

Selfcare in Ministry: some posts on clergy and stress

In early 2007, my attention was caught by an article in the Church Times called *What price priesthood*, which reported the first research programme on clergy stress. The same week, I came across an interesting couple of blog posts by Revd Sam Norton. At the time, I was an incumbent myself, and a lot of what I read resonated with me, especially the way the wider Church tended to avoid looking at the issue of clergy workload when implementing its quinquennial ‘strategies’ - which normally were ways of working out how to do the same things with fewer stipendiary clergy.

Begin this week’s study by reading these posts:

- Sam’s [first post](#).
- Sam’s [second post](#), including interaction between him and his interlocutor, MadPriest (aka Revd Jonathan Haggar). The point at issue is whether Sam has the right priorities in his ministry, or whether he is becoming a cog in an ecclesiastical machine.

Questions:

1. **What do you think of MadPriest’s list of essential jobs as defined in the Ordinal?**
2. **If you would do otherwise, what would your list look like?**
3. **What do you think of Sam’s response? Is MadPriest being oversimplistic? Is Sam being too individualistic in his model of ministry? What do you think of *his* list of priorities?**
4. **What do you think of the advice Sam is getting from Gordon MacDonald, *Ordering your private world*?**

Sam’s working week of about 55+ hours is fairly typical and it can easily exceed this if preparatory and supportive reading is taken into account, or for time-limited reasons. The other factor is that different people do the same tasks at different speeds, depending on their skills and abilities. (Which seems to be recognised in Gordon MacDonald’s book to which Sam refers above.)

I was fascinated with their correspondence so it sparked some blog posts of my own – remember, these were written when I was active as an incumbent. Perhaps now, my memory is getting rose-tinted, but it’s sobering to read my reflections at the time.

- [You can read my first blog post on the subject here.](#)

Questions:

1. **What do you think of the phrase, ‘Ministerial faithfulness in human relationships involves administrative faithfulness too.’ How can a priest, by themselves, place limits so that they don’t spend all their time doing admin?**
2. **Reflect on the story I narrated about not ‘being there’ for someone when they needed me. A sense of guilt can be one of the boundaries preventing personal time and space from expanding. What advice would you give me?**

So is it a problem with the mythology associated with the working title we bear - ‘priest’?

- [I reflected on this in my second blog post on the subject.](#)

My remarks really hint at a distinction that I would like to make, I think, between myself and MadPriest's more traditional understanding of what priests are for. In a nutshell, MadPriest says 'you can't be a proper priest with all the administrative stuff, so just forget about that, and do what the ordinal tells you to do'. I respond with a point along the lines of: 'I'm not sure about the title "priest". It locks us into archetypes which are not biblical. Why not go back to "presbyter" and do some from-scratch thinking about all the things that could mean for us today.' (The comment by John Richardson indicates approval from the Reform end of things. Praise from John on my blog is always praise indeed!)

Question:

- **To what extent do you think the general view of the parish priest is shaped by archetypes from the past which are making the job difficult or undoable?**

Like Sam, my curacy had been formed by the ideal of 'visiting'. Often one key area of guilt-related stress is the way clergy find themselves limited in the amount of time they spent visiting church members and people within the parish. Truth be told, I always felt I was failing in this area of my ministry. (Maybe for you it will be some other area, but there will often be one area where you just feel a failure...)

Less critical, [but you may wish to read the third post, on visiting...](#)

'Whenever you hear the word "strategy", reach for your gun...'

My final blog post sought to dissect the way clergy workload has increased (and continues to increase) as the Church of England continues to manage decline in congregation and clergy numbers together with the rising costs of maintaining stipendiary clergy. In passing, it explores a suggestion made by +Mike Hill that some priests should perhaps consider liberating themselves from the need to earn a stipend by 'driving a white van' (or equivalent low-stress income generation activity).

- [Read the post here – it's my final summing-up.](#)

Final Questions:

Consider my closing remarks: "In the meantime, my thoughts return to Mad Priest's kindly criticism of Rev Sam, and the unease they provoked in me. If priests are called to serve the Church, then like it or not, we have to serve in ways that we are asked, however flawed they may be. It is going to become much more difficult for priests like Mad Priest to move to new posts, as increasing numbers are shaped by the kind of 'strategy' outlined above. Perhaps a priest who really wants the time to pray deeply, form seriously transformative relationships with people, preside over worship and teach the Faith, *and* still have quality time left for their own human and family development is going to have to seek a ministry outside the formal and stipendiary structures of the Church of England."

- **Is this a cop-out, a pipe-dream, or an image of the future?**
- **What thoughts to you have, especially in the light of your next move?**

Postscript

Earlier last year, MadPriest's final extension of his time-limited contract in the Diocese of Newcastle came to an end. Despite his protestations to the diocese, he and his family finally had to out of the vicarage which they occupied. Rather than applying for another parish job, he is attempting to earn his living through other sources. [You can read basic details here.](#)