement and financial issues, physical and mental health, and dealing with difficult parishioners.

18. As expected, clergy, like everyone else, turn to a vast range of people and support systems, depending on the nature of the difficulty, including personal friends, family, colleagues in ministry, mentors, experienced or retired clergy, diocesan staff, and professional counselors and agencies.

19. “Formalised support” was understood in various ways, but the majority of respondents was not supportive of such a system if it meant any kind of “enforced” or “compulsory” system; or some additional layer of diocesan “hierarchy”; or any official files being kept. Many said that clergy should take initiative and ensure they develop their support networks – any imposed system would not work. A number commented that the problem is more that those who need pastoral support the most may not seek help or admit there are difficulties, and therefore isolate themselves.

20. Most of those who did support a “formalised” system understood this to mean a clearer path or process by which support could be requested and/or offered, and a greater range and availability of support people and systems. A few respondents did support some kind of compulsory pastoral process, including a compulsory review and accountability system. Others suggested a non compulsory system where clergy could voluntarily place themselves under a trusted supervisor who is not connected with the parish or organization they work for.

21. Most respondents felt they had adequate support from their Bishop and Archdeacon, and/or other supports as mentioned in paragraph 18 above. Other supports mentioned as being of significant help include –

- Their Moore College year which continues to meet once or twice a year.
- Focus on Ministry “Retreat Groups”, which were established some years ago in the diocese and now include approximately 80 clergy. These groups are informal, create their own rules and are growing in popularity as they seem to be meeting the need for support, in a context of confidentiality and friendship. Numbers are set to double in the next year or so.
- What some call “Clusters” – a small group of clergy meeting regularly, for mutual support and personal accountability.
- A “buddy” system, where two clergy agree to meet regularly for mutual encouragement and accountability, including permission to challenge and correct one another.

44 Supplementary Report of Standing Committee & Other Reports & Papers

- Area deanery meetings
- The recent Arch Hart conference

22. The most common suggestion was that a list of resources and personnel be developed and updated which clergy could voluntarily and confidentially turn to, for a whole range of personal problems or needs. A few people suggested that a number of experienced clergy could be set aside in a full time or part time paid capacity to be available to clergy. Others suggested a fund that could be accessed by clergy to pay for professional assistance, and preventative care such as marriage enrichment courses.

23. The committee recognised that it would be important also to consult laity concerning the pastoral care of clergy, but this was not possible within the time frame and scope of this report.

Conclusion

24. It is clear that clergy will vary in the kind of support they need or are willing to turn to. A one size fits all approach therefore seems unlikely to succeed. The committee makes two general conclusions. Firstly, just as clergy are encouraged to take life-long initiative and responsibility in growing their theological understanding and ministry skills, it is likewise important to encourage the same in the areas of their personal care, growth and relationships. Secondly, as the circumstances and challenges of modern ministry change and become more complex, a greater range of resources need to be developed and made accessible to support our clergy.

Action taken by the Standing Committee

25. Standing Committee –

- (a) agreed not to change existing formal structures or add another level of diocesan leadership, but continue to develop an increasing range of support resources and personnel, and
- (b) recommended to Bishops and Archdeacons that they –
 - assist all clergy in their regions to take initiative and responsibility in proper self care and in developing their support networks and lines of accountability which suit their personality and circumstances, and
 - develop an ongoing list of willing ministry “mentors” or “advisors” in each region, to which clergy can turn to. Such people may include retired clergy and clergy in parishes and organisations, and they would each decide on the number of clergy they could at any one time support. The purpose is purely supportive and advisory, and there would be no reporting back to diocesan leadership, and
 - encourage each area deanery to discuss the various support mechanisms available and how they can better support each other in ministry, and
 - promote the Focus on Ministry retreat groups, and
- (c) requested the Registrar to develop a register of professional resources, such as Christian psychologists and counsellors who can help clergy with a full range of personal issues, and to make it available to all clergy, and
- (d) requested Ministry, Training and Development to compile and send to all clergy a list of good resources such as courses, books, web sites and upcoming conferences (including recommendations and descriptions of various support structures and mechanisms that clergy have found helpful, such as the mentoring system, the buddy system, clusters, etc), and
- (e) referred this report to the Mission Board for consideration in light of Policy 4 of the mission regarding Reforming Structures.

For and on behalf of the Standing Committee.

BISHOP IVAN LEE
Chairman

28 August 2007