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Focussed Study 4

# ‘Let Justice Roll Down Like Waters’

Exploring the Wellbeing  
of Working-Class Clergy  
in the Church of England:  
A Rally Cry for Change

October 2023

LIVING**ministry**



## The Living Ministry Research Project

### Aim

Living Ministry supports the work of the Church of England's Ministry Council and the wider church by providing ongoing, in-depth analysis to help those in dioceses, theological education institutions and the national church understand what helps ordained ministers flourish in ministry.

### Objectives

- To understand the factors that enable ordained ministers to flourish in ministry;
- To understand how these factors relate to ministerial education and continuing development;
- To understand how these factors vary by sociodemographic and ministerial differences;
- To understand how ministerial flourishing changes and develops over time and at different stages of ministry.

### Methods

- A ten-year, mixed-methods, longitudinal panel study, launched in 2017;
- Focussed qualitative studies reporting on specific topics or perspectives.

### Reports and resources

Research reports and practical resources are available at <https://www.churchofengland.org/living-ministry>.

### Panel study reports

- *Mapping the Wellbeing of Church of England Clergy and Ordinands* (2017)
- *Negotiating Wellbeing: Experiences of Ordinands and Clergy in the Church of England* (2018)
- *Ministerial Effectiveness and Wellbeing: Exploring the Flourishing of Clergy and Ordinands* (2019)
- *Moving in Power: Transitions in Ordained Ministry* (2021)
- *'You don't really get it until you're in it.' Meeting the Challenges of Ordained Ministry* (2022)
- *Clergy in a Time of Covid: Autonomy, Accountability and Support* (2022)
- *Covenant, Calling and Crisis: Autonomy, Accountability and Wellbeing among Church of England Clergy* (2023)

### Focussed studies

- *Collaborative Ministry and Transitions to First Incumbency* (2019)
- *The Mixed Ecologists: Experiences of Mixed Ecology Ministry in the Church of England* (2021)
- *'If it Wasn't for God': A Report on the Wellbeing of Global Majority Heritage Clergy in the Church of England* (2022). With accompanying podcast.
- *'Let Justice Roll Down Like Waters': Exploring the Wellbeing of Working-Class Clergy in the Church of England* (2023)

### Resources

*How Clergy Thrive: Insights from Living Ministry* (2020) is available in print and online along with a range of accompanying resources.



**‘Let Justice Roll Down Like Waters’  
Exploring the Wellbeing of Working-Class  
Clergy in the Church of England:  
A Rally Cry for Change**

Sharon Jagger and Alex Fry with Rebecca Tyndall

Living Ministry Focussed Study 4

October 2023



'My heart exults in the LORD;  
my strength is exalted in my God.  
My mouth derides my enemies,  
because I rejoice in my victory.

'There is no Holy One like the LORD,  
no one besides you;  
there is no Rock like our God.

Talk no more so very proudly,  
let not arrogance come from your mouth;  
for the LORD is a God of knowledge,  
and by him actions are weighed.

The bows of the mighty are broken,  
but the feeble gird on strength.

Those who were full have hired themselves out for bread,  
but those who were hungry are fat with spoil.

The barren has borne seven,  
but she who has many children is forlorn.

The LORD kills and brings to life;  
he brings down to Sheol and raises up.

The LORD makes poor and makes rich;  
he brings low, he also exalts.

He raises up the poor from the dust;  
he lifts the needy from the ash heap,  
to make them sit with princes  
and inherit a seat of honour.

For the pillars of the earth are the LORD's,  
and on them he has set the world.

'He will guard the feet of his faithful ones,  
but the wicked shall be cut off in darkness;  
for not by might does one prevail.

The LORD! His adversaries shall be shattered;  
the Most High will thunder in heaven.

The LORD will judge the ends of the earth;  
he will give strength to his king,  
and exalt the power of his anointed.'

~ The Song of Hannah (1 Samuel 2: 1-10) ~<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> NRSV, Anglicised. Participants regularly referenced the Song of Hannah and the Magnificat as a representative example of the need for class-based justice advocated for throughout the pages of Scripture.



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## Foreword

In recent years, the Church of England has embarked on a new phase of an age-old journey. The destination is a Jesus-centred and Jesus-shaped church: a church of missionary disciples, thriving in a mixed ecology of different expressions of church life; a church that is younger and more diverse, fully representing the communities we serve. A church that is simpler, humbler, and bolder.

This report is a step along the way on this journey. It portrays clearly and movingly the experiences of working-class clergy within the Church of England. Social class is not an easy topic to address, and this is not a comfortable read, but it is vital if we are to achieve our vision. Not just because of the importance of justice for working-class people who are disadvantaged in the church, although this is clearly an imperative alongside racial justice and other issues. And not just because of the responsibility the church shares for the wellbeing of working-class clergy, although it is our duty and our joy to care for those who devote their lives to the church and to support them to thrive.

Tackling this issue is vital if we want to achieve a Christ-shaped church. Jesus was born into the humblest of circumstances, working with his hands as a carpenter. The church will only ever be fully centred on and fully shaped by Jesus when there is genuinely room and space for everyone. This goes beyond welcome and acceptance to being open to challenge; and transformation of our hearts, minds and structures. It requires us to be humble in the face of difference. It is in this spirit of humility and openness that I urge you to read this report. I am deeply grateful to those who have been willing to share their stories and I hope and pray that their courage and effort will contribute to a church that is recognisably Jesus-shaped.



Stephen Cottrell

Archbishop of York

Patron of the Institute for  
Social Justice, York St John University



## Acronyms

<b>CofE</b>	Church of England
<b>DDO</b>	Diocesan Director of Ordinands
<b>HE</b>	Higher Education
<b>NECN</b>	National Estate Churches Network
<b>PTO</b>	Permission to Officiate
<b>SDF</b>	Strategic Development Fund
<b>SIB</b>	Strategic Investment Board
<b>SSM</b>	Self-Supporting Ministry
<b>TEI</b>	Theological Education Institution





We asked some participants: What are your thoughts about being part of this research?

I have found it stimulating, being able to share with others and discover that others have had similar issues and to be able to voice some of the frustrations I have held for many years.

It has been both stimulating and helpful, inspiring, and empowering.

Thought provoking, energising, angry making, affirming.

Glad to have finally been able to express these things in research supported/funded by the CofE.

Really lovely to meet other working-class clergy . . . Maybe WE need to be the mentors and coaches who help others in their vocation . . . We could even share positive stories of how we have moved forward in our ministries despite systemic challenges.

Stimulating.

Both encouraging and frustrating, good to hear other people voice similar struggles.

It's stirred up all kinds of thoughts and feelings - some of which are difficult but overall it has been an empowering experience.

Great to have my voice heard and taken seriously. Good to know others have experienced the same as I have. Hopeful that any recommendations are taken seriously for the next generation.

Useful and an avenue for things often left unsaid.

I have found it useful to think through these sorts of issues and to discuss them with others. I am aware that it is a bigger problem than I thought - it's not just me!

I have enjoyed being involved in a very important area of research.

## Executive Summary

### Background

This study explores the experiences of clergy identifying as working-class in the Church of England (CofE), to understand how their class experience impacts their wellbeing. We start from the position that (i) wellbeing of working-class clergy is a matter of **social justice** and, (ii) classism and other factors beyond the control of the individual affect wellbeing; wellbeing cannot be simply about self-care. The title, taken from Amos 5:24, is a command for God's people to treat all with equity. It is also the verse that the Archbishop of Canterbury repeatedly highlighted during his address to the Trade Union Congress in 2018 and is therefore a fitting title for a report on the classed experience of clergy.

### Aims

Our aim was to draw out the impacts of class identity on wellbeing and amplify the voices of working-class clergy by:

- Exploring the relationship between social networks of working-class clergy, access to material resources, and feelings about being ordained and being working-class.
- Identifying the types of support that working-class clergy draw on during difficult times in ministry.
- Exploring how notable facets of class (e.g., regional accents) and other aspects of identity (e.g., gender) are negotiated and received in a variety of Church contexts.
- Comparing and contrasting the experiences from different dioceses and types of ministry to establish how access to resources for wellbeing differs.
- Comparing how wellbeing is experienced in different institutional contexts (e.g., ordination training, parochial ministry, diocesan roles, national roles).

### Methods

We undertook 50 semi-structured interviews with clergy from across the CofE's dioceses and hierarchy. We also facilitated four focus groups with 25 participants in total where we discussed themes identified and gathered feedback on recommendations and planned resources. We endeavour to root all the recommendations in the experiences of our participants.

## Categories

### Working-class

Participants recognised the awkwardness of defining class identity because they have high-level education and are in an occupation defined as middle-class. Nevertheless, a common feature was a strongly felt distinction between the perceived culture of privilege within the CofE and participants' own working-class identity and heritage. Participants described working-class identity in relation to their educational attainment, formative relationships, their work history prior to ordination and their values. Values of honesty and social justice were highlighted as part of working-class culture, along with authenticity and a dislike for pretence.

### Wellbeing

In keeping with current research on wellbeing, following Dodge et al.,<sup>2</sup> this is understood as an equilibrium between threats to wellbeing and resources that enable us to manage those threats. Resources for wellbeing are physical, social and psychological in nature, although these intersect with the facets of wellbeing already identified in the Living Ministry project: participation, financial and material, spiritual and vocational, relationships, and physical and mental. However, we resist the neoliberal understanding of wellbeing as purely self-care and so focus here on social structures and institutional cultures and processes beyond the control of the individual. This means that the institutional Church will need to make changes for its clergy and eliminate the need for individuals to shape themselves to fit the institution. Our research suggests more can be done institutionally to combat the structural and systemic classed impacts on wellbeing.

## Themes

### Work and the material

#### The financial and material

A lack of financial and material resources impacts wellbeing and generates significant anxieties. Participants focused on how CofE finances are seen as insecure and guarantees of future housing and stipend provision are rarely provided, seen as especially impactful on those from working-class families with fewer savings and where property ownership is less common.

#### Vocations and trajectories

Whilst some participants felt that being working-class was a boon to ministries in predominantly working-class areas, others felt assumptions were made about the calling and ministry of working-class clergy and that there were class barriers in relation to ministry opportunities and 'deployment'.

<sup>2</sup> Dodge et al. (2012).

### **Educational and training issues**

Education was frequently cited as a challenging, though often rewarding, feature of training. Some participants did not receive the type of educational background that many middle-class clergy have, impacting on confidence, and many critiqued the way academic ability is measured throughout the training process. For some, the culture of theological training was alienating, and other types of experience and skillsets were valued less in the context of academic and spiritual formation.

### **The working environment**

Participants discussed the culture of overwork in the Church. There were also concerns about the access to wellbeing resources for those with fewer resources themselves or in less affluent parishes. Several participants talked about collective ways of addressing workplace issues.

### **Power in the Church hierarchy**

Those in the CofE hierarchy can wield power, consciously and unconsciously, in ways that alienate, subjugate, and marginalise participants. These experiences lead to feelings of powerlessness and of being misunderstood.

## **Culture and belonging**

### **The dominant culture of the Church**

Participants described their experience of the upper-middle-class culture of the CofE and articulated examples of how it determines the norms, values, preferences, and expectations of the institution's hierarchy, often leading to feelings of marginalisation and alienation.

### **Social mobility**

Several participants grew up in families that were socially mobile during their childhood (sometimes only temporarily). Some participants had experienced social mobility prior to ordination, often via education. Participants' feelings towards social mobility are complex, with loss and dislocation existing alongside gratitude for improved material circumstances.

### **Cultural differences with the Church**

The difference in culture – speech, space, hobbies, diet, bodily representation – that goes unacknowledged continuously generates feelings of alienation. This is enhanced by reactions from other clergy, including disapproval, judgementalism and lack of sensitivity towards cultural difference.

### **Working-class ways of speaking**

Class bias arises around regional accents and modes of expression. Some felt the need to adjust to a more neutral way of speaking and others felt they were subject to prejudice, underestimated because of the way they spoke.

### **Cultural flexibility**

Participants described being cultural 'chameleons', able to adapt to different cultures whilst in ministry. This helped them to navigate the cultural differences they encountered, but at times it increased the burden of emotional labour and heightened feelings of not belonging in the Church.

### **The benefits of participants' background**

Participants told us their upbringing was a gift that prepared them to minister to those from a variety of backgrounds. For some, a working-class background helped them establish appropriate boundaries with those pastorally reliant on them, and in doing so helped them to better manage their emotional labour.

## **Impact on wellbeing**

### **Problematising resilience**

Some participants see their backgrounds as helping them develop perseverance and resilience. However, several participants wanted to strongly critique individualistic discourse around resilience that obscures systemic inequalities which should be addressed at an institutional level as a matter of social justice.

### **Lack of pastoral support from the Church**

Many participants reported a lack of pastoral support for the demands of ministry, often due to a mismatch around expectations and what those in senior positions offer, often interpreted as the result of class difference.

### **Self-acceptance**

Some participants, through life experience, have reached the point where they are more comfortable being themselves without feeling the need to conform to perceived expectations. However, their journey was accompanied by significant barriers to wellbeing, frequently a drain on emotional energy and time and often accompanied by diminished physical and mental health.

## **Recommendations**

We make several recommendations to different areas of the CofE based on the stories shared with us. As well as suggesting further research, the recommendations follow the pattern of the themes in this report: work and the material; culture and belonging; and the impact on wellbeing.

### **For Dioceses**

- That the Church examine the provision for retirement and ensure clergy who are wholly reliant on Church-provided housing are given clear information and guidance about accessing housing after retirement, regardless of how close they are to retirement age.
- That dioceses make use of self-supporting ministries only where this is the active choice of individual clergy and that the process of such agreement includes a financial risk assessment to ensure individuals are not placed in financial precarity.

- That parishes be given access to resources when seeking to appoint clergy to assist in putting together their parish profile avoiding discriminatory and exclusionary language.
- That peer groups be established within or across dioceses to enable networking and conversation amongst clergy who see themselves as working-class, to be convened by clergy, financed by dioceses and to act as a point of consultation for the Church.
- That each diocese works to make access to therapeutic resources explicitly accessible and encourage a culture where accessing these resources is seen as a routine part of ministry.
- That financial provision for regular spiritual direction/accompaniment, types of therapy and retreat days be offered to all clergy in recognition that this is a necessary aspect of the role. This should be at a diocesan level rather than left to the individual parish.
- Promote membership of the Faith Workers branch of Unite trade union, how to join and what membership entails.

#### For Theological Education Institutions

- That TEIs take a more flexible and person-centred approach to training which values candidates' previous experience and values a wider variation of learning styles, rather than privileging particular forms of academic achievement.
- That TEIs ensure that part-time ordinands are not required to work onerous hours to complete training.

#### For the Pensions Board

- That the Church examine the provision for retirement and ensure clergy who are wholly reliant on Church-provided housing are given clear information and guidance about accessing housing after retirement, regardless of how close they are to retirement age.
- Retired clergy who do not own a property should be guaranteed provision which is genuinely affordable and takes into consideration their household pension income and the financial implications of any dependants.
- That in considering the housing provision for retiring clergy, the Church provides a mechanism to ensure that non-traditional family set-ups (e.g., where dependants are not children or where non-spousal family members live with the clergy) are given parity in terms of tenure security.

#### For the Data Services Team

- That the Data Services Team use the data on social background now being collected for all those entering Stage 1 of the discernment process to monitor whether working-class people are being over-represented in either part-time, non-stipendiary or associate roles.

#### For the Ministry Development Team

- That the researchers develop a report detailing the stories collected during this project about classed experiences within congregations and communities and disseminate widely, particularly to the National Estate Churches Network.
- That the researchers be asked to develop materials featuring the education and training information gathered in this project to inform those leading the Common Awards programme and other providers of theological training and education.

- That the Church develops a policy to ensure both discernment and appointment panels are diverse in terms of class-identity, gender, ethnicity and so on. In recognition of the vital gate-keeping role that they play, DDOs should be given training specifically about class-related bias as part of the dissemination of the new selection framework.
- Promote membership of the Faith Workers branch of Unite trade union, including how to join and what membership entails.
- That 'reverse coaching' be implemented to inform senior leaders how to avoid a narrow cultural perspective.
- That the MDT ensures its expectations do not require part-time ordinands to work onerous hours to complete training.
- That the Church develops a national system of peer support, mentorship, advocacy and pastoral support outside of the structural management arrangements.

#### For the Strategic Investment Board

- We support two recommendations made by the Independent Review of SDF funding in 2022: That the 'Strategic Investment Board should introduce processes to monitor and report on the diversity of project leaders and worshippers.'
- That 'the SIB should judge sustainability not just in financial terms but on whether plans are in place to encourage the development of indigenous [sic] leaders over time, particularly in relation to social class.'

#### For the Office of the Archbishops of Canterbury and York

- That the Church develops more transparency around the process of appointments, particularly for senior leadership positions.

#### For the Archbishops' Council

- That further research is undertaken
  - i. to better understand how gender, race, class, age, sexuality, and disability compound systemic inequality and exclusion in the Church. This is not only to develop an environment conducive to the wellbeing of all, but also to be an example of social justice at work;
  - ii. to examine more deeply how the Church's structures, systems and culture reproduce class inequality with a view to illuminating privilege in all its guises.
- That the Church commits to engaging with the issue of classism within its structures and culture and makes this an explicit part of its strategic priorities for the decade.

#### For the House and College of Bishops

- That the College and House of Bishops discuss the findings of this report, with a view to:
  - Better understanding both the pastoral and missional importance of promoting full inclusion of working-class clergy and lay people as part of the Church's efforts to become more diverse and fully represent the communities it serves;
  - Taking steps to ensure that the vocations and wellbeing of working-class clergy are better supported;
  - Producing theological teaching on social class for use within the Church of England.

## Introduction

*'Class is a justice issue.'* Dylan, Curate.

## Background

Why undertake a study about working-class clergy? This question was asked of us during the project and several participants wanted to be assured that it oriented towards the systemic, rather than seeking ways for working-class clergy to make themselves a better 'fit' in the Church of England (CofE). We concur, and we discuss systemic issues throughout this report. Class bias has generally been neglected as a topic of concern over the last few decades, despite it being the source of deep inequality, corroding wellbeing of those for whom being working-class limits opportunities and access to resources. As class divisions are deepening in our society there is now renewed recognition that attention should be paid to classism as a matter of social justice<sup>3</sup> and our intention is to reflect this in the following discussion.

Though it remains under-researched, the intersection of class and Christianity has been the subject of recent academic conversation.<sup>4</sup> But clergy who see themselves as working-class and participated in this research confirm there is a lack of space and language to articulate those situations and experiences that leave working-class people feeling ill-at-ease as well as materially disadvantaged and limited in the Church. Equally, clergy wellbeing is increasingly being recognised as an important area of study with practical implications,<sup>5</sup> not least within the Church of England.<sup>6</sup> In the light of these important discussions, this study was commissioned by the CofE's Ministry Development Team to begin the conversation about how the experiences of working-class clergy impinge on wellbeing and how the Church might implement practical and policy changes on the road towards cultural change. Additional funding was provided by the Institute for Social Justice at York St John University.

The CofE, as the Established Church, inhabits a unique position in the cultural life and governance structure of England and is strongly associated with elite groups.<sup>7</sup> There is a culture of privilege amongst many of its ordained representatives<sup>8</sup> who often benefit from elite educations and come from highly respected professions prior to their ordination.<sup>9</sup> Sociologists have discussed how, for those without this privileged social background, operating in elite environments can be alienating, which reproduces and reinforces existing inequalities.<sup>10</sup> There is strong evidence that such marginalisation and the compounding of social inequality negatively impacts wellbeing.<sup>11</sup>

<sup>3</sup> Friedman and Laurison (2020).

<sup>4</sup> Guest *et al.* (2017).

<sup>5</sup> E.g., see Village and Francis (2021).

<sup>6</sup> See the Living Ministry web pages: <https://www.churchofengland.org/resources/diocesan-resources/ministry/ministry-development/living-ministry>.

<sup>7</sup> Guest *et al.* (2012).

<sup>8</sup> Davies and Guest (2007).

<sup>9</sup> Fry (2019).

<sup>10</sup> We draw on Pierre Bourdieu who provides a framework for examining class as a socially made arrangement, reproduced by institutions and through social. See Bourdieu (1977).

<sup>11</sup> Bellani and D'Ambrosio (2011).



Our research reveals that clergy identifying as working-class often find themselves socially and culturally at odds with the Church environment and that this negatively affects wellbeing.

Whilst we refer to the Church's structure, culture, and working processes, several participants were clear that there is a distinction to be made between 'the Church' which is made up of all those who work and worship under its auspices, and the institutional Church which is the hierarchy and the machinery that determines how people enact their roles and how they should 'fit'. We attempt to keep this distinction clear throughout our discussion and our recommendations are oriented largely towards the latter. We also note that Living Ministry research refers to 'the many faces of the church' to acknowledge that even the institutional Church acts at multiple levels.<sup>12</sup> As participants in our research emphasised, issues of class discrimination and inequality are deeply embedded into cultural life and cannot easily be addressed by actionable recommendations. Since many of our participants articulate class barriers as a matter of social justice rather than an individualised concern, we hope the recommendations outlined in this report are taken in that spirit, as a starting point to addressing some of the material and structural symptoms of classism.

The response to our call for participants tells us something about the appetite for talking about classed experiences. After a single social media post, we were contacted by almost a hundred clergy who identified as working-class or with working-class heritage: we interviewed 50 (see Appendix) and facilitated four focus groups to deepen the conversation. Many of the participants were moved by the opportunity to speak, be heard, and have their stories amplified, some of which we detail below (all names in this report are pseudonyms). Feedback we received indicated that simply being able to tell stories about classed experiences – for the first time for some – was significant. However, for a project dealing intimately with the detail of people's stories, each one offering a rich portrayal clergy life in the Church of England, this is a significant amount of information. We are therefore mindful that this report contains only the 'headline' themes, with our attention for now focused on those areas that elicit robust and actionable recommendations. We include some 'thick' description to illustrate these themes, but we intend to do more work in the future to do justice to the complexity and nuance within the stories so generously shared with us.

We offer this report as space for working-class clergy to name and define their experiences of classism and to orient the discussion in such a way that refuses to frame working-class people as 'the problem'. Many of these experiences relate to the systemic. Other stories are about personal and relational classed encounters. The recommendations within this report are based on these stories and on participants' ideas about what should change. Whilst there was an abundance of joy, pride, fun, and generosity within the storytelling, we also heard a great deal about the harms caused by class bias and inequality leading to feelings of frustration, anger, fear, grief, and sadness. To begin to reveal some of the systemic and cultural injustices being experienced, we have organised our narrative and recommendations into three main themes: Work and the Material, Culture and Belonging, and Wellbeing Impacts. We begin by defining what we mean by 'working-class' and 'wellbeing'.

<sup>12</sup> Graveling (2018).



The title, taken from Amos 5:24, is a command for God's people to treat all with equity. It is also the verse that the Archbishop of Canterbury repeatedly highlighted during his address to the Trade Union Congress in 2018. We therefore feel it is a fitting title for a report on the classed experience of clergy.

## Class and wellbeing

*'The social order that we have is a historical accident. A product of the Fall and all sorts of sins.'*  
Richard, Incumbent.

Before defining our terms, it is important to acknowledge that people's identities are multi-faceted. For example, women who participated have gendered experience overlaying classed experience – acknowledging this is known as intersectionality.<sup>13</sup> We explore class-based experiences in the main, but at times participants are aware of gender and age (for example) as factors in their experiences. Work is required to understand fully how these facets of identity combine with working-classness to produce multiple barriers within the Church. We also note that a weakness in this project is the lack of diversity in terms of ethnicity and so we can only talk about the experiences of white working-class clergy. Dr Selina Stone's report *'If it Wasn't for God': A Report on the Wellbeing of Global Majority Heritage Clergy in the Church of England*,<sup>14</sup> examines the experiences of global majority heritage clergy and precedes our study; we suggest there is an opportunity to engage in a joint conversation about how this gap might be addressed.

Our first recommendation therefore reflects this need for deeper understanding of systemic intersectional bias.

**RECOMMENDATION:** That further research is undertaken to better understand how gender, race, class, age, sexuality, and disability compound systemic inequality and exclusion in the Church. This is not only to develop an environment conducive to the wellbeing of all, but also to be an example of social justice at work.

## Defining 'working-class'

Since we are tasked with interrogating how class inequality in the Church impacts on the wellbeing of clergy, we need to understand how social class impacts how we think, speak, act, and how we are viewed by others.<sup>15</sup> Class comes to bear significantly upon our day-to-day experiences, and this can be subtle or so prevalent that it goes undetected.<sup>16</sup> Equally, class is intimately linked with family background, relationships, housing, values, and jobs – it shapes a person's identity and their sense of who they are, which is why it can contribute so significantly to an individual's wellbeing.

<sup>13</sup> For an explanation of how intersectionality became a usable framework, see Crenshaw (2017).

<sup>14</sup> Stone (2022).

<sup>15</sup> Much of our interpretation of stories shared with us leans on the work of French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu, who is a key figure in the discussion about society and class. See Bourdieu (1977).

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*

According to the occupational definitions of social class, clergy are placed in one of the highest professional categories.<sup>17</sup> However, this does not mean that people from a working-class background are automatically given, or accept, this middle-class label after being ordained. How we group people with broadly similar characteristics is based on assumptions.<sup>18</sup> Moreover, class is a social construction which is arranged hierarchically. We are taught to think in terms of upward social mobility as a good and worthwhile trajectory, so ‘lower’ social classifications are perceived as less respectable and of lower value. Of course, social mobility can be positive when it involves moving from a context of restricted access to material, educational, and social resources that help us flourish in the society in which we live. Social mobility is, however, entangled with the unspoken assumption that people leave behind a cultural context, and this is the price paid to unlock material opportunities. Our participants are clear that there is a hierarchical arrangement of class and describe the way activities, tastes, and mores framed as working-class in some social contexts are seen as less valuable, less respectable and in some cases, less in keeping with Christian values, than those considered middle-class. During this project we have learned that clergy sometimes hide their working-classness, are often harmed by the sense that working-class culture is devalued and degraded, wrestle with internalised feelings of shame and diminished confidence, and are deeply alienated from a church culture that favours and naturalises middle-class ways. This cultural hierarchy compounds the very real material concerns of clergy from backgrounds with restricted access to resources.

Participants described working-class identity in relation to their educational attainment, formative relationships, their work history prior to ordination and their values. Many referred to the communities in which they were brought up, belonging to families that self-understood as working-class, often in relation to parents’ occupations and housing tenure, such as social housing or private rented accommodation. Some identified their jobs prior to ordination as working-class, and many had not had experience of higher education. Some participants were the first in their families to attend university; the variety of educational careers became a significant theme which we discuss below. Values of honesty and social justice were highlighted as part of working-class culture, along with authenticity and a dislike for pretence.

There were, then, significant similarities in the way participants defined ‘working-class’ and each had a strong sense of class identity, even for the socially mobile. Participants recognised the awkwardness of defining their class identity given their high-level education and middle-class occupation. Indeed, some have achieved positions of authority within the Church’s hierarchy. Nevertheless, a common feature across the interviews was a strongly felt distinction between the culture of privilege they see within the CofE and participants’ own sense of self where they continue to identify with their working-class heritage. To complicate this, some have become less aligned to working-classness in their life journey and find that they are also alienated from their working-class origins – as more than one participant noted, this creates a feeling of liminality, and of being between social spheres, not truly belonging to either.

<sup>17</sup> See <https://www.ons.gov.uk/methodology/classificationsandstandards/otherclassifications/thenationalstatistics socioeconomic classificationnssecrebasedonsoc2010#conceptual-basis>.

<sup>18</sup> Equally, methods of classifying middle-class are debated. See Weiss (2019).



We need to acknowledge, then, that there are different approaches to defining ‘working-class’ and more nuance and complexity are required, particularly as people from working-class families move into occupations not traditionally considered working-class; all our participants fall into this category. Our premise is that ‘working-class clergy’ is not an oxymoron. Whilst this means making the parameters around what we mean by ‘working-classness’ fluid, we honour the variations without giving more weight to some factors over others.

There are some commonly told effects of being working-class in a middle-class environment. Confidence, for example, can be hard to maintain if you feel your values, tastes, and habits are looked down on. Several participants talked in terms of lacking the sort of confidence that is perceived as a gift to those born and brought up in middle-class and more affluent contexts. Class-based erosion of confidence can have a significant impact. For example, Gemma told us her background affected her experience of the discernment process: ‘the whole discernment process took for me maybe longer than other people because I just wasn’t confident.’ Another participant also explained: ‘the underlying thing about being working-class for me has been a lack of self-belief and a lack of self-confidence.’ Some participants talked of feelings derived from childhood and adulthood class-based experiences that leave residual feelings of shame<sup>19</sup> and exclusion.<sup>20</sup> These feelings impact on individual wellbeing but are not related to an individual’s resilience levels (as discussed below).

### Defining wellbeing

There is a significant amount of research available on wellbeing in a wide variety of contexts. However, many studies understand the concept of wellbeing differently and often measure different components of it. One influential article argues that most studies do not define wellbeing as such but offer descriptions of some of its aspects.<sup>21</sup> Drawing on Dodge *et al.* we adopt the definition of wellbeing as the equilibrium between experiences of challenging events and the ability to manage them. In this model, wellbeing has three broad components, namely: the physical, the psychological, and the social. To meet the challenges to wellbeing, people draw on their own personal resource pool that they have acquired over time.<sup>22</sup> The ‘challenging events’ are those things we refer to that are systemically generated, rather than simply upholding the notion that a person’s resource pool should be fixed (although there is value in reasonable self-care).

A person’s resource pool consists of physical, psychological, and social resources: physical resources can be related to the body (such as an immune system) or can be objects (such as a car that gets someone to medical

<sup>19</sup> Sociologist Beverley Skeggs discusses class-related shame and uses Bourdieu’s work to highlight how class differentiation results in working-class people failing to measure up and being subject to judgement against standards set by middle-class contexts. This can be especially traumatising for working-class children trying to belong in the middle-class school environment when they have no agency over family circumstances. See Skeggs (1997).

<sup>20</sup> Commentators have identified the trend in TV entertainment in creating shaming discourses around working-class people: <https://www.theguardian.com/media/2019/may/15/jeremy-kyle-show-was-part-of-a-wider-shame-agenda-aimed-at-the-working-class>.

<sup>21</sup> Dodge *et al.* (2012).

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*

treatment or a support group); psychological resources are mental resources that enhance a person’s mood or ability to process experiences (such as a sense of being in control of a situation or a feeling of peace); social resources are the networks of people we have access to that help us cope in difficult circumstances (such as family, friends, and doctors).<sup>23</sup> One major advantage of this understanding of wellbeing is its universal applicability,<sup>24</sup> which is increasingly being recognised as it continues to be widely cited across very different wellbeing studies internationally.

This model allows us to resist the neoliberal depiction of wellbeing as purely self-care. The recognition that wellbeing is in part social implicitly acknowledges the influence of factors beyond our control (i.e., the actions of others). It is the actions of others (for example, those with more power in the CofE’s hierarchy) that shape institutional cultures and processes and thus the wellbeing of other clergy. This reinforces the need to recognise that fostering wellbeing is a joint responsibility and that there is much that can be done by the institution to enable the flourishing of working-class clergy.

Several studies have noted the relationship between the economic, the social, the cultural, and wellbeing.<sup>25</sup> This indicates that the exploration of class and wellbeing is of great importance now, particularly given the cost-of-living crisis and the aftermath of the covid-19 pandemic, and their potential to exacerbate the rising inequalities that have been observed since the 2008 financial crisis.<sup>26</sup> In other words, a person’s access to an adequate resource pool can be hampered by external class-based factors.

The Living Ministry project focuses on wellbeing and distinguishes between five facets of wellbeing, namely: participation, financial and material, spiritual and vocational, relationships, and physical and mental. Each of these facets is captured by the model for wellbeing we adopt and many of these facets will be evident in the analysis below.

PHYSICAL	PSYCHOLOGICAL	SOCIAL
Financial and material	Mental	Participation
Physical	Spiritual and vocational	Relationships
		Spiritual and vocational

Another advantage of Dodge *et al.*’s model is found in its development by Alex Fry, who explicitly notes how each type of resource interacts with the other type. Psychological resources, for instance, are shaped by social resources because our relationships with others come to bear on our emotions.<sup>27</sup>

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>25</sup> Pang (2018); Ramos *et al.* (2018); Calvo *et al.* (2012); Helliwell and Huang (2010).

<sup>26</sup> E.g., see Barr *et al.* (2015).

<sup>27</sup> Fry (2020).

## Theme 1: Work and the Material

*'I know what it's like to feel poor and to be worrying about money all the time. And that's really stressful.'* Isaac, Incumbent.

The most common and immediately impactful topics raised in our interviews relate to working conditions and financial constraints experienced by working-class clergy. Our participants are aware of the variety of strategies open to clergy to maximise their financial wellbeing, such as savings, inheritance, lodgers, renting out a house, and family assistance,<sup>28</sup> but many reflect that their class positionality as well as their material resources limit the use of such strategies. Many participants told us that they were simply unable to rely on inheritance money, property, or family assistance. Some participants noted that resources such as charities and diocesan funds were available to them, and several told us they had accessed these funds. However, many participants felt that the availability of such funds lacked transparency and others found the application process onerous. Furthermore, some reflect that the experience of asking for charity assistance to meet the costs of living has significant classed dimensions which are potentially stigmatising. Ultimately, we feel there should be scrutiny of the reasons clergy rely on charities and other assistance, particularly for those on a full-time stipend.

Many participants talked about a culture of overwork in the Church. We acknowledge that long working hours and burdensome expectations are common to many clergy whatever their background. However, being working-class compounds the effect of overwork.<sup>29</sup> Restricted access to material resources is related to how a person can navigate a work environment, how much unpaid labour they are able to undertake, and how much they can access additional support.

We have included in this section stories about the journey to ordination and how discernment and training routes are seen by our participants as classed. Such stories are integral to the later experiences of working-class clergy and in some cases are at the root of being ill-at-ease in the institution of the Church.

### The financial and material: 'I haven't got savings'

Recently, Living Ministry research found that almost 40% of stipendiary respondents find it difficult to save.<sup>30</sup> The lack of surplus money after living costs affects most acutely those who entered the ordained ministry with fewer resources. Some of our participants recalled a lack of financial means growing up and described the impact this has on their current financial situation. For instance, many lack pre-existing savings or family resources to fall back on and this is a source of anxiety, particularly when the precarity in Church finances is passed on to clergy themselves. This is especially stressful for those who rely solely on their stipend and are unable to save for leaner

<sup>28</sup> See Graveling (2018).

<sup>29</sup> Studies show the health dangers of long working hours without adequate time off. E.g., see, Michie and Cockcroft (1996).

<sup>30</sup> Living Ministry Wave 4 Panel Survey, publication pending.

times and who do not expect to inherit property or money from family because of their working-class background. One participant put it like this:

There's issues at the moment with regards to job vacancies within parts of the Church of England. Covid has caused a huge issue financially [ . . . ] And it's been mentioned to one or two of us that we should consider falling back on our savings for a few years, whilst we see how it works out [ . . . ] I don't know what you think we've got savings in [ . . . ] I haven't got savings.

The financial dependency on the CofE, particularly where there is no home ownership and where accommodation is tied to the ministry role, creates a sense of material vulnerability. The expectation that individual clergy can shield themselves from institutional financial depletion lands unequally – many are not in a position to absorb financial shocks. Another participant, Tess, who is non-stipendiary, is aware of the difference it can make if there is access to family or independent resources. Tess told us how difficult it is to support a family on a single income and highlighted the impact on wellbeing that comes with a lack of financial resources:

We had to survive pretty much on one income which was twenty-odd grand [ . . . ] My mum and dad can't write me a cheque for ten grand. They can't pay for a car for us [ . . . ] I know there are people now who are clergy, their families financially support them [ . . . ] they buy them cars and they pay for them to go on holiday because they've got that kind of money. And so, there's that wellbeing aspect, there's the financial security.

So, differences in financial wellbeing are often based on class background. Moreover, the limited access to financial resources can have a significant impact on social engagement and on confidence, as Gemma told us:

I haven't had a holiday for five years and I don't go to any concerts because I can't afford them. And I listen to free Spotify. [In social gatherings] I'd just be, like, nodding politely and then drifting onto the next person.

Gemma feels she has little in common socially with people who have the resources to enjoy cultural and social activities. Here we see the combining of the physical and the social indicators of wellbeing; being excluded because of financial constraints is more deeply alienating when entangled with the focus of social interactions.

Clergy Support Trust was mentioned by one person who had drawn on their financial assistance and by another who was aware of the grants available for wellbeing activities. The Trust's impact summary for 2020 indicates a significant rise in the numbers of clergy receiving financial help.<sup>31</sup> It is noteworthy that some clergy are eligible for support from the Trust to undertake the wellbeing activities many might take for granted, such as holidays, as well as types of activities specifically important to clergy wellbeing, such as retreats. The Living Ministry research already mentioned into the impact of the cost-of-living crisis on clergy found that among respondents

<sup>31</sup> See Clergy Support Trust (2020).



to a survey in Spring 2023 almost 70% of stipendiary clergy required some form of financial assistance from the diocese, Clergy Support Trust, government, family or elsewhere. This chimes with our own findings, particularly with anxiety around retirement provision. We do note that situations that stretch resources for clergy are not always class related. However, without independent savings and assets, it is difficult to plan financially for the future, and more difficult to weather financial crises, and so the material elements of clergy life are likely to disproportionately impact on the wellbeing of clergy from working-class backgrounds where financial hardship and precarity have been experienced.

Fears around provision for retirement were expressed by many participants, some of whom detailed specific contexts that point to a need for a more reliable, robust, and assured provision for retiring clergy. We noted two main concerns: those who come into the priesthood from the rental sector have the added burden of not having their own property to retire into, and there are often assumptions made that clergy are renting out family property; and definitions around what constitutes a family unit mean future insecurity for some, such as siblings or other family members who live together.<sup>32</sup> Some participants pointed out that their parents are, or had been, tenants (a common tenure for working-class families) and so there is no option to rely on inheritance later in life. One participant explains the position thus:

[the Church] hasn't recognised the financial consequences to imposing a retirement age. It assumes that clergy are richer than they are [ . . . ] what they didn't take into account is that it removes housing. It doesn't just remove income [ . . . ] And if we were given a housing allowance instead of the house, we could actually build up capital over time and have something to live in when we retire [ . . . ] it means that if you just stick with the Church, then when you retire, you're homeless. Unless you're already middle-class or have housing somewhere [ . . . ] this is where the rhetoric that comes from the leadership can become toxic because they'll talk about oh the calling to be a priest as a life of sacrifice [ . . . ] But of course, the life of sacrifice is very different if you're middle-class.

We highlight here the important observation that some discourses around vocation need to be understood through a class lens. In practical terms, retirement provision is complicated and affected by individual circumstances. However, there is a collective anxiety about not having started an ordained life in the same financial and material position as more affluent clergy and finding that the stipend does not allow for options such as buying a house for the future. Eve also told us:

I had a conversation with someone because the retirement stuff you can start to access to look at, more than just the first pages, when you turn 50. I've only just turned 40 and I worry about it [ . . . ] That knowledge can be really helpful because the assumption is still, often, that clergy have a house that they'll go to when they retire.

<sup>32</sup> In addition, one participant mentioned that for those who do own property, being a private landlord can be ethically challenging. Home ownership is not, then, necessarily a goal for all clergy, though for some, support in this endeavour would create long term housing security.





Some of our participants, then, are aware that there is a post-retirement housing scheme offered by the Church, but there is frustration about the lack of access to information and the fear that this provision may not be guaranteed. Retirement provision was one of the most mentioned themes causing anxiety for working-class clergy.

Representatives of the Church of England Pensions Board have acknowledged that some clergy are not familiar with their options for retirement housing and expressed a desire to address this. They informed us that more specific information is usually shared with clergy five years prior to retirement, mainly through pre-retirement seminars. Nevertheless, given the initiatives to increase clergy knowledge of their retirement options reported to us (such as visits to theological education institutions and dissemination of information on the CofE Pensions website), it is our hope that the recommendations made to the Pensions Board will be quickly actioned.

Representatives from the Pensions Board explained they use the Target Rent Model to calculate housing for retired clergy (putting rent at circa 60% of the market rate). Whilst we recognise that this is significantly preferable to the Government's Affordable Rent Model (putting rent at 80% of the market rate), participants – many of whom were not on a full CofE pension because of the years of service required for this – reported struggling to pay their rent.

Those we spoke to from the Pensions Board also acknowledged that the current model of retirement housing provision was not well set up for non-traditional families and recognised that, in coming years, clergy families will be increasingly diverse. However, they explained that there are restrictions on what can be done because of limits to funding (the current service relies on funding from the Archbishops' Council). We also note that the rules around tenancy succession (whereby a spouse, for example, is assured continued tenancy on the death of the clergyperson) are not within the purview of the Pensions Board. The Board offers 'assured tenancies' to retiring clergy and their spouses in line with the Statutory Succession rules from the Housing Act 1988 (section 17). This was updated for the Civil Partnership Act 2004. The main route of 'succession' under the act is intended for wife, husband, civil partner or cohabitee (i.e., living together in a relationship). We have learned from representatives of the Pensions Board that there is a high demand for properties from newly retiring clergy and so assured tenancies are restricted to those with succession rights under the law. In cases where a person would not have a right to succession upon the death of the legal tenant, the Pensions Board state they work to assist them make a move to another property, with an alternative provider. There is, therefore, a disconnect between current legal succession rights and broader definitions of family and households. The current basis for funding is to support retired clergy and their spouses/partners. In theory the Board has the power to offer succession to some other family members and they state that this would be subject to available funding and demands on its services. We recommend that this is pursued in discussion within the Church hierarchy.

We reiterate our availability for further discussion of the research findings regarding these issues, which we acknowledge are in part connected to legal and regulatory frameworks. However, we continue to highlight the experiences these systems and processes have on some of our participants – ultimately, housing and pension



insecurity are damaging to wellbeing in ways that disproportionately affect those from working-class and less affluent backgrounds.

**RECOMMENDATION:** That the Church examine the provision for retirement and ensure clergy who are wholly reliant on Church-provided housing are given clear information and guidance about accessing housing after retirement, regardless of how close they are to retirement age.

**RECOMMENDATION:** Retired clergy who do not own a property should be guaranteed provision which is genuinely affordable and takes into consideration their household pension income and the financial implications of any dependants.

**RECOMMENDATION:** That in considering the housing provision for retiring clergy, the Church provides a mechanism to ensure that non-traditional family set-ups (e.g., where dependants are not children or where non-spousal family members live with the clergy) are given parity in terms of tenure security.

## Educational and training issues: ‘Can we just look at who people are and then train them appropriately?’

Whilst many valued the opportunity to explore their vocation through the rigours of academic education, for others, this aspect of the training presented issues of accessibility. For some, there was a sense of needing to ‘catch up’ if they had missed out on educational support and attainment earlier in life. Because of this gap, some working-class clergy are required to negotiate perceptions that they are not intellectual or thinking people. For those experiencing higher education for the first time, more support to quickly learn academic skills may be required, but this was sometimes converted into perceptions that the person was not as intellectually capable as counterparts who had been through higher education. Lee, for example, described his experience:

College really it was a struggle. I'd never written an essay where I'd had to reference something before [. . .] when I said to folk that I didn't think it was me because I lacked the academic rigour, people would say ‘oh yeah, but you're not stupid Lee’, to which my response was, ‘I didn't say I was stupid.’ [. . .] You can tell from the bookshelves that I'm a bit of a bookworm and always have been. But in that kind of autodidact sort of way, not in that kind of rigorous academic sort of way.

Another participant shared a similar scenario whereby she entered the university environment but lacked the specific terminology that was taken for granted by tutors and those who had previously studied, making her feel out of place. Participants telling us these stories did so to emphasise that needing to adjust to the rarefied atmosphere of higher education, with its specialist language and skills, is not about intelligence or ability but about the need to culturally adapt. One participant felt that the assumption she was not clever carried on into her ministry. She put this down to her strong regional accent, often misread as being ‘thick’:



I get that a lot, that people are surprised that I'm clever [. . .] Because of the way I talk and because the minute you open your mouth and these vowels come out, people think you're thick. [. . .] And I feel like when I'm in rooms full of bishops [. . .] I feel like a novelty like oh, she's a hoot [. . .] like the party trick. She's northern, and she's quite bright.

At play in both educational and ministry scenarios are the unacknowledged rules about how to present intellect, demonstrating knowledge of insider language, skills, and etiquette of higher education, and speaking in a neutral accent (more on this later). On the one hand, making theological training accessible and less narrowly focused on academia answers the need to loosen the dominance of elite education culture. On the other hand, as participants point out, this must not be underpinned by the assumption that working-class people who have not had higher education opportunities cannot flourish, enjoy, and excel in academia. Making theological education accessible (but not less academic) requires the availability of technical support (such as how to use Word effectively for those who have not worked with computers), and support to quickly acquire academic skills.

Some barriers to educational flourishing were more cultural for our participants or related to the notion of social capital (knowing the right people), enhanced by Oxford and Cambridge credentials and parental background. This means that upper-middle-class people can have a significant head start. The message from participants is two-fold: those in residential training have an opportunity to develop enriching networks, but this is overlaid with the privileges afforded to those with an elite educational background. To be in residential training has networking benefits that are not the same for those in non-residential training and this understanding increases the feelings of having missed out for those who had hoped to train full-time but were denied the opportunity. The awareness that elite educational backgrounds are privileged in terms of social capital is illustrated as Delia recalled her time at a residential college, having become friendly with an ordinand from a privileged background:

[this guy] is like my alter ego. We got on great, but [. . .] everything that I am, he's the total opposite [. . .] he was [from a] very privileged background [. . .] he went to private education [. . .] I see it now in [his] ministry, he uses his contacts and privilege and educational articulation to the absolute maximum [. . .] and it's given him a platform that other people wouldn't [have].

In this instance, the barrier was the type of education they had prior to ordination training. Having gone to a state school and coming from a working-class family, this participant did not possess sufficient cultural capital (knowing the rules) and social capital (knowing the right people) to use residential college as a networking opportunity to advance their professional standing within the CoFE. In fact, participants regularly commented that this is the sort of leveraging behaviour that is at odds with their values of sincerity. Some clergy leave ordination training with less social capital than others often because of class factors, decreasing the likelihood that working-class clergy will get sufficient levels of recognition for their work and validation in their ministry compared to those with different social backgrounds. There are material disadvantages at play within this scenario, and this is one example of how class inequalities are reproduced.



Several participants highlighted how types of theological education are valued differently in the Church. Tricia told us:

My tutor said to me, 'you need to do an MPhil while you're here, so you get a Cambridge degree because your degree won't be worth anything in the church.' And she was right [. . .] anything that wasn't Oxbridge was just thought of as kind of worthless. [. . .] So my PhD didn't count for diddly squat. [. . .] you can't catch up, because you can't change your past.

This moves the conversation beyond the practical ways education and training can be made more accessible and into the deeply embedded culture of elitism in the Church. The privileging of elite education reaches far back into childhood and access to the resources that will secure such a trajectory. In terms of what educational attainment is most prized and rewarded by the Church, the dice are loaded against working-class clergy.

Ordination training can lead to high levels of discomfort for an individual when they feel their agency is compromised; having control over one's life is a significant wellbeing marker. This lack of agency was described by multiple participants and in the working groups in discussions around theological education. Amelia, for example, described a particularly difficult time at theological college, explaining their choice of training institution was the result of their DDO's advice, thinking that it was the least-worst option. After sustained periods of unhappiness at college, the participant requested to train differently:

I had to have these interviews with [. . .] representatives from the Archbishops' Council to say why I should train differently than anybody else. And I explained to them because I am different than anybody else and can we just look at who people are and where they've come from and where God might be taking them, and then train them appropriately?

This illustrates the frustration that the CofE is not more attuned to individual requirements, compounded by Amelia's belief that alternative provision was possible but very difficult to access. In contrast to Amelia's story, several participants indicated they felt they had missed out on full-time residential training and diverted into part-time courses, and we pick this up later.

There are significant wellbeing implications for working-class people who are required to resist class stereotyping and who feel under-estimated because of class. Amongst our cohort there is a feeling of grievance that certain doors are perceived to be closed to anyone without a privileged and elite educational background. Several participants were cautious about any recommendations around theological training that reproduced a two-tier system that would further disadvantage working-class clergy and as such we highlight the need to recognise agency and to introduce flexibility in provision. Above all, we want to underline how the lack of agency to choose appropriate training routes can lead to discomfort, unhappiness and in some cases trauma for working-class people struggling to navigate a system that privileges and values narrowly.



We recognise the recent developments in theological training that reflect the desire to move towards ministerial formation that gets the best out of a wider diversity of ordinands, as exemplified in the new action-learning pathway at Emmanuel Theological College. We see such positive evolution in training provision as a firm basis on which to build and we intend the training recommendations below to support the trajectory. We would like to offer to continue this discussion with those holding responsibility for training opportunities at diocesan, regional and national levels.

**RECOMMENDATION:** That TEIs take a more flexible and person-centred approach to training which values candidates' previous experience and values a wider variation of learning styles, rather than privileging particular forms of academic achievement.

**RECOMMENDATION:** That the researchers be asked to develop materials featuring the education and training information gathered in this project to inform those leading the Common Awards programme and other providers of theological training and education.

## Vocations and trajectories: 'We need to do better for ourselves so we can do better for the people who need to see our ministry'

Some participants explained how they felt class played a role at the beginning of their journey to ordination and throughout the training and appointments process. There were many positive stories that highlight the support and encouragement offered by mentors, including DDOs and bishops. Some participants, though, stated that having their call recognised in the way that felt congruent to them was a struggle. Gail, a curate, sums up the perception that working-class clergy are required to negotiate the appointments process based on class differentiation. She alludes to the resource pool discussed above and how to some extent she had dissolved barriers by being less visibly working-class. Yet the opaque way the Church organises its appointments is, for Gail, systemically biased and requires political and social skill to negotiate:

I have sufficient coping mechanisms that have got me to this stage. I've eradicated my own barriers [via things like getting a degree and modifying accent] but had I not done that, I don't think I'd even be here [...] I don't think that you should have a psychological degree in Game of Thrones in order to be a clergy person in the Church of England [laughs] [...] You either have to know the right people, be the right people, be shiny or be quite a good politician. Sadly, I only have the last one to rely on!

This comment introduces the notion of having social capital (knowing the right people) and having the knowledge of how things work in the Church. These are both aspects most accessible to middle-class people and those with long experience of the Church as an institution.



Another story told to us by Irene, a curate originally from the north of England, is an example of how classed cultural barriers can prevent working-class people from exercising their vocation in the Church in the first place. This story also serves to highlight the need for cultural literacy and a diversity of people having input into discerning whether someone is called to the priesthood. She told us:

I went forward for ordination, but actually I wasn't selected the first time. And this for me was the first time I saw the real kind of working-class and northern bias [...] I was not recommended on personality and character. Because they said I was very chatty and very friendly [...] that they thought that this was a sign that I was deeply insecure and not robust [...] Every single one of my selectors was southern, well-spoken, and male.

Irene's bishop was concerned that 'they haven't seen you properly' and encouraged a second attempt at the discernment process. This time, a different discernment panel was very affirming. Irene needed to do the work twice over to have her call recognised and for her it was because her working-class, northern femininity was misread. This story also illustrates that knowing the right people to act as guide and champion can be advantageous. Although everyone has a sponsor in their bishop, the experience of this is varied and, for some, active sponsorship that resists class bias was crucial to their journey. These sorts of stories suggest that the discernment process is heavily reliant on individuals acting as culturally aware guides and champions. Had Irene not had a bishop who understood her and was convinced of her calling, her journey might well have ended at the first rejection.

Work has been done to make changes to the CofE's discernment process and framework, with the intention to make it more relevant to a broader variety of people. However, the role of gatekeepers was prominent throughout the interviews. Dylan put it starkly: 'if I'd had [one particular DDO] I wouldn't have had a hope if he was my DDO. No way! I've seen the way he speaks to me in meetings and things, you know.' There is a concern amongst our participants that relying on the support of individuals who 'get them' in a system which consistently fails to see the gift that they are to the Church is a barrier for working-class people exploring their vocation. It seems likely that working-class people have been misread, under-estimated and been at the receiving end of class bias through the process of discernment and have not been able to fulfil their vocation. This is an injustice to the individual as well as a loss to the Church.

We see in some of these stories the notion that working-class ways of expression – vernacular, volume, and straightforwardness – can be framed as a deficiency in character. Participants often stated they feel their way of expression is seen as out of place and unwelcome. This is especially seen as problematic in working-class women.<sup>33</sup> Several women we spoke to felt that they attracted the labels of 'gobby' and 'too much' and some male participants spoke of the 'gobby working-class woman' as presenting both a challenge and a benefit to

<sup>33</sup> For anyone interested in research that looks at how working-class femininity is framed, see Skeggs (1997); Clarke-King (2004).

the Church. These types of gendered labels further underline the need to understand the differences between working-class women's and men's experiences. We intend to pursue this theme in more detail in further work.

We interviewed a number of clergy who are self-supporting and some raised issues such as lack of parity of esteem, financial precarity for those in lower-paid jobs, and lack of agency in the decision-making about whether self-supporting ministry (SSM) reflected their calling. We note the research in the Living Ministry report *Negotiating Wellbeing: Experiences of Ordinands and Clergy in the Church of England* (2018), which describes the difference between SSMs who had chosen this way of fulfilling their vocation and who were financially secure enough to do so, and those who had not chosen SSM and were therefore less satisfied with their circumstances. In our research, we found echoes of this. We wish to raise the question of whether SSM is a more accessible ministry to those who have higher paid jobs or family resources. SSM ministry is likely to be more difficult for those with fewer material resources built up and in lower paid employment. Our research also concurs with the Living Ministry report's discussion about status given to SSMs, often treated differently to stipendiary clergy, and who, in some cases, feel exploited.

In our project, some SSM participants we spoke to felt strongly that their vocation was not being fulfilled and talked about financial burdens arising from lack of independent resources, life circumstances, and not being in receipt of the stipend, though there was a desire to have a full-time stipendiary post. Gloria, for example, told us she was not fulfilling her vocation, which she felt was full-time stipendiary, a source of deep distress and frustration. Her day job does not pay enough for her to work part-time, so she must grab hours to undertake curacy training:

I come in to work for an extra hour every morning to accrue time so I can get a day in the week in the parish in for my curacy. And also, to accrue time to do the diocesan training as well [ . . . ] it feels like it's a deep wound in my psyche and my spirit. I didn't, wasn't expecting to feel like that, but it does feel like that. It feels like a glass ceiling for people of working-class background and that you can do SSM, you know, but aspirations are kind of very limited. It's the assumptions and prejudices, I think. [ . . . ] when I look at all the criteria that I'm meant to be fulfilling, I think I'm just set up to fail [ . . . ] It's just been a massive struggle [ . . . ] whereas people that are younger who are from more affluent backgrounds, they get all the residential lovely formation. So, it's been a bit shit, really.

Feeling out of step with a vocational desire clearly has implications for a person's wellbeing, but additionally, this participant feels financially constrained which impinges on her ability to put quality time aside for her training. Moreover, she communicates a sense that it is her working-classness that has influenced decisions made about her vocation. She feels she is subject to inequality of opportunity as she sees others enter full-time ministry, whilst life is much more difficult for her. This is an example of how a loss of agency is distressing and frustrating and illustrates how SSM can be financially arduous for those without adequate income from other sources.

Self-supporting ministry may be the right path for some. What this story highlights, though, is when this is imposed against the vocational desires of individuals, the benefit to the Church is being privileged over the needs



of the individual. Self-supporting ministry is a source of free labour for the Church, which should be freely given and treated as a gift, rather than a method of bridging labour and financial gaps. When this type of situation is compounded by class, age, and gender injustice, the impact on wellbeing is clear. We argue that the first principles of wellbeing are rooted in the equality of access to the opportunities to fulfil a vocation. The relationship between wellbeing and fulfilling a vocation is well-documented.<sup>34</sup>

Other issues around ministry trajectories were raised frequently in the interviews. Some participants felt they were well-placed in their ministries, though many also discussed the challenges specific to working-class clergy ministering to a largely middle-class parish (and some of these stories are discussed under the Culture theme below). The question of whether working-classness means assumptions are made about suitability for parishes was raised. Some participants felt they were well-suited for ministry on 'estates' because they share a background with the congregation and community, but others felt that this was not their calling and that they had to resist the assumptions that working-class clergy are always inclined to minister in working-class communities. One participant wanted the Church to guard against 'pigeonholing people [. . .] doing that thing of saying "Oh well, because you came from an estate, you'd be good on an estate."' Another participant told us she had been identified as 'indigenous clergy' material; language she finds offensive because it suggests an othering dynamic is at work. We argue the underlying assumptions made about 'working-class ministries' is an additional way in which agency over vocational decisions is impeded.

However, we need to separate these stories of feeling that a type of ministry is projected onto working-class clergy from the stories that illustrate the benefits to the Church that working-class culture and background bring, which we outline later. Some participants were very clear that being visibly working-class is an important way for people to see themselves represented in the Church. The other side of this representational coin was suggested by several participants, who felt that they had been encouraged into middle-class parishes to bring a different perspective into those churches. After listening to these stories about ministry trajectories, it seems that decisions are often made through a class lens, sometimes with positive results and with vocations being fulfilled. Equally, sometimes working-class clergy feel they lack agency, are under-estimated, and are seen one-dimensionally in classed ways.

For some of our participants, the appointments process has been significantly class biased. Tricia talked about her experience, which dovetails with other stories about the intersection of gender and class:

It was a cathedral post and the Dean rang me and she said, 'you're our number one on paper, but you were too self-effacing at interview. You were up against four boys who all sold themselves [. . .] And you did the typical woman thing of being humble' and you know, all of that kind of thing. And there was a bit of me that was thinking, that's not just being a woman. I was the only working-class person in that room. [. . .] And there are certain kind of ways of presenting yourself, which I think, don't come easily to working-class people. It's everything you're taught not to be.

<sup>34</sup> Duffy *et al.* (2017).





Class (and gender) bias in recruitment is by no means unique to the Church.<sup>35</sup> However, equality in access to opportunities, to preferred ministries and parishes, to jobs within the hierarchy is the minimum condition to ensure working-class people are represented in all parts of the Church, but more than this, to ensure that individual working-class people are not subject to prejudice and bias. As such, one participant suggested that how parishes advertise for clergy requires some scrutiny and that guidance should be given to avoid bias and exclusionary language in these early recruitment stages. For example, we were told that in one case it was made known that regional accents were not welcome in a candidate (and there were several stories about how accent becomes a barrier which we include later).

So, there are complexities involved in how vocations are formed for working-class clergy, some of whom feel they are in the wrong place and are under-resourced and some feel general discourse around the Church's mission to communities is classed and should be examined more deeply.

**RECOMMENDATION:** That the Church develops a policy to ensure both discernment and appointment panels are diverse in terms of class-identity, gender, ethnicity and so on. In recognition of the vital gate-keeping role that they play, DDOs should be given training specifically about class-related bias as part of the dissemination of the new selection framework.

**RECOMMENDATION:** That the Data Services Team use the data on social background now being collected for all those entering Stage 1 of the discernment process to monitor whether working-class people are being over-represented in either part-time, non-stipendiary or associate roles.

**RECOMMENDATION:** That dioceses make use of self-supporting ministries only where this is the active choice of individual clergy and that the process of such agreement includes a financial risk assessment to ensure individuals are not placed in financial precarity.

**RECOMMENDATION:** That TEIs take a more flexible and person-centred approach to training which values candidates' previous experience and values a wider variation of learning styles, rather than privileging particular forms of academic achievement.

**RECOMMENDATION:** That TEIs ensure that part-time ordinands are not required to work onerous hours to complete training.

**RECOMMENDATION:** That parishes be given access to resources when seeking to appoint clergy to assist in putting together their parish profile avoiding discriminatory and exclusionary language.

<sup>35</sup> Friedman and Laurison (2020).



## The working environment: 'Nobody can do the work of nine people'

Some participants felt they were able to draw good boundaries around their working hours and the demands of emotional labour expected as part of their ministry. This was not a universal experience however, and some of our participants emphasised the culture of overwork that pervades some parts of the Church. Healthy toil can easily turn into overwork that is harmful to health and wellbeing and some participants felt this was systemic. In the words of one participant; 'why does the Church break its clergy?'

Another participant, who has a leadership position told us that overwork and stress are at extremely high levels: 'nineteen of the clergy [in my area] told me they are either on antidepressants or they've had to have time off for stress.' The impact on mental health after long periods of overwork is clear and one participant underlined how institutional expectations are unrealistic, harmful, and dislocated from theological principles:

They expect clergy to work 60 hours a week [. . .] ten years ago now I drove myself into a nervous breakdown for doing literally 60-hour weeks, week on week [. . .] marriage ended up falling apart. And, you know, just the structural stresses that were overwhelming [...] that's the theological problem, especially in the Church. It's an idol. Work has become an idol.

We acknowledge that overwork and stress are symptoms that go beyond class experiences, although in the case of self-supporting clergy, we have argued there are class inequalities at play. However, given the Church's investment in research around wellbeing, these are stories that require highlighting at every opportunity. More specifically, one of the focus groups discussed the culture of work and the inability to speak openly and honestly about difficulties, perceived failings, anxieties and importantly, the need for additional resources. One participant put it like this:

You are expected to be this somewhat perfect package and I struggled with that. I struggled with asking for help, asking for more, you know, for asking for resources, for time. Because you're constantly walking alongside people who [. . .] are also pretending to have it all together, when in actual fact, none of us have.

Our recommendations (below) regarding facilitating peer-led groups may help generate an environment where these work-related struggles can be aired and from where systemic pressures can be communicated to the Church leadership. Whilst the symptoms of stress and overwork, as well as the emotional expenditure that is the nature of pastoral ministry, is likely common to all clergy, the issue we have found in this project is that some from working-class backgrounds are particularly unable to access structured resources, which we address in our final section on wellbeing and we note that this needs to be addressed at the institutional level rather than at the level of the individual.

When discussing the working environment of the Church, one participant highlighted how different the relationship is with the hierarchy to the traditional relationship between workers and managers. We note current



Living Ministry research has already laid down the foundations to understand the difference between covenant and contract, between autonomy and heteronomy in institutional relationships and the reliance on mutuality and grace.<sup>36</sup> There is, therefore, nuance required when discussing stipend rather than salary, personal accountability rather than relating to line managers, and the attribute of grace rather than employment rights. But this unique context is open to exploitative practices and there is not the type of safeguarding in place that other workplaces must provide.

In many employment cultures, unions are there to assist with all work-related wellbeing issues, such as conditions of work, bullying, discrimination and so on. Being in a union is often part of working-class employment histories. Bryan stated:

If you're from a working-class background [ . . . ] you're used to an employment structure where there's rights and obligations on both sides and unionisation. There is no unionisation in the clergy, and the rights and obligations on either side are exceedingly vague. And it's so unlike an employment situation [ . . . ] that's just alien to working-class people used to an employment structure where it's very clear what you can expect and what's expected of you.

We note there is a Faith Branch of the Unite union and some participants mentioned this as a potential source of peer support as well as work-related support. A strong theme coming out of our conversations was that working-class clergy often feel isolated, feeling they are the only ones to experience class-based discrimination and bias. Belonging to a union ensures a belonging to a collective that supports people in their work environments. This may also present opportunities to seek support outside the hierarchical management arrangements which are sometimes viewed as compromised in having both pastoral and managerial oversight.

In his interview, Leo mentioned his contact with the union and how helpful it had been for him, but recognises the limitations of union membership because of the nature of the relationship clergy have with the Church: 'I had this said to me there's only so much [the union] can do because at the end of the day, the Church of England, as we know, is a law unto itself [ . . . ] It has all these anomalies within it, and that's as true as of clergy conditions of service.' Some of the employment support offered by the union, then, does not apply to stipendiary and non-stipendiary clergy. We do note, however, that in June 2023 the Unite union presented the Church of England with a pay claim of over 9% on behalf of clergy members, an unprecedented action.<sup>37</sup> Collective work is a strong theme in the interviews and is reflected in our report, particularly in recommendations about convening peer groups for support. To strengthen this (perhaps newly spoken-about) sense of class solidarity, we have also suggested that such a peer group is treated as a consultation group and in many ways, this might act in a union fashion, representing clergy who experience class bias. We would also like to highlight Luke Larnier's

<sup>36</sup> Graveling (2023).

<sup>37</sup> <https://www.uniteunion.org/news-events/news/2023/june/church-of-england-clergy-submit-pay-claim-for-first-time-in-history/>

recent edited book *Confounding the Mighty: Stories of Church, Social Class and Solidarity*, in which various authors explore class as an intersection, bringing the theme into the public debate about social justice.<sup>38</sup>

Related to the Church structural environment, some participants spoke about the way money is distributed and invested in the Church and the nature of the projects that attract financial input. For example, 'resource churches' (benefiting from Strategic Development Fund money) and mission funding more generally are perceived sometimes to aid middle-class models. As a case in point, one participant, when discussing resource churches, felt that outreach tends to form around middle-class hospitality habits, such as dinner in people's homes, and this was not always an appropriate hospitality model in working-class areas. The concern is that resource allocation can reproduce class divisions and inequalities. We note that the independent review of such funding<sup>39</sup> explicitly raises the theme of diversity of funded projects and project leadership, stating that social class should be an overt part of diversity criteria. We reiterate these recommendations from the review to underscore the importance of being aware of diversity in leadership, the social value of ministry, and the class make-up of areas benefitting from additional resources.

**RECOMMENDATION:** Promote membership of the Faith Workers branch of Unite trade union, how to join and what membership entails.

**RECOMMENDATION:** We support two recommendations made by the Independent Review of SDF funding in 2022: That the 'Strategic Investment Board should introduce processes to monitor and report on the diversity of project leaders and worshippers.'

That 'the SIB should judge sustainability not just in financial terms but on whether plans are in place to encourage the development of indigenous [sic] leaders over time, particularly in relation to social class.'

## Power in the Church hierarchy

Part of the narrative around the classed work environment relates to how power is accrued and exercised through the structure. The lack of access to power, especially over a person's own decision-making and environment, is likely to have a detrimental impact on wellbeing. There are implications for working-class clergy then, if those with the most power in the Church are more likely to be from privileged backgrounds. Those in the Church hierarchy can wield power, even at times unbeknown to them, in ways that alienate, subjugate, and marginalise participants. Gail expressed her experience of this power thus:

<sup>38</sup> Lerner (2023).

<sup>39</sup> See Chote *et al.* (2022).

Church structures still look like something either out of the Cabinet or Eton. So, if I have an interview [. . .] I have to be the one that feels uncomfortable and difficult and speak in a certain way and learn how to combat that. Rather than it being incumbent on a bishop, for example [. . .] there was nothing incumbent on them to make me feel at ease or to have some manners actually [. . .] and I thought that reciprocal/mutual respect seems very, very sadly lacking. I do think that there is something about where you come from and who you know that can either break that ice or make it harder.

The sort of power discussed here is 'soft' power. In this example, the participant recalls their frustration that when they interact with the wider diocese, the established etiquette is such that they must adapt how they 'are', their ingrained habits, dispositions, way of speaking etc. to meet the expectations of those in authority, who typically come from middle-class backgrounds. These backgrounds often include a private school and Oxbridge education (which we have discussed above). Matthew summed up the classed experience of the hierarchical structure:

I have only ever seen the structure of bishops and archdeacons work in ways which favour the powerful. And they decide pretty much who's going to flourish as a powerful person, you know. I see people completely sidelined, you know, in that sort of a structure.

This brings us back to the discussions about how knowing the right people is seen as a key feature to progression in the Church. There was a sense of frustration at the alienation felt by having to act differently in CofE culture, and the perception that no accommodation was being made for them. Hence, participants experienced a lack of cultural capital (having the 'right' knowledge, tastes and habits) in those contexts.

One participant spoke of being in meetings with other clergy from more privileged backgrounds and noting the widespread inclination for clergy to 'suss out' where each had trained and who their common connections were, a process which often felt exclusionary. This indicates a lack of social capital also shaping participants' marginalisation, especially when they trained on regional training courses on a part-time basis. Dylan explained the impact of the power imbalance like this:

[The trauma] feels like anxiety and [an] adrenaline reaction, which usually results in fight, freeze and whatever the other Fs are. It has felt like being in situations where I've had to get up and walk away, because the fight or flight response is so strong, I'm thinking I'm gonna say or do something incriminating here and then it will be so easy for them to say see we told you he was a troublemaker [. . .] So, it is mainly a feeling of anger and anxiety that it has provoked in me.

This participant had alluded to a sense of trauma they felt when engaging with the wider Church. When asked what they meant by this, they explained that they experienced a sense of alienation and othering because of their more candid form of communication, which could lead to accusations (whether direct or implied) about the appropriateness of their ministerial conduct. This leads to both dejection and agitation-related emotions.



These structural themes spill over into a discomfort around how appointments are made. (We discuss how parishes advertise posts elsewhere). One participant felt the Church had a ‘cloak and dagger’ approach to decision-making, and how opportunities are offered. For some participants, there is a suspicion that appointments are made according to classed expectations. For example, Barbara told us:

I think also there's a whole issue around appointments that because of the culture is so bad particularly in the Church of England. [...] when you go for interviews, there is an assumption by people on the panel that they want a certain type of person. [...] their expectation of an ideal vicar is usually very clear and not working-class or not working-class background and usually has gone to the right universities etcetera. So, I think that it's not just about those gatekeepers. There needs to be a trickle-down change of culture as well.

Amelia also feels there is a lack of transparency around opportunities and appointments; coupled with both conscious and unconscious bias in gatekeepers, there is also the perception that unofficial invitations are extended to people handpicked for opportunities:

People have got roles that are gatekeepers. And if you're seeing such unconscious bias and some even *conscious* bias in the gatekeepers, then nothing's gonna change in the church [...] you notice when you get side-lined more, you notice the people that get chosen for particular things and you notice who gets the tap on the shoulder for particular jobs. You know, ‘have you considered this?’ Like, nobody's ever done that to me in my life. Nobody goes ‘well, Amelia, would you consider coming to my diocese?’ [...] Yet I'm surrounded by colleagues who that happens to all the time.

Another participant, Isaac, emphasises that as the Church shrinks, it becomes more important to be well-placed when opportunities arise. He concurs that it is important to be seen and liked by those with the power to open doors: ‘I'm quite aware that being appointed to different parishes quite often it's because the Bishop or the Archdeacon likes you or someone says you're a good thing so [...] it's tied up in that if I'm really honest.’

Some participants, then, feel there are unofficial patronages and preferments at work, and there is a suspicion that this may be connected to social and cultural capital (knowing the right people and having the right presentation). We focus here on class differentiation, but as with much of this discussion, other intersections are likely to be at play.

**RECOMMENDATION:** That the Church develops more transparency around the process of appointments, particularly for senior leadership positions.



## Theme 2: Culture and Belonging

*'The work of working class is to be in the middle-class context ... it's hard graft.' Tess, Self-Supporting Minister.*

Discomfort and feelings of alienation manifest in different ways but often it is described as a vague sense of being out of place. We have attempted to capture some of the ways not belonging has been described to us, but we acknowledge it is difficult to formulate recommendations that address the general (and sometimes very specific) sense of being ill-at-ease in an environment because of differences in working-class and middle-class cultures.

The weight of extra labour on working-class clergy who are trying to fit in is a serious impediment to flourishing and may well be draining the Church of its most precious resource. As Carrie told us:

I'm a square peg trying to fit in a round hole and it doesn't work. Which at times can be very wearing and tiring. So, you just sort of think, am I ever gonna fit? And I sometimes wonder if parish ministry in the Church of England is somewhere that I could thrive long term or even survive long term.

Some participants talked about being a 'chameleon' as they make adjustments depending on the context in which they find themselves. Below, we outline some of the stories that illustrate the circumstances around much of the expenditure of this emotional labour – the unacknowledged additional mental and emotional effort that goes into the everyday tasks and interactions required from those who must work harder to belong.

### The dominant culture of the Church: 'I felt pressured into being something I'm not'

On the surface, it may seem that being a little different and being able to bring a new (classed) perspective to the Church is welcome (and we explore the positives further). However, this welcome of difference may be contingent. A participant in one of the focus groups shared her thoughts thus: 'When I got ordained it was like "oh, wonderful! A breath of fresh air [. . .] so just come and be yourself." And I got ordained and they went "oh, no, not like that."' The overriding message from our interviews is that belonging in the Church for working-class clergy takes strategy and effort and that there exist contingencies to acceptance.

Stories shared with us highlight the many ways working-class clergy are required to adjust how they present themselves. (This is different from enjoying being introduced to new tastes and habits; we are talking about a feeling of imposition and expectation to hide working-classness and present inauthentically as middle-class.) Connor's comment sums up the thoughts of working-class colleagues well: 'Now, when I started on this route, I felt pressured into being something I'm not [. . .] It's this expectation that you are always very well-spoken, very polite [. . .] You've got savings in the bank.'

Participants often felt that various aspects of their class status were at odds with the culture of the CofE. This was not only true incidentally but, in some cases, participants felt actively pressured into conforming to the elite culture and downplaying or hiding signs of their working-class background. As Freya states: 'it's like behaving in this way, this coded middle-class way, is the most important thing.' The detrimental impact of this pressure to conform varied by context but was consistently experienced by our participants. The range of feelings described to us included isolation, anxiety, and reduced confidence and agency. These experiences are not simply snapshots of isolated events that temporarily reduce wellbeing but reveal the fundamental class dynamics that infuse a person's sense of self in the long term, to the detriment of wellbeing beyond the specific experiences in question. This mirrors what has been observed elsewhere – that diminished confidence can lead to cycles of reduced accomplishment, which will, in turn, bolster negative emotional experiences.<sup>40</sup>

### Aspiration and social mobility: 'I'd regard myself as working class (lapsed)'

Some participants grew up in families that were socially mobile during their childhood (though sometimes only temporarily). Others considered themselves socially mobile before being ordained, education often being the route taken. Some had achieved financial status. Harry told us: 'I think I'd regard myself as working-class, bracket lapsed, because that's where I started from [ . . . ] my one main view/ habit/ facet that isn't working class is that I would always say education is the answer.'

Our interlocutors were often aware from a relatively young age that education would be crucial for social mobility and so many sought varying types of higher education. This included teacher training colleges, polytechnics and universities. Amelia commented:

I thought [doing a PhD is] kind of going to help me in the Church because it's hard being working class. It's hard having a northern accent. It's hard being a woman [ . . . ] So, I think Reverend Dr [Amelia] is gonna really help me. Then maybe I can apply for whatever job I like [in the Church].

Building on our earlier discussion about educational experiences, this story shows the process does not stop once participants enter ordained ministry; some understand formal educational development is necessary to fulfil their potential in the CofE, owing to the multiple (i.e., intersectional) barriers that they face as working-class clergy who may also be, for example, women. By undertaking doctorates, for instance, the clergy we interviewed were able to make connections with others in the CofE who were involved with various research networks. It also provides enhanced credibility in an institution where many of its senior leaders hail from privileged backgrounds, thereby affording them greater ease of access to higher education. However, such advances do not necessarily equate to the removal of class-related (and other intersectional) barriers. Note the use of the word 'maybe I can apply for whatever job I like.' This participant had, in fact, been told that they would never be made a cathedral dean because of their social background, so even with the highest educational

<sup>40</sup> E.g., see Bandura (1997).



outcome available (a doctorate) from a prestigious university they sense they will not overcome institutional class prejudice.

This means that, regardless of efforts our discussion partners made to be seen more positively within the CofE, the threats to wellbeing that result from a lack of social and cultural capital identified above, remain. There is also the additional threat to wellbeing related to engaging with higher education, especially when it comes to time and financial constraints (the latter being identified by participants regardless of their educational pursuits), as well as the isolating and exacting nature of doctoral-level education.

In other words, the lack of cultural and social capital afforded to working-class clergy, in addition to threatening their wellbeing, leads them to pursue avenues to increase their capital that could likewise threaten their wellbeing. Unsurprisingly, many participants in this research are challenging the prevailing understanding of social mobility as entirely positive. One dialogue partner told us: 'There's nothing wrong with being working class. You know, some people are really proud to be working class.' So, whilst social mobility has been a feature in the lives of some of our participants, we sense a prevailing appetite for discussion that questions how class – and the corresponding culture – is constructed in hierarchical form that means to better oneself and belong equates to becoming passably middle-class.

### Culture differences within the Church: 'I just find the whole thing alienating'

The differences in culture – speech, space, hobbies, diet, bodily representation – that are unacknowledged continuously generate feelings of alienation for some participants. Whilst the example below of using snuff seems exceptional (mentioned by two of our participants) it nevertheless illustrates how alien and alienating some experiences and aspects of CofE culture reported by working-class clergy can be. Dan recalled:

I just find the whole thing alienating. Getting a book token [as a thanks] to me feels alienating. Uh, receiving the bottle of wine [as a thanks] just felt alienating. It was just like, oh, it's just another place I don't fit [ . . . ] I did go to a dinner a few years ago [ . . . ] when we arrived, we were all given a glass of port. Don't drink port. So I had me orange juice. Then after the meal, they brought the snuff around. Oh right, snuff. It was a camel and then you lifted up the camel's behind and there was snuff inside. And they were all on the snuff. I was like, oh, this is all very alien to me.

The material culture of the CofE is often experienced as middle- and upper-class, thereby reaffirming some participants' sense of being at the margins of the Church. The above quote is one of the more extreme examples of upper-class culture, however, multiple participants pointed to feelings of disorientation when their colleagues stayed in gentlemen's clubs rather than the Premier Inn, when their theological college held a croquet tournament, or when they had to attend meetings at a Bishop's palace. The prevalence of cheese and wine became a theme so common it evoked laughter in several interviews. Others mentioned dinner parties, black tie events and supper socials which were intended as times for clergy to relax, but for our participants were



unfamiliar and sometimes stressful. Lee joked, ‘You know, “come to this dinner party”, hmm I’d sooner not actually. Can I go for a pint?!’ Those we interviewed often did not have the same tastes as those in authority and so gifts to say thank you for carrying out any additional responsibilities are sometimes perceived as inappropriate. Given the financial constraints that many have working the Church, that such gifts were often tokens rather than financial heightened feelings of anxiety. Dan explained the feelings of alienation in this way:

The danger is when you don't feel valued, and you don't feel like you're understood and you don't even feel like you're known or seen, the effect that has on you is – well you could almost go down the route of, why do I even bother? It affects your sense of accomplishment. It affects your sense of achievement. Leaves you feeling quite down, quite fed up.

Again, the sense of dejection stemming from a lack of the ‘right’ cultural capital is apparent. For some, experiences of interacting within an elite institution can be demoralising, even when participants attempt to engage significantly in the wider life of the Church and not just in their own parish. As already hinted at, this material alienation is also related to how people present themselves. Some participants have noticed, for instance, how they dress differently to other clergy, often not conforming to perceived expectations and those of their congregants. For example, one participant has been criticised for their tattoos; a colleague suggested their appearance ‘had nothing to do with the Church.’ Belonging can be compromised by seemingly trivial exclusions around clothing or socialising. Our tattooed interlocutor’s sense of alienation, as an example, is not simply impressionistic, born out of the subtleties and idiosyncrasies of human social interaction – it is a real, overt, and even public experience of being identified as being outside the norms of the Church. This type of event has significant implications for a clergy person’s sense of belonging as this is shaped by one’s perception of group norms, beliefs, and behaviours.<sup>41</sup> A reduced sense of belonging leads to feelings of dejection and/or agitation.<sup>42</sup>

This illustrates a core theme – that characteristics read as working-class are not perceived as representative of the clergy norm. The notion that there is an idealised physical representation of the Church of England priest (i.e., the white, male, privileged body) is picked up by one participant who told us how their theological college cohort named this ideal ordinand as ‘Toby’. Light-hearted as this is meant to be, ‘Toby’ is a shorthand for how clergy who are not male, white, and middle-class are framed – in all sorts of ways – as ‘other’. Unsurprisingly then, the requirement to ‘fit in’ to a cultural milieu that is different from a person’s background is costly in emotional labour and impacts wellbeing in ways that are often hidden.

### Working-class ways of speaking: ‘Does everything I say sound stupid?’

Feeling the need to ‘rein in’ speech or presence is about trimming working classness to fit in, which often happens because of a painful experience, censure, or feeling too visible. Hazel talks about having to spend emotional energy trimming her speech:

<sup>41</sup> Sani (2005).

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*

Sometimes I say too much, but this is one of the things I was pondering. When I worked at [a shop] with those girls who grew up around me, we never said 'too much'. We weren't 'too much' for each other [...] we had some real mismatches in terms of communication [in the parish] because I tell the truth. You ask me a question I will give you the answer. I think that makes me quite vulnerable.

In general terms, working-class vernacular and straightforwardness are celebrated as rich and lively ways of communicating. However, they are also a source of (pejorative) differentness leading to misunderstandings, feelings of unbelonging and the suspicion of not being taken seriously or being underestimated. This experience often revolves around regional accents.

Whilst some participants do not have regional accents (either from childhood or because their accent had lessened as they moved away from their geographical and class origins), many do, and we heard several stories about being faced with barriers because of accent (which is read as working-class). Some participants told us they have a strong impression that a 'neutral' way of speaking is considered the desirable norm for clergy. One reported, for example, that she knew about a job advert where the parish profile initially stated a preference for no regional accent, though the archdeacon intervened, and it was changed before being published. Another asked, 'Where are the people who have regional accents at the top levels of the church?'<sup>43</sup> In her interview, Barbara explained to us how classism around accents became evident during training:

There was a few of us [at college] with northern accents and that became a bit of a butt of jokes from others and about the northern accents [...] just sarky comments around oh well, you know people in the North East only know anything about football, they don't do things. That became a bit of a running joke.

Ellie also related to the way accent is a marker of working classness and how it can undermine the ability to be bold:

There are things that I wouldn't do or involve myself in really because it's, you know, you're gonna stand out or your accent's gonna stand out [...] I've had people laugh at my accent [...] I felt undermined by that because you think, does that mean everything I say sounds stupid? You know, people think you're thick because you've got this northern accent.

Other participants told similar stories of feeling they were significantly underestimated because of their regional accents. Felix, for example, who became a priest after a long career in another industry, told us that the first time he had encountered a questioning around his northern accent was when he was ordained into the Church of England. Another participant told how she had been requested to attend elocution lessons, ostensibly to help her with clarity, following complaints she could not be heard. She felt, however, this was more to do with

<sup>43</sup> Nigel Rooms and Ellie Wort (2021) have written about northern-ness and churches, a discussion that overlaps our class analysis here



objection to her gender and her northern accent, and that a 'neutral-sounding' way of speaking was privileged, whilst her northern identity was undermined.<sup>44</sup>

### Cultural flexibility: 'I talk like this to be treated seriously'

Relatedly, not all participants retained working-class markers and several discussed how they had 'naturally' changed their habits and their lifestyle in ways that accord with a middle-class environment. Many had developed neutral accents, for example. For some, this was a journey towards assimilation into Church culture that posed no problems. Sometimes, however, the requirement to be culturally flexible in this way is seen as additional work required of working-class clergy. Following on from the discussion above about how certain modes of speech are given more value than others, some participants feel there is benefit in being able to communicate across a class divide, but this is a one-way requirement that privileges middle-class modes of speech and working-class clergy are often required to be 'bilingual'. Amelia, for example, reported:

My bishop [...] said 'you need to learn to speak middle class,' was his exact phrase. And at the time I was horrified [...] And so it really just was a very difficult environment to be in. The bishop said I just needed to learn to speak middle class and I remember saying to him, 'Oh, why doesn't the Church learn to speak my language? Why do I have to learn to speak the language of the Church that has decided to be middle class? Jesus wasn't middle class...We can't meet people where they're at...?' But that was how it was. And now I've decided instead to think of it as needing to be bilingual, which in fact is/ was for me a more useful way to think about it, which I can now do after all these years, obviously working in a middle-class Church.

In a similar yet distinct vein, one participant summarised: 'There is a sadness at the heart of me that I've had to learn to talk like this, to be treated seriously.' In both accounts, the pressure to communicate in a middle-class manner is clear. In such a context, participants had two options; either they do the emotional work to look at this pressure differently, or they more fully acknowledge the detrimental impact this has on their sense of self. For some, the sense of self is better protected because being bilingual acknowledges retainment of your original identity, which is not lost, but perhaps shielded in some contexts. The extra labour can be burdensome, though, if classed identity becomes performative to be able to express and communicate depending on audience.

Experiencing a disconnect between your sense of self and how you think you should be leads to emotions of dejection and agitation.<sup>45</sup> Equally, needing to reinterpret statements that put pressure on you to change is also likely to have the same impact because before the process of reinterpretation occurs, there needs to be an acknowledgement that your sense of self does not reflect what is being expected of you.<sup>46</sup> There is also the

<sup>44</sup> We should note that there is a tendency to conflate a northern accent (as well as other accents) with being working-class. This is problematic, although in our cohort there is considerable overlap.

<sup>45</sup> Bizman and Yinon (2002).

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*

matter of why participants should be pressured to feel that they need to change anyway, not least given the unique positives that their life experience brings to the CofE's ministry. This contribution risks being undermined if aspects of their working-class background are required to be made invisible, threatening to undermine the positive life evaluations that stem from their pastoral work – this impacts negatively on wellbeing.<sup>47</sup> Being misunderstood by those in your social (including vocational) circles is particularly burdensome and is compounded by the emotional labour that our dialogue partners frequently undertake to be taken seriously.

### The benefits: 'It helps to be working class'

Working-class stories are rarely publicly told in terms of power, but are mostly associated with trauma, lack, and hyper-resilience.<sup>48</sup> We do not diminish those stories and we hope we have honoured the difficult experiences told to us here. However, many participants also gave accounts of how powerful, rich, and edifying working-class culture is; something the Church is currently not allowing into its cultural bloodstream, leaving it anaemic in parts. Above, we have described the frustration participants expressed at being channelled into certain types of ministry because they are working-class. In this section, we want to reflect how the benefits of being working-class play out in ministries; we argue that this should be held in tension with the critique of assumptions participants feel are being made about how working-classness can be leveraged by the Church. In other words, participants feel what they bring to ministry should be valued more but in conjunction with having agency over their ministries.

One participant expressed being working-class in the Church as a kind of paradox: 'you are a stranger in a strange land and that comes with benefits and drawbacks.' Another also told us there is tension in how ministries are defined:

There definitely is more stress in my life because I'm in parishes where I have to work harder to understand the people [ . . . ] then you're in danger of saying, well, this person's working-class. Let's put them in a working-class parish. That doesn't sound healthy really.

There is a need for nuance and, above all, agency in how the Church views the placement of clergy according to class credentials.

Several participants shared that whilst they are often misunderstood in some contexts where a middle-class sensibility prevails, having a working-class cultural background gives them the ability to relate more broadly to people, to break down unhelpful and conditioned deference, and to be more relatable to the wider community that the Church hopes to reach. Harriet echoes other participants when she talks about her background giving her a much-needed way of looking at the world and a way of relating to people. She offers advice to her working-class colleagues, suggesting they:

<sup>47</sup> See Tay and Diener (2011).

<sup>48</sup> Graeber (2014).

work through all the enriching things it brings to your ministry [...] let's face it, most people are working class [...] And so many people struggling at the moment that if you can have any kind of empathy and understanding of what they're going through it's got to be good at building relationships and that, you know, for me, that's what being a priest is about; is building relationships with people and being alongside them. When things are tough and hard and understanding them.

Some participants see how clergy who have not shared similar experiences to those they are ministering to may struggle to relate, which may impact on their pastoral ability. For example, Connor stated:

One of the previous incumbents here before me had a lot of problems mixing in with this area. He didn't know how to engage with the people, didn't know how to engage with mission and ministry out there. He had a lot of problems with people coming to the door, making demands, and kicking off and not being able to stand his ground. And this in my eyes is because he was from a middle- to upper-class background where he didn't have experience with these things. Whereas, for example, yesterday I was sourcing baby milk out for a local young girl [...] and when people turn up at the door demanding and kicking off you need to be able to put your foot down and say 'look, you're not walking all over me' [...] So I think it helps [...] to have that background of working-class if you are going to minister in a working-class parish.

Returning to the idea that working-class background brings (unrecognised) value to the Church, several interviewees referenced vernacular approaches to communication that, in their view, could help the Church's conversation be more productive, more transparent, and more honest. The following quote illustrates a commonly held view that straightforwardness in speech that is part of a working-class upbringing should be seen as a gift to the Church:

I think I've learned that different classes communicate differently, and we tell the truth. In the moment, if you ask me a question, I will answer you [...] And this is one of the things I've been mulling over [...] this whole same-sex marriage stuff that's going off [...] In the community that I grew up in, we talked about sex. And is this a reflection of the Church in that we're so bloody middle-class that we can't have this honest and open conversation about sex. And if we could? Maybe we could communicate more effectively.

The Church then should embrace and harness people's ability to speak truth, to speak boldly, to speak plainly. Moreover, Amelia believes there is a more political context into which working-class people can speak: 'the working-class are just a gift to the Church, aren't they? Because we're here to challenge. And Jesus did it all the time, challenging the powerful and the religious authorities. And that's what we're here for!'

Having a working-class background is obviously useful for those ministering in working-class areas. Participants feel they have an understanding of working-class experiences, and an affinity that helps in relationships with working-class parishioners, such as being able to support more effectively and being able to establish healthier boundaries. Having a shared working-class worldview in contexts where it is not made incongruent is beneficial



to wellbeing because: (i) participants felt able to fulfil their calling as pastors; a positive life evaluation, which promotes positive feelings;<sup>49</sup> and (ii) the ability to maintain personal space and protected time is a vital aspect of self-care.

Another participant, Carrie, said:

I remember in my first year here I had a couple come in wanting to get married in church. Chap was divorced. Couldn't look me in the eye. Was really embarrassed. I was asking about his first marriage. And I just said would it help you to know that I've just had my decree nisi through the post and he just looked up and looked me straight in the eye and said 'really?' And I said, yeah. And my marriage [ . . . ] was falling apart [ . . . ] That can be a real bonus in outreach and community [ . . . ] whereas in church you might get met with slightly sniffy attitudes of, you know, not quite up to par, aren't you?

Whilst divorce is obviously not unique to those from working-class backgrounds, this quote does clearly highlight the distinction between how participants' life experiences are received in the CofE and those from working-class backgrounds who do not regularly attend church. Whilst participants' lived experience can remove some barriers for those who might otherwise be unwilling to engage with the local church, there is a sense that in some contexts the gift of such experience is not appreciated.

Such stories told within the working-class milieu that signify qualities often unrecognised as gifts to the Church and that the Church needs, are manifold in our interviews, yet seem to be told in isolation from each other. The main message from participants is that this project has facilitated the start of the collective conversation. To underline this message, another participant felt that the priority for the Church is to ensure working-classness is represented at all levels and that understanding multiple perspectives is part of a listening and learning project:

I think honestly if we were just representative across all of our roles in the Church of England, I think that would help. If you don't have working class people in meetings at certain levels, then you're not getting that perspective and you never will [ . . . ] what they need to do is, therefore, is really listen to people [for] whom that is their experience.

Participants were well-aware of the cultural inequalities within the Church that will require deliberate action but would not be quickly remedied. One participant urged the Church, 'to embrace and celebrate the people who bring a different culture.'

<sup>49</sup> Fry (2020).

**RECOMMENDATION:** That peer groups be established within or across dioceses to enable networking and conversation amongst clergy who see themselves as working-class, to be convened by clergy, financed by dioceses and to act as a point of consultation for the Church.

In addition, we recommend 'reverse coaching' be implemented to inform senior leaders how to avoid a narrow cultural perspective.

**RECOMMENDATION:** That the Church commits to engaging with the issue of classism within its structures and culture and makes this an explicit part of its strategic priorities for the decade.





## Theme 3: Impact on Wellbeing

*'Who am I then, if this gobby person is a bad thing? And yet, I'm so sure that God is calling this gobby person. What on earth does that mean?' Irene, Curate.*

As we turn our attention to the notion of wellbeing itself, we want to reflect how many of our participants expressed deep love for and commitment to the Church. Joy and wellbeing come from fulfilling a vocation in ministry. Participants described a sense of congruence when they minister to both churchgoers and the wider community in ways that feel authentic. Amelia, for example, described this sense of calling; 'God uses all of who we are. And so, in that sense, we're called just to be ourselves and our authentic selves.' Regular prayer and spirituality resources such as retreats, pilgrimages and spiritual direction were all mentioned as a necessary part of an individual's resource pool and in this report we highlight the connections to material access to these resources. Multiple interviews and focus group discussions reflected that because one's vocation is mediated through the Church, relational support and spiritual wellbeing are intimately connected. We therefore argue that spiritual wellbeing cannot be considered in isolation.

One notable aspect of interviews and focus group discussions was the resonance participants felt with the Christian tradition and scripture that could be described as spiritual wellbeing. Jason described the integration he feels in his ministry between social action and spirituality:

It's really easy to find it in the Bible. It's really easy to find it in what Jesus did. It's really easy to find it in the Magnificat. I don't have any problems whatsoever when someone hands me the Magnificat and going into my church and saying rulers will be dragged from their thrones and the poor will be lifted up. I don't have any problems whatsoever saying that the rich should be sent away empty and that the hungry will be fed.

Several other participants mentioned the significance of the Magnificat, often repeated in Anglican liturgy. Further theological work on what we might call 'working-class theology' could have significant wellbeing implications for working-class clergy and their congregations and part of our future work will be focused on what theological underpinnings are being developed by those clergy active in class-related social justice. We have already highlighted Luke Lerner's edited volume, and we are aware of other projects that focus on developing leadership profiles of working-class lay and ordained people, work which we intend to follow closely and amplify.

Both the scholarly work and the praxis being developed around class justice supports our orientation towards the systemic rather than the individual. We have emphasised that there is an objection amongst working-class clergy to emphasising the individual's work on their own resource pool in the wellbeing equation – several participants articulated that working-class clergy do not require 'fixing'. As Barbara told us: 'We aren't the problem, you know. But it's easy to think that you are.' This should alert us to how working-class clergy perceive the framing



of wellbeing and their feelings of not belonging. In other words, we should look outwards towards systemic class oppressions.

Some participants were indeed recovering from bruising experiences within the Church, and some, on the other hand, felt they were protected by having boundaries. Our concern has been to explore whether wellbeing is understood as purely an individual matter of self-care – the problem with this is that it can add feelings of failure when a person is unable to resolve or withstand the external pressures placed upon them because of classism (or any other form of oppression). One participant told us they had been involved in previous research that concluded the Church should employ ‘more robust clergy’ which had angered him because it failed to connect the systemic causes with absence of wellbeing. Connecting class and wellbeing requires an understanding of both the systemic barriers experienced and how class impacts on the access to wellbeing enhancing resources.

In this section, we look at the various attitudes to wellbeing to see if there are messages about causes of poor wellbeing amongst working-class clergy and how they access potential solutions.

### Problematising resilience: ‘Been there, done that, got the T-shirt’

Participants frequently had to go through difficult life experiences, especially from an early age. For some, this enhanced the ability to tackle challenges (even though this does not eradicate the presence of struggle and its threat to wellbeing). For example, Gail commented that ‘there’s a resilience and perseverance that comes from my background that maybe doesn’t come through immediately.’ Another participant, Aidan, explained:

And actually, when you think about what the worst that can happen [you’ve] probably lived through it already [ . . . ] having a relative with a terminal illness, been there, done that, got the T-shirt. Don’t want it to happen again. But if it did it wouldn’t be uncharted territory [ . . . ] under God it’ll all be OK. Might not look like it does now, but it’ll be OK.

Some participants felt therefore, they were able to persevere through times of decreased wellbeing because of their life history; having to overcome significant struggles to survive can equip individuals to withstand all manner of adverse situations. This does not undo the sense of being ‘ground down’ over time by the Church’s culture, as participants reported. However, it does mean that they may have some ‘stickability’ whilst they feel alienated and marginalised. This is a mixed blessing. Whilst it means that the Church can benefit from their ongoing ministry, it also makes it more difficult for struggle to be identified, especially given the lack of pastoral support on offer (discussed below). This can mean any form of support comes very late in the day for some participants – for example, when they needed to be signed off work for significant time on mental health grounds.

Whilst we want to unpack the notion of resilience and highlight some of the shortcomings of this idea, in some contexts having the wherewithal to persevere is also linked to a sense of power that comes with working-class heritage. For Hazel, an incumbent, such power is also linked with a particular type of working-class femininity. Having told a story about being sidelined by her congregation and then being chastised for a minor error, Hazel’s ability to cry and then laugh over the incident is framed as a needful, but also powerful, classed trait:

Until you've met a working-class woman, actually, you don't know the power of a working-class woman because we're used to fighting, aren't we? And you won't knock us. Because it's ingrained into us to get back up. Clean the doorstep and face the day.

Whilst several stories featured resilience and acts of perseverance, these were often told in the spirit of challenge to classed structures and encounters. We do not want these resilience stories to be misinterpreted. As one participant noted; 'My resilience is not an issue here. The lack of support is.' Experiencing difficulties in life because of class inequality, which generates 'resilience,' should be understood as a symptom of injustice and not as a discourse that can be leveraged to encourage continued acquiescence to oppressive environments. In other words, individual resilience should not be a way to ameliorate the effects of class, since it is not the responsibility of the individual to learn to withstand a middle-class and elite bias. Instead, solutions should be sought that challenge and change the classed structure and culture where they present barriers and engender unequal levels of belonging.

Additionally, discourses around 'robust clergy' are problematised by some participants. One of the focus groups pinpointed the ethical problems with institutionally relying on the individual to have the wherewithal to withstand structural and systemic burdens and oppressions. One participant was clear that when individuals can rightly establish boundaries with workload (for example) it can impact on the workloads of others rather than being a challenge to structural deficiencies. Another participant in the group agreed strongly that the notion of resilience should be rigorously challenged. This is not to say that individuals exercising their own resilience, maintaining boundaries and ensuring they have access to an appropriate resource pool is unimportant – indeed, this may be considered a spiritual path by some.<sup>50</sup> Rather, this should not be in place of systemic change, fairness, and equality.

Another participant has thought deeply about the institutional reliance on individual resilience:

The narratives of resilience in the Church of England have been [...] formed around an individualistic lens. It's all about individual psychology, individual capacity, individual emotional states, and that the training that you get as an ordinand and also early on in curacy focuses on that. And it talks about things like, you know, taking breaks or doing hobbies. And there is no mention of things like finances, housing security, family relationships, and to shift that and to have a broader view would be really helpful.

This brings into sharp relief the inadequacy of the wellbeing strategies that are purely about self-care. Whilst we do discuss the need to have good access to retreats and peer support, we emphasise that this is not instead of tackling the systemic injustices outlined (albeit briefly) in this report and in other studies.

<sup>50</sup> See for example Allain-Chapman (2012).

## Lack of pastoral support from the Church: ‘The diocese doesn’t care about me’

Some interviews raised the lack of pastoral support for the demands of ministry. In some cases, participants identified problems with the cultural expectations around the content of support – often expectations seem to differ between working-class clergy and those further up the institutional hierarchy. Equally, whilst some spaces may be thought of as pastoral, they are not always seen as safe or appropriate places to deliver on wellbeing requirements. There were multiple perceptions as to why this was the case. Several participants pointed out that it is not appropriate to mix the pastoral caring role with structural management responsibilities and that there are difficulties in revealing vulnerabilities to the person who also has disciplinary power over the individual. For others, personal information needs to be shared only with people deemed appropriate by the individual. For example, Carrie explained:

I've been diagnosed with endometriosis, and it can make periods and that time of the month horrific to live through for a few days. Now I'll share that with my female friends, and I'll tell you because it's part of this research and I've talked to a counsellor about it, but I wouldn't necessarily feel very comfortable sitting [and] showing that in an all-male chapter meeting.

This experience is also gendered and relates back to the point made about intersectionality. She does not possess the same level of relationship with her male colleagues as her female colleagues and a male-dominated environment presents similar inadequacies as a middle-class dominated environment. The point being made is that pastoral provision should not be built around the constructed norm of male and middle-class clergy, nor should it necessarily be contained within formal hierarchical relationships.

An alternative interpretation was provided by Dan:

I have friends who say to me, ‘I am disabled, the diocese gives me no support.’ ‘I am a female clergy person, single clergy person. The diocese gives me no support.’ ‘The diocese doesn't like single females.’ ‘The diocese doesn't like disabled clergy.’ I could say that the diocese doesn't care for working-class clergy [. . .] I think there's an overarching narrative that if you're a gay clergy person, you could very easily say the diocese don't care about me because I'm gay, therefore there's a big issue with how they relate to gay clergy. No. I feel it as well [. . .] if I wanted to talk about baking sourdough bread, they're probably more happy [. . .] or talk about gin, or go in for a glass of wine, they're probably more comfortable. But because... you're not gonna find me doing those things and talking about those things, I think they don't know what to do with me.

This perspective indicates that other cultural factors are at play and that a lack of cultural understanding within the hierarchy contributes to the sense of marginalisation and the feeling that limited support is on offer. Again, this illustrates the sense that pastoral support is sought from those appointed to manage clergy, but it is compromised by lack of time and limitations in understanding diverse requirements that are beyond the imaginary ‘typical’ mould of a CofE minister. Again, there are particular needs amongst working-class clergy that are not being met by the dominant model of support in the CofE.

The feeling of not being treated as a valued individual by the Church hierarchy was central to some participants' wellbeing and mental health. Sometimes this is related to the material issues we outlined above. Gavin, for example, commented:

What I found was kind of oh shit here I am at the end of my curacy [ . . . ] the house I live in is now a tied cottage [ . . . ] my house goes with my job. I need to find a new job if I want somewhere to live [ . . . ] I've given up my salaried job to go into the Church of England, so I was economically dependent on the Church and the Church wasn't supporting me, nor was it supporting quite a few of my colleagues that I knew in a similar situation [ . . . ] at one point I got a letter from the Archdeacon that said basically said; 'Dear Gavin, I hope you are having some success in your search for a new post. This is just a reminder that we'll want the keys to your Vicarage back on July the 14th. Best wishes, Archdeacon'

Regardless of the reason (none of which are mutually exclusive), lack of support is a significant issue for those who are frequently supporting others in times of need. This issue is exacerbated by the difficult experiences that participants have endured as working-class clergy in a predominantly elite Church. This theme, once again, highlights that wellbeing is not merely about self-care. Rather, the dominant culture of the institutional Church has a significant impact on the wellbeing experienced by its clergy. The above quote brings us back to the material stresses faced more acutely by those who have fewer independent resources to call on, but the absence of empathy and understanding from those upholding the systems in place when situations are acute, compounds the sense of precarity.

The impact of managing this sense of dejection alongside a strong sense of vocation to ordained ministry – particularly a vocation that requires being available for others – takes its toll on the wellbeing of many of our participants. In the focus groups several used the language of being 'ground down' over the course of their ministry by marginalisation and alienation. This was true for those who had been ordained for a few years and those who had been ordained for decades. This perception is a significant barrier to wellbeing as it undermines our interlocutors' sense of agency.

As we have mentioned earlier, the issues around pastoral support are sometimes related to limited access to the wellbeing resource pool. Some participants felt disadvantaged: in poorer parishes there are fewer resources that can be allocated to retreats and such like for clergy. As Fiona told us in a discussion about how the working life of clergy needs to include important times of restoration; 'Can you afford to go on retreat? Maybe not. If you're in a poor parish, they may not have the finances and you may not have the finances to actually be able to do that.' Barbara concurred and highlighted that when there are expectations that clergy undertake enriching activities, the expense should not fall to individuals or parishes:

A lot of working-class clergy are working in estate ministries and actually, the parishes are on their knees, you cannot ask them for money for you to go on a retreat or for you to go and see your spiritual director. You know, you just can't do it.

The financial implication for accessing meaningful resources is part of a wider theme. Some participants felt that asking for support resources was difficult because it feels exceptional and there was a sense that such requests are taken as signs of failure, abnormal vulnerability or not being 'robust'. To mitigate this, we suggest that dioceses review their approach to offering wellbeing-related resources, to make this routine, widely available and proactively offered.

**RECOMMENDATION:** That the Church develops a national system of peer support, mentorship, advocacy and pastoral support outside of the structural management arrangements.

**RECOMMENDATION:** That each diocese works to make access to therapeutic resources explicitly accessible and encourage a culture where accessing these resources is seen as a routine part of ministry.

**RECOMMENDATION:** Financial provision for regular spiritual direction/accompaniment, types of therapy and retreat days offered to all clergy in recognition that this is a necessary aspect of the role. This should be at a diocesan level rather than left to the individual parish.

## Self-acceptance: 'I don't feel the need to hide who I am'

Though we have critiqued some forms of resilience discourse, we recognise that at times it is related to self-acceptance. Participants, through difficult life experiences, had been brought to the point where they were much more comfortable being themselves than conforming to the expectations of others. Anne stated; 'We have to be kind, you know, sometimes what we are isn't very nice and we need to be kind. But actually, I don't feel the need to hide much of who I am.' Connor similarly said:

Now when I started on this route, I felt pressured into being something I'm not [ . . . ] It's this expectation that you are always very well spoken, very polite... You've got savings in the bank [ . . . ] it got to a point a little while ago where it was beginning to stress me out [ . . . ] Don't get me wrong, I don't have the mouth of a sailor, but, you know, occasionally it's [ . . . ] just, 'oh, shit'. [Now] I feel more relaxed. I feel more able to laugh with people, laugh at people, and laugh at myself.

As with resilience, a paradox exists. It is through the difficulty of being pressured to conform to an elite culture that participants came to affirm their identity. In other words, threats to wellbeing (i.e., alienation and marginalisation) facilitate the need to rethink their sense of self. Moreover, for some participants, life in general produced other difficult circumstances outside the church experience, leading to self-reflection and self-acceptance. Participants did, however, make the distinction between challenging events that might befall anyone and classism. In other words, participants are expressing the notion that experiencing wide-ranging class bias and oppressions within the culture of the CofE and within wider society should not be considered part of the 'normal' set of challenges that life brings. The journey to self-acceptance as a working-class person is an additional journey in response to the lack of belonging we have described in the sections above. Stories about both resilience and self-acceptance outline positive outcomes for individuals in the face of socially constructed classed obstacles.



## Closing Comments

*I don't think people will be surprised by any of the research that comes forward. The fact that if you're from Cambridge and your dad was the Archdeacon, you're at an advantage over somebody different; [it's] an open secret, isn't it?' Comment in a working group.*

There are several areas that were raised during this project that we have not discussed here but are nevertheless important. Participants talked in detail about the impact of class inequalities on congregations and communities, including how the Church projects itself into communities, and how working-class clergy negotiate the class divisions and inequalities within their congregations (such as expectations around hospitality and social events). We would like to provide further discussion on these topics and direct them to a wider audience, such as the National Estate Churches Network, to enable our participants' stories to have ongoing impact. As part of our resources cache, we intend to write more fully and deeply on topics such as gender and class, discourses that construct class divisions and developing theology that speaks to the working-class experience. These resources are intended to further provoke discussion and thought.

As we alluded to in the introduction, some participants were concerned that a project focusing on working-class clergy might be orientated in the wrong direction. One participant felt that there would be value in highlighting class privilege as well as looking at the working-class experience:

[I] think that maybe people who've had a lot of privilege and opportunities really need some work doing on them to recognise their privileges and opportunities and maybe the work ought to be going into there, rather than into the other side.

Another participant felt that our project may contribute to the othering of working-class clergy:

You're problematising working class by doing the study, no offence, but why aren't we problematising – to be crude – white male privilege? Or why aren't we problematising clergy with private school backgrounds?

Circling back to participants' comments about the importance of working-class clergy not being framed as 'a problem' or being required to shore up their own wellbeing diminished by classism, the suggestion that *privilege* should be recognised and scrutinised is fitting. The comments above make an important point and whilst we hope we have re-orientated the discussion towards the systemic and structural, there is clearly a need to critically examine how the Church's systems and culture support privilege and reproduce class (and other) inequalities. Our recommendations go some way to illustrate how change can be made practically and structurally. We have also attempted to identify how wellbeing is impacted by classism without laying the burden of care and repair at the feet of individuals.



**RECOMMENDATION:** That the researchers develop a report detailing the stories collected during this project about classed experiences within congregations and communities and disseminate widely, particularly to the National Estate Churches Network.

**RECOMMENDATION:** That the Church commissions further research that examines more deeply how its structures, systems and culture reproduce class inequality with a view to illuminating privilege in all its guises.

**RECOMMENDATION:** That the College and House of Bishops discuss the findings of this report, with a view to:

- Better understanding both the pastoral and missional importance of promoting full inclusion of working-class clergy and lay people as part of the church's efforts to become more diverse and fully represent the communities it serves;
- Taking steps to ensure that the vocations and wellbeing of working-class clergy are better supported;
- Producing theological teaching on social class for use within the Church of England.





We asked some participants what they might do differently because of this research:

Be aware of how much background and class may affect how the process of discernment process, training and ministry in the C of E has affected them. Be aware of the challenges as well as the prejudices of others and myself regarding class.

Be much more aware of how class can be a barrier for some people.

Keep building working class networks.

Start to build up a database of resources that can help working class people and clergy e.g. funding for retreats, the NECN website and newsletter has resources, Mothers' Union.

I have been challenged to be less apologetic, speak up more and look at some of the issues around the Church and working class communities.

The discussion will, I am sure, give me extra confidence in carrying out my ministry.

I have recognised afresh the need just to be more "visible" and to connect with others.

Try to mask less, I think.



My soul magnifies the Lord,  
and my spirit rejoices in God my Saviour,  
for he has looked with favour on the lowliness of his servant.

Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed;  
for the Mighty One has done great things for me,  
and holy is his name.

His mercy is for those who fear him  
from generation to generation.  
He has shown strength with his arm;  
he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts.

He has brought down the powerful from their thrones,  
and lifted up the lowly;  
he has filled the hungry with good things,  
and sent the rich away empty.  
He has helped his servant Israel,  
in remembrance of his mercy,  
according to the promise he made to our ancestors,  
to Abraham and to his descendants for ever.

~ The Song of Mary (Luke 1:46-55) ~  
NRSV, Anglicised.



## Appendix: Further Methodological Considerations

### Research ethics

The project was subject to ethical approval from York St John University, Bournemouth University and the National Church Institutions. The ethics process included approval of secure and appropriate storage of information; confidentiality was also guaranteed. All data is anonymised and was stored on a password-protected cloud, shared by the researchers only. Participants were given written information and a consent sheet to ensure fully informed agreement and to ensure they were aware that they could withdraw before, during and after the interview. Participants were asked whether they were happy for their interviews to be recorded and for the data to be kept for up to three years after the project in case it could be used for further dissemination. Participants are also free to change their mind regarding permission to store their data for the three-year period at any point and have the researchers' email addresses, should they wish to do so.

As there is always a risk of power imbalance in social research, and all the more so when exploring a sensitive and highly personal topic, additional steps were taken to address this dynamic. One such step is the researchers' openness to being guided by those we interviewed. As participants shared difficult life experiences, enhancing their vulnerability, we too have been open about our own assumptions and backgrounds relevant to the research. Another step was the decision to use semi-structured interviews as these enable participants to steer discussion in a way they deem appropriate and to avoid answering questions with any information they do not wish to share. A further step was the focus groups that allowed participants to feed back on the initial themes identified by the researchers, ensuring that they have been understood and represented accurately. Our participants are therefore co-contributors to the knowledge and implications discussed in this report. As such, we consider them our interlocutors or dialogue partners.

### Recruitment, data collection and data analysis

Participants made contact with us via open calls on Twitter and via a Facebook group for estate churches (as many working-class clergy are appointed to minister in such contexts). A small number came via other participants who recommended the research to their own contacts. Existing relationships were also used for recommendations and we made direct contact with some participants when their contact details were public. When such details were not accessible, we sent an invite to participants via the existing relationship. Interviews were designed to last approximately an hour. We discussed with participants their family background and upbringing, education and work history, their understanding of working-class identity and of wellbeing, their journey to ordination, their experience of ordained ministry, any theology relating to class, and their recommendations for structural change that can enhance the wellbeing of working-class clergy in the CofE.

One of the lasting legacies of the pandemic is the familiarity many now have with communicating via video platforms Zoom and Microsoft Teams. The benefits of online interviews for this project are significant: (i)

maximising use of the time allocated; (ii) maximising the number of participants; (iii) minimal disruption for participants; and (iv) allowing interviewees more privacy and control over their participation. There is an additional benefit of transcription creation with some of this software, allowing researchers to watch recordings back to edit, rather than create from scratch, transcripts.

Data has been analysed with thematic analysis and coding took part in two stages. First, descriptive coding was adopted, labelling the data with language found within it. Second, pattern and focused coding was employed – the former involved making connections across the data set and the latter, identifying the most common codes. The emergent codes were combined when their language or concepts were related, to identify the themes. We labelled the themes with language found within the transcripts. This was to recognise our participants' role in the creation of the knowledge found in this report.

Whilst all the stories we heard were unique in varying ways, there were themes that could be found across these stories. Data saturation was achieved when we became aware that the latest interviews mirrored the patterns of previous ones.<sup>51</sup>

Our project explores the experiences of being a working-class clergy person in the CofE and how this shapes experiences of wellbeing. Along with the 50 individual interviews, we invited all participants to attend one of four focus groups to follow-up some of the themes and ideas raised. 25 took up this invitation. The clergy we spoke to are from across the Church's hierarchy, ranging from curates (newly ordained ministers), vicars, archdeacons, bishops and those with regional or national roles. We interviewed a mixture of men and women, although all were white and identified as working class.

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<sup>51</sup> Grady (1998).



Characteristic	No.	Characteristic	No.
Male	24	Curate	10
Female	26	Incumbent	25
North East	3	Chaplain (HE or other)	2
North West	9	Parachurch	2
North (central)	9	Other (including national roles)	4
South East	15	Senior (residentiary canons, archdeacons, bishops)	4
South West	2	Retired (incl. PTO)	3
Midlands	12	Stipendiary (incl. retired but former stipendiary)	41
		Self-supporting (excl. retired but former stipendiary)	9

Figure 1. Participant Locations

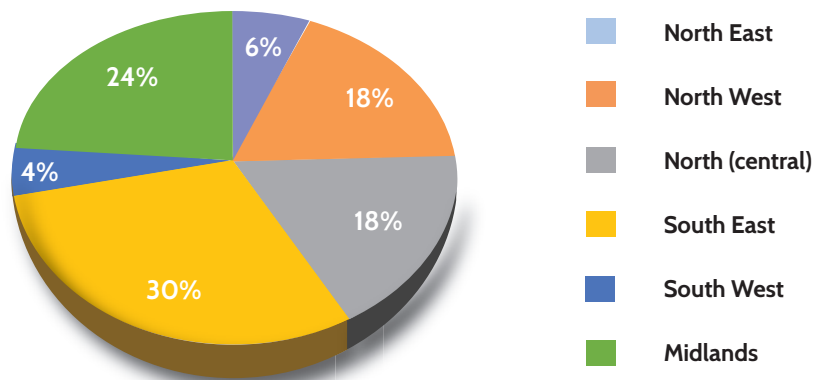


Figure 1 shows that the clergy we spoke to mostly came from South East England. Although this is the most affluent region of the country,<sup>52</sup> this is an unsurprising find because of the higher cost of living,<sup>53</sup> socio-economic inequalities are likely to be more acutely felt, potentially leading more working-class clergy to discuss their experience, given that there is a potential therapeutic benefit to doing so.<sup>54</sup>

Tellingly, when participant locations are grouped into the north, the midlands and the south, 42% come from northern regions, compared with 34% from southern regions and 24% from the midlands. This reflects wider socio-economic disparities between different regions in England<sup>55</sup> and so foregrounds that wider societal factors will be shaping the experiences of working-class clergy. The inclusion of working-class clergy from nearly all regions of England (other than the South (central)) suggests the representative nature of our findings.

**Figure 2. Participants by Province**

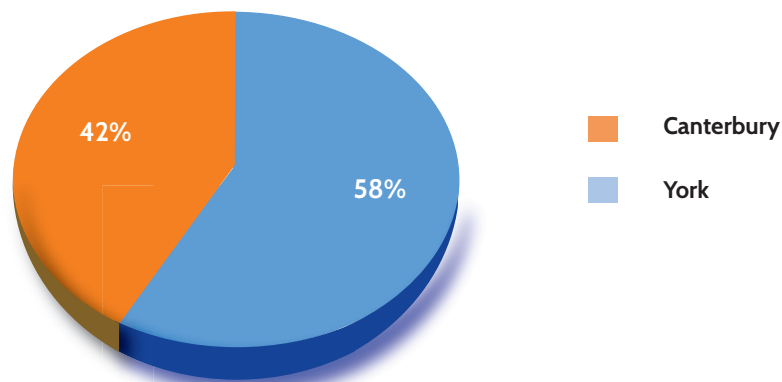


Figure 2 shows that there is a 16-percentage point difference between the number of working-class clergy interviewed coming from the Canterbury (58%) and York (42%) Provinces. However, the York Province contains only 12 dioceses whereas the Canterbury Province has 30. Given that the latter has 2.5 times more dioceses than the York Province, it is clear that our dialogue partners' locations again reflect the socio-economic disparity found within England beyond the CofE. This is a further factor that suggests the representativeness of our findings.

<sup>52</sup> Office for National Statistics (2021).

<sup>53</sup> Andrews (2023).

<sup>54</sup> Birch and Miller (2000).

<sup>55</sup> E.g., see Newcastle City Council (2017).

**Figure 3. Participants by Role**

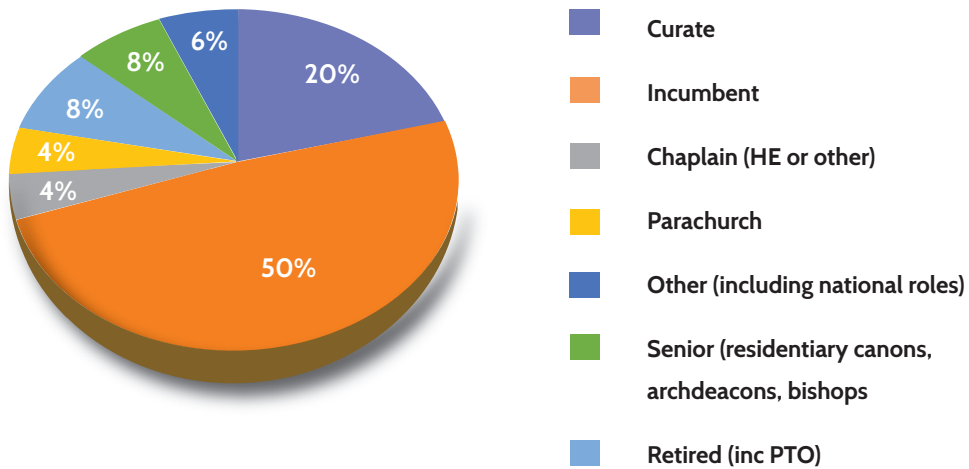


Figure 3 shows that dialogue partners were found from across the Church’s hierarchy. The role of incumbents varied from associate vicars (with incumbent status) to priests in charge, vicars and rectors, to residentiary canons, archdeacons and bishops, although no cathedral deans took part in this research. Again, this wide sample indicates the representative nature of our findings.



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