

The Role of Time Management in Clergy Wellbeing

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Abstract

A life of a priest should speak powerfully about God not only to the worshipping communities in their care, but also to the wider community. But so very often this living witness is diminished when clergy suffer from poor wellbeing due to a greater number of roles and responsibilities that impact negatively upon their lives. This paper explores the role of time management and that it may be a contributing factor towards promoting wellbeing. Finally, a new tool is introduced that may assist the priest in providing a greater insight into the shape of their ministry.

Background

The whole life of a priest should speak powerfully about God not only to the worshipping communities in their care, but also to the wider community. That their prayer life, their worship and discipleship should be a living witness for all to see. Their life should so mimic that of Christ that those around about the priest will be drawn to emulate a life of holiness, a life of joy, a life that is not only thriving but importantly seen to be thriving. The words of Saint Irenaeus '*The glory of God is man [and woman] fully alive*' should resonate with the priest.

And yet, so very often the experience of parish priests is that a greater number of roles with competing demands, coupled with increasing workloads are placed upon them as they oversee more parishes. As a consequence when clergy gather together they tend not to discuss how they are each *fully alive* but will inevitably articulate the pressures, the strains and the unreasonable expectations that are placed upon them by the wider church and the congregations they seek to serve.

This lack of wellbeing widespread amongst the clergy has not gone unnoticed by the wider church and in July 2017 the General Synod appointed a Clergy Wellbeing Working Group to bring proposals back to Synod two years later. The Working Group published a draft document (*A Covenant for Clergy Care and Wellbeing*¹) for consultation so that a more considered report might be brought before Synod. A

plethora of responses were eagerly provided^{2,3}. Whilst some welcomed the draft document, others were keen to indicate that it did not address many key issues (e.g. financial worries of clergy, lack of support from senior clergy, poor use of the Clergy Discipline Measure, trust between clergy and diocesan hierarchies).

A short paper, like this, cannot possibly address or tackle the multi-faceted and complex issues that diminish wellbeing amongst the clergy. However, one aspect that appears to be absent from much of the discussions surrounding clergy wellbeing is that time management may be a contributing factor (and perhaps, even a significant one) in the wellbeing of clergy. This paper briefly reviews some of the research into clergy wellbeing before examining the role of time management and finally introduces a new tool that may assist the priest towards improved wellbeing.

Flourishing in Ministry

The psychological science of clergy wellbeing may still be relatively new, but the idea that clergy need to look after themselves has been known for at least 400 years. Charles Borromeo, a catholic priest in the 16th century, commented that

*Are you in charge of the souls of the parish? If so, do not neglect your own soul, do not give yourself to others so completely that you have nothing left for yourself. You have to be mindful of your people without becoming forgetful of yourself.*⁴

Whilst much has surely changed in parish ministry since those words were written they are, like many gems of wisdom, still instructive and relevant for today. However, the daily demands and pressures faced by clergy in the 21st century, this gem of wisdom is unlikely to be sufficient to engender flourishing in ministry.

Fortunately, in the last decade a wealth of research papers, articles and reports have been published on wellbeing. In particular, Professor Bloom and his *Flourishing in Ministry* team at the University of Notre Dame, Indiana have undertaken considerable research⁵⁻⁸ into factors surrounding and contributing towards clergy wellbeing. They suggest that wellbeing comprises four building blocks, namely

- **Happiness** - the emotional dynamics and the subjective quality of our daily lives.
- **Resilience** - our capacity to adapt, change, and respond to life's challenges, and our capacity to grow, learn, and to develop new capabilities.
- **Self-integrity** - our identity which includes the beliefs about who we are; our self-image, and self-worth; and our sense of respect and dignity.
- **Thriving** - the meaning and significance we experience; our sense of having values and beliefs that inspire us, create purpose; experiencing deep and positive connections with others.

They define a person as flourishing when someone is reporting high levels in all four areas. Bloom explores each of these areas in detail as they apply to a life in ministry. Their research has found that in the area of resilience, workload is one of the most important factors that shape and form our lives. For many caregivers (and clergy), work is *'unpredictable and extremely diverse. Work does not come in a well-ordered flow but is more ... fast-paced, a continuous jumble of different tasks'*⁶. The diversity and assortment of tasks means that there are high switching costs when a new task requires a very different skill set and approach (e.g. moving from a financial meeting to a pastoral encounter).

In later research, Bloom⁶ indicates that by mapping daily experiences and the patterns in workload a person can obtain an insight into what creates a smooth work-life rhythm and conversely what might disrupt it. The mapping of these daily experiences forms the focus of the latter part of this paper.

This proposed mapping is by no means innovative nor restricted to the 21st century as a former vicar of my parish writing in the church magazine¹¹ in 1967 was shocked to find that over a six week period just 37% of his time was spent on what he termed spiritual work (services, visiting, sermon preparation, etc.) whilst 63% was spent on administrative work (form filling, meetings, correspondence). He wistfully looked back to his predecessors in the 1900s who were able to devote much of their time to pastoral visiting. He suggested that the time must come for the Church to provide a full-time parish assistant to free clergy for their pastoral work and went on to conclude *'I believe that it would do more than anything else to re-establish the Church as a living force in the community'*. Despite the advances in technology (and maybe because of them) the multitude of differing tasks and responsibilities competing for a minister's time has no doubt increased since the late 1960s.

The Importance of Time Management

Over the last 30 to 40 years many articles and books have been written about time management, particularly in regard to the business world. This is probably unsurprising given the drive for greater efficiency, productivity and effectiveness that many people and corporations are seeking. However, time management is often frowned upon, and even dismissed outright in Christian circles as a business practice that should be avoided at all costs. I believe time management should be embraced partly because there may be lessons that can be learned (and it would be arrogant to think otherwise) but primarily

because the roots of making good use of time by structuring the day are far older than modern secular practices.

The Rule of Benedict has been the inspiration of most monastic communities for the last 1500 years. The Rule organises the monastic day into allotted periods: communal worship, work, recreation, rest, private prayer and sleep. At the boundary between each activity a bell is sounded and one activity is laid down whilst another begins; knowing that a return to the former activity will occur in its due time. This Benedictine practice is not about slavish adherence to a Rule but an attempt (however imperfect) to embody an ethos or a rhythm. This rhythm pervades the life of the community (as a whole) but also the life of each member.

Too often clergy buy into the myth that there is a quieter day just around the corner if they only put in longer working hours today. The result is that longer working hours are normalised, and that prayer, recreation, rest, time with family and friends, meals and sleep are all impacted negatively and as a consequence wellbeing suffers. It is suggested that if a similar discipline of Benedictine time management was adopted by clergy that their wellbeing may improve (all other factors being equal) and may even allow their ministry to flourish.

Consequently, time management should not be seen as a practice exclusive to the business world but rather is deeply rooted in the spiritual discipline of a Rule that has shaped and formed much of western Christianity. And hence, should be embraced and not shunned.

It is perhaps with this in mind that Gordon MacDonald in his highly popular book (*Ordering your Private World*⁹) points his readers towards organisation by ‘*budgeting time*’ and becoming good stewards of this limited resource.

Budgeting of time should also involve planning regular periods of rest not only throughout the day but ensuring that the weekly day-off and annual leave are taken. It is important for rest to be seen not merely as a cessation of labour but time set aside to enjoy and appreciate the world around and the fruit of their labours. The labourers may well be few, but they shouldn’t be overworked. In the Gospel, when the disciples return from preaching and anointing the sick, Mark reports that

The apostles gathered around Jesus, and told him all that they had done and taught. He said to them, ‘Come away to a deserted place all by yourselves and rest a while.’ For many were coming and going, and they had no leisure even to eat. And they went away in the boat to a deserted place by themselves. (Mark 6:30-32)

After such a busy time, Jesus is concerned for the apostles’ wellbeing, perhaps, because their focus has been solely on ministry activities and they have neglected to nourish themselves both physically and spiritually. His concern is demonstrated by inviting them to come away and spend time alone with him (and apparently it needs a stretch of water so that they might not be distracted from their rest !).

At the end of this section, two further points need to be mentioned, the first is that ministry has a tendency for not fitting tidily into set hours but rather there is an unpredictable nature to it. However, when time management techniques are employed it is more likely that unpredictable events can be better accommodated into a busy week. If the minister has little, or no, time management then the likelihood is that their time will be planned for them by others and hence they will frenetically move from one activity to another in a chaotic-like fashion with only a superficial focus.

Secondly, when an excessive workload is placed upon a priest (either from the parish or a diocesan hierarchy) that cannot be accomplished by one

person, then time management is unlikely to remedy the situation. Time management is not about squeezing more and more into the day but fostering and maintaining healthy boundaries.

Introducing a New Tool

Thyme Tracker¹⁰ is a user-friendly tool to assist the Christian minister (clergy or lay) in time management. It was originally developed for my personal use to undertake a simple audit of my time so as to obtain a greater awareness of where my time was being spent. The inspiration for this audit arose when a church member (who was at the time exploring ordination to the priesthood) wrote to me following a particularly long and arduous PCC meeting expressing his concern that a considerable portion of my week was apparently given over to *'administrative tasks, the upkeep of church buildings and churchyards, writing faculty applications, funding proposals and the like'*. I was immensely grateful to receive such a letter. However, I was conscious that my situation was by no means unique and indeed many parish priests across the Church of England could share similar experiences.

Thyme Tracker (v2.4) has undergone a number of iterations and improvements since its first inception. In essence, it allows the minister to daily record the amount of time spent on a range of activities (up to 25 separate activities can be monitored). These activities can be edited so as to better reflect the tasks associated with an individual's ministry be it parish priest, cathedral canon or a chaplain. The tool keeps a running total of the amount of time spent on a particular activity across the week, month and year, and also provides the total time spent on all activities across the same time periods.

Data Entry The simple data entry (shown in Figure 1) should not belie the power of Thyme Tracker in analysing the data and displaying it in a

number of ways; both tabular and graphical. A chart displaying the total hours worked each week (not shown) provides the minister with quantitative figures and allows them to assess whether this is excessive over a sustained period, and hence provides an indicator of unhealthy practice. A report published by the Society of Mary and Martha (*Affirmation and Accountability*¹²) suggested a lower limit of 38 hours and an upper limit of 50 hours a week for full-time ministers. So for example, if a minister consistently works over 70 hours per week for over a month, it should cause them to at least consider whether this is healthy and sustainable.

Shaping Ministry Thyme Tracker also displays the total number of hours worked on an activity in a given period as a net chart (Figure 2) and a pie chart (Figure 3). In order to simplify the charts only the ten most prominent activities are displayed. It is suggested that a broad shape would be revealed if Thyme Tracker was used over a period of six to eight weeks as this would indicate whether there are areas that are being overlooked (e.g. pastoral visiting) and other areas that are over-invested (e.g. administration). These charts allow the minister to reflect upon the real shape (as opposed to the perceived shape) of their ministry. Bloom indicates that one of the elements for a person to thrive in ministry is when they are able *'to invest one's best personal resources (talents, capabilities, energies, time) into the attainment of cherished goals and admirable pursuits'*⁵. The insight gained through using Thyme Tracker and assessing where time is being invested (or spent) should assist the minister in the self-regulation of their time and ideally focus their attention on those areas of ministry that will allow them to thrive.[†]

[†] It is recognised that there will be areas of ministry that will not be conducive to an individual thriving, but nevertheless need doing.

MacDonald approached this from a different angle by suggesting that it was necessary to seize time as ‘*un-seized time will flow in the direction of one’s relative weakness*’⁹. In effect, more time is spent doing those tasks that a person is less equipped to do. This may lead the minister to consider delegating appropriately areas of ministry to someone else (clergy or lay) who has those necessary skills.

Annual Leave and other features A feature designed to promote clergy wellbeing is the ability for the minister to plan and record their annual leave and to display it visually (Figure 4). This allows a minister to see the whole year at a glance and aids him/her to ensure there are not extended periods in the year where no leave is taken. This facility may even ensure that all allocated annual leave is taken.

Thyme Tracker has many other useful features to aid the clergy in their ministry. These include:

- Six different lectionaries that are hyper-linked to Bible Gateway, allowing for simple access to the readings for Sundays and festivals;
- Sunrise/sunset times for Easter Day for UK locations;
- Dates of key festivals;
- Web links to Lectionary-based hymn choices;
- A simple Sunday service rota planner;
- Daily time-management tips.

Limitations Thyme Tracker is a tool that should aid the minister but it is not without its limitations. This is because it does not measure the value of time spent - be it in pastoral ministry, prayer, or sermon

preparation. For example, a five minute chance-encounter with a busy parent and their children in a crowded supermarket may be the most significant event in the life of the priest in that week. Rev. Cowley raises this issue in his article *Freedom from the Need to Achieve*¹³ and goes on to comment that:

Numbers are a great way to reassure us that what we are doing is somehow significant, and that we are in control. Of course, this often is an illusion. But numbers are a great way to feed the illusion.

Consequently, Thyme Tracker should be used as a guide to inform the minister of the broad shape of their ministry rather than as a means to evaluating the productivity or effectiveness of a particular day.

Concluding Remarks

In this short paper I have explored the role of time management and that it might be a contributing factor towards clergy wellbeing. The need for good time management is particularly important due to the unpredictable nature of ministry and the bewildering number of tasks that have now become common place and may ultimately cause a sense of being overwhelmed.

I have introduced a new tool that allows for the accurate recording of time spent on past events and therefore may bring a greater sense of awareness of those activities that are eating into this limited resource. This then may act as a catalyst toward the improved budgeting of time and may ultimately promote clergy wellbeing.

References

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Week Beginning: Monday 14 January

Rank	Activities	Percent	Total	Monday 14 Jan	Tuesday 15 Jan	Wednesday 16 Jan
10	Personal Dev & Spirituality	5%	2.75	0.50	0.50	0.75
	Administration [incl. emails]	4%	2.25	0.50	0.25	1.00
8	Parish Organisation – PCCs	6%	3.25		1.00	2.25
7	Staff Meetings	6%	3.50	1.00		
	Building Work / Fabric					
	Churchyard	2%	1.00	0.25		0.25
	Service Preparation	1%	0.50			0.50
1	Sermon Writing	11%	6.00	2.00		
4	Sunday Services	9%	5.00			
	Weekday Services					
4	Teaching / Mentoring	9%	5.00		1.25	
	Pastoral Care / Visiting					
	Church Social Events	3%	1.50		1.50	
	Spiritual Direction					

Figure 1: An example of the weekly data entry. Activities above a 5% threshold are automatically colour-coded in red (and ranked) allowing prominent tasks to be highlighted.

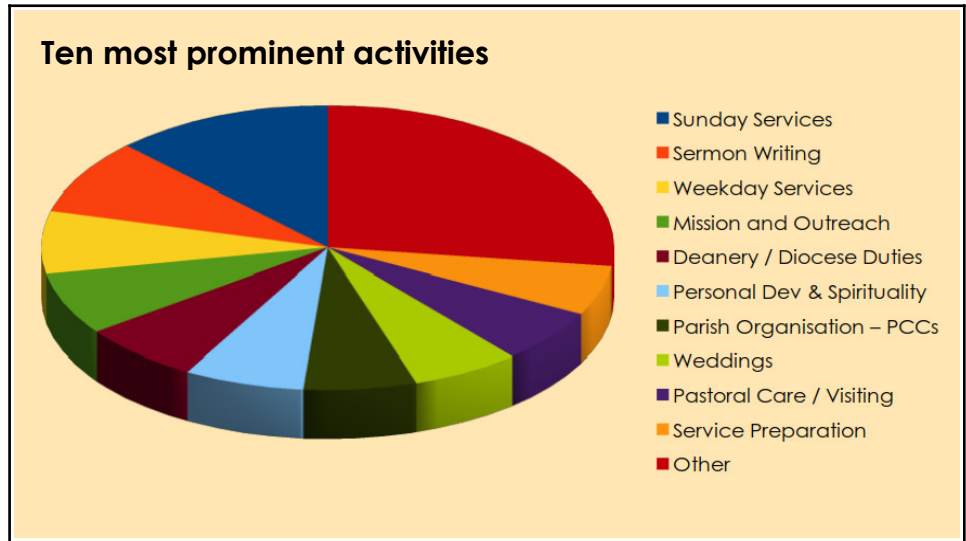


Figure 3: As for Figure 2, but represented as a Pie Chart.

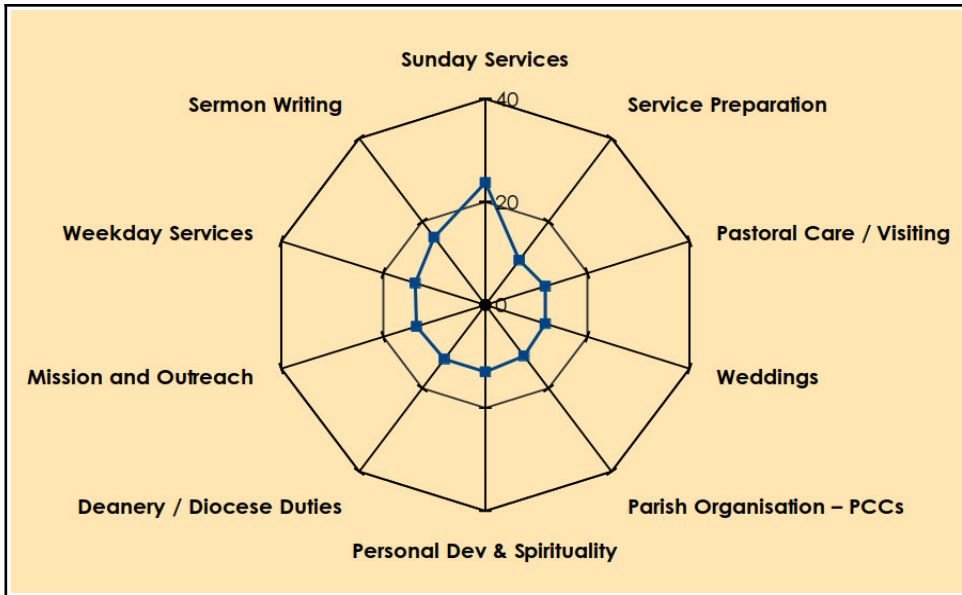


Figure 2: The ten most prominent activities over a whole month represented as a Net Chart.

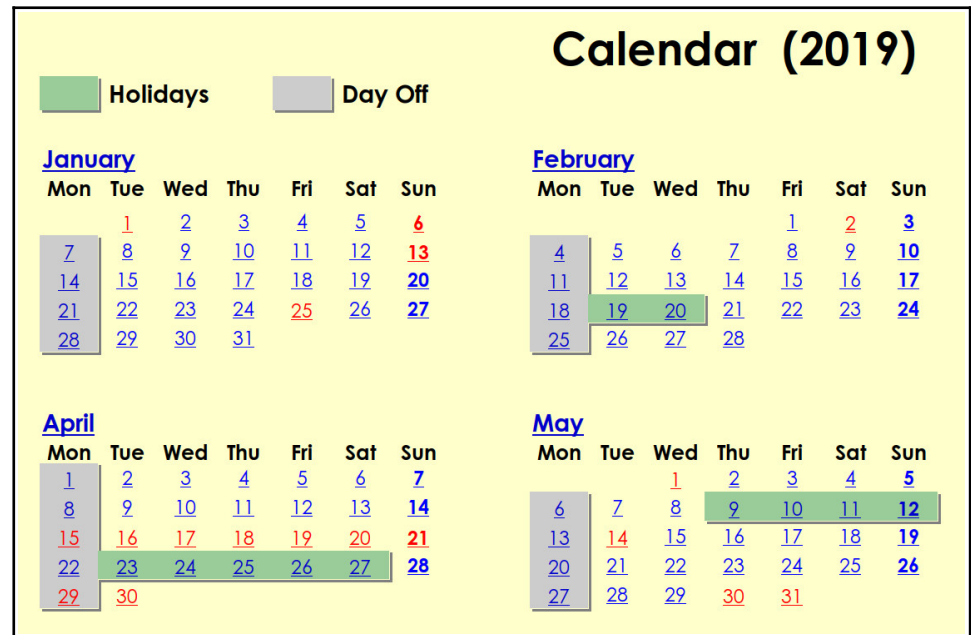


Figure 4: A portion of the Thyme Tracker calendar showing planned days off (grey) and holidays (green). Days shown in red indicate a festival or feast day (e.g. 6 January) and hence aids the planning of holidays.