

# Covenant for Clergy Care and Wellbeing

## Consultation response by Sons & Friends of the Clergy

### Background

Sons & Friends of the Clergy is an Anglican clergy support charity established by Royal Charter and with origins going back to 1655. Our charitable objects are, in relation to ordained Anglican clergy, ordinands and their dependants, the relief or prevention of poverty or hardship and the relief of illness and the promotion of health, whether physical or mental. In 2017 we gave out grants totalling almost £2.7 million to over 1,000 eligible beneficiaries, mostly in the Church of England, but also in other Anglican provinces in the British Isles. We are the UK's largest and oldest charity focused exclusively on the wellbeing of Anglican clergy. We therefore welcome this opportunity to respond to the consultation paper on the proposed Covenant for Clergy Care and Wellbeing.

### General comments

We see evidence in our own charitable work of increased pressures on clergy wellbeing and heightened levels of clergy stress. We therefore welcome the principle of a covenant for clergy care and wellbeing, and the idea of establishing it by an Act of Synod, with subsequent adoption by diocesan synods. We also agree on the need for appropriate monitoring of implementation, including a review by General Synod in February 2022. In the context of what is perceived to be greater managerialism and 'target-setting' within the Church, we also detect increased levels of cynicism and disengagement amongst many members of the clergy, especially those approaching retirement. So effective implementation of a new covenant by all dioceses (not just those who already promote best practice in clergy care) will be absolutely crucial if the covenant is to be more than just words.

Our specific comments on the consultation paper relate to the following three areas:

- The definition of what the paper calls '**the Wider Church**' and the need to include within it para-church organisations like Sons & Friends, and indeed secular organisations who work in support of clergy welfare, which may not necessarily operate 'through the Office of the Bishop'.
- The effect on clergy wellbeing and stress levels of **financial factors**, particularly clergy stipends and retirement provision, neither of which is touched on in the consultation paper.
- The need to **restore trust** between ordinary clergy and diocesan hierarchies, a trust which appears to have been undermined in recent years by greater managerialism, a lack of appropriate pastoral supervision and inconsistent approaches to Ministerial Development Reviews (highlighted in the paper), and also the increasing misuse of the Clergy Discipline Measure (CDM) process.

### Defining 'the Wider Church'

We note that the Wider Church is defined in the paper, the draft Covenant and the 'Big Conversation' questions as being those church institutions which act 'through the Office of the Bishop'. While we agree that it is only those bodies under the diocesan bishop who can be required to commit to the Covenant, through the authority of the Bishop, we think this definition

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is too narrow. This is because it fails to bring into the equation non-church organisations who may be focused on or involved in clergy wellbeing. These include charities like Sons & Friends, St Luke's Healthcare for the Clergy and The Henry Smith Charity, umbrella groups like Broken Rites and Unite's Church of England Clergy Association, specialist retreat and wellbeing centres like the Society of Mary & Martha and Holy Rood House, and other organisations involved in supporting clergy such as Christians Against Poverty, which runs a 'Money Ministers' debt advice service.

The risk of defining 'the Wider Church' too narrowly is that it creates a 'them and us' culture, with neither side (church and para-church) knowing what the other is doing, and the opportunity for a holistic approach to clergy care and wellbeing is lost. We already see this with some diocesan 'clergy care' handbooks failing to mention the full range of support services available for clergy outside the confines of the church. This approach was even reflected in the composition of the Clergy Covenant Working Group in September 2017, with only one member who was not a member of General Synod or otherwise part of the institutional church. The care and wellbeing of Anglican clergy and their families will be best served by 'the Wider Church' being defined broadly, particularly in the footnote to the covenant text itself, so that all those working for the welfare of clergy can be involved in the discussion.

### **Financial factors affecting clergy wellbeing**

We note that the consultation paper barely touched on financial factors impacting clergy wellbeing and stress, although there is a brief reference (para 35) to the involvement of the church's Remuneration and Conditions of Service Committee in future monitoring. The clergy stipend is intended to be 'adequate for clergy to discharge their duties without undue financial anxiety'<sup>1</sup>, yet we see a significant minority of clergy whose ministry is affected by such anxiety. Sons & Friends co-funded with Ministry Division in 2017 some detailed analysis of the financial wellbeing of Anglican clergy and ordinands. This research indicated:

- Most clergy are doing well but 20% of ordained Anglican clergy are struggling or 'just about getting by' financially.<sup>2</sup>
- Some 29% of ordained clergy with children under 16 in the household report financial difficulties.<sup>3</sup>
- 43% of those in stipendiary ministry said they were finding it difficult to save money regularly.<sup>4</sup>

As part of our work on financial hardship in clergy households we have commissioned research into what might constitute a 'minimum income standard' for clergy in the UK and this confirms that clergy with more than two dependent children in the household are likely to be especially vulnerable to financial stress, if income is largely reliant on the stipend with little or no spousal or other income, and restricted welfare benefits. The present stipend system does not appear to protect young clergy families from 'undue financial anxiety', and this will continue to have a major impact on clergy wellbeing.

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<sup>1</sup> *Generosity and Sacrifice: the report of the Clergy Stipends Review Group* (London: Church House Publishing, 2001), 67

<sup>2</sup> *A Closer Look at Financial Wellbeing* (December 2017), 19

<sup>3</sup> *A Closer Look at Financial Wellbeing* (December 2017), 29

<sup>4</sup> *A Closer Look at Financial Wellbeing* (December 2017), 23

Anecdotally, we also see significant numbers of clergy with unsustainable levels of personal unsecured debt, and this is an area where we hope to undertake further research in collaboration with Ministry Division.

Anxiety about retirement provision (pension levels and housing) is also a significant factor affecting clergy wellbeing. The latest Ministry Division research suggests that over 40% of those ordained Anglican clergy surveyed strongly or somewhat disagreed with the statement that they had adequate provision in place for their retirement.<sup>5</sup>

Financial hardship grants to serving and retired Anglican clergy will continue to be a major feature of our charitable activity, but any attempt to improve clergy care and wellbeing that does not also seek to address the inadequacy of clergy stipends and retirement provision (pensions and housing) is likely to face significant obstacles.

### **Restoring trust**

We are struck by the levels of cynicism and disengagement shown by many ordained clergy towards church initiatives on wellbeing. An anonymous contributor to the Sheldon Hub online forum suggested that the draft covenant is ‘another lengthy document that will, in practice, be filed away and quietly forgotten about...just like the anti-bullying policy’.<sup>6</sup> Bishops and Archdeacons are sometimes perceived as being remote and too driven by Renewal and Reform targets to focus on pastoral matters. This was noted in an earlier paper on clergy wellbeing, with one Diocesan Clergy Chair quoted as saying that ‘no one lifts the phone’.<sup>7</sup> We are surprised that these issues have not been revisited in greater depth in the consultation paper. We do however welcome the proposals to improve Ministerial Development Reviews and make MDR practice more consistent across dioceses. We remain concerned however about the increasing misuse of the Clergy Discipline Measure (CDM). CDM cases are on the increase (the number of cases raised has increased by over half in the last two years<sup>8</sup>) and are often being used for complaints rather than disciplinary matters, which was never the purpose of the CDM. We understand that many bishops are unwilling to take the advice of diocesan registrars that they should dismiss more CDM cases as frivolous. We welcome the recent campaign launched by Sheldon Hub to review the CDM rules and do believe that a major overhaul is needed if trust between clergy and diocesan hierarchies is to be restored.

Sons & Friends of the Clergy  
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<sup>5</sup> *Mapping the Wellbeing of Church of England Clergy and Ordinands* (June 2017), 44

<sup>6</sup> [www.sheldonhub.org/forums/forum/thread/3379](http://www.sheldonhub.org/forums/forum/thread/3379)

<sup>7</sup> *GS 2072 paper on Clergy Wellbeing for General Synod* (May 2017), section 7

<sup>8</sup> Annual Reports of the Clergy Discipline Commission for 2017 and 2016 (101 complaints in 2017, 67 in 2015)