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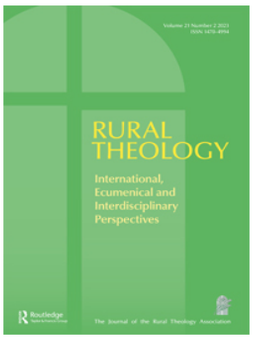

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Andrew Village

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Church of England Ministry in the South-West Peninsular: Gaps and Priorities

Andrew Village

School of Humanities, York St John University, York, UK

ABSTRACT

This paper reports on how 92 parochial incumbents, 80 assistant clergy, and 94 Readers in the dioceses of Exeter and Truro rated the importance of various tasks in their ministries, how well they felt equipped to do those tasks, and their priorities for ministry and training. Preaching, leading worship, and pastoral care were rated as most important, while management and administration, talking about giving and raising money, and speaking up on local issues were rated as least important. The largest gaps between importance of a task and being equipped for it were supporting personal wellbeing for incumbents, equipping disciples for assistant clergy, and bringing others to faith for Readers. Top ministry priorities were equipping lay ministries, team working, and supporting evangelists; lowest priorities were remaining faithful to received traditions, maintaining the parish system, and developing digital ministries.

KEYWORDS

Fragile church; Church of England; clergy; Readers; rural ministry

Introduction

In his extended poem *The Deserted Village*, published in 1770, Oliver Goldsmith (1861) paints a somewhat romantic picture of a rural clergyman:

> … A man he was, to all the country dear,
> And passing rich with forty pounds a year;
> Remote from towns he ran his godly race,
> Nor e'er had changed, nor wished to change his place;

The poem goes on to describe someone who welcomes vagrants into his 'modest mansion', ministers at times of life and death to his poor parishioners, preaches powerfully, and is adored by all.

> … At church, with meek and unaffected grace,
> His looks adorned the venerable place;

CONTACT Andrew Village a.village@yorksj.ac.uk School of Humanities, York St John University, York, UK

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Truth from his lips prevailed with double sway,
And fools, who came to scoff, remained to pray.
The service past, around the pious man,
With steady zeal, each honest rustic ran;
Even children followed, with endearing wile,
And plucked his gown, to share the good man's smile.

Taken as a whole, Goldsmith's poem expresses despair at the rural depopulation that must have been widespread as the towns and cities grew during the rise of the Industrial Revolution. It reminds us that the flight from the country is nothing new, and that rural ministry has often been about trying to hold onto a past that is crumbling in the face of 'progress'. What is, perhaps, more surprising is that, for the Church of England at least, the parish system that would have been familiar to Goldsmith is more or less intact today. What has changed to be sure is the ratio of incumbents to parishes, with multi-parish rural benefices being the norm in virtually every diocese today.

The changes in rural communities, and the Church of England's response to them, have been reported and discussed for many years (see, for example Andrews, 2011; Church of England, 1990; Francis, 1985, 2015, 2018; Weller, Artess, Sahar, & Neary, 2019; Winter & Short, 1993). The response of the Church has varied but has largely involved a growth in assistant clergy (largely self-supporting and part time), a turn to lay ministries, and the creation of multi-parish benefices under the oversight of a single incumbent (or priest in charge). Some idea of numbers can be gleaned from the most recently published ministry figures for the Church of England, which refer to 2020 (Church of England, 2021). Trend data for 2016–2020 suggests numbers have been generally stable of late, with just under 8,000 stipendiary clergy, about 3,000 self-supporting ministers, and just over 7,000 clergy with permission to officiate. On these figures, some 55% of licensed clergy are voluntary and part-time. Alongside clergy are lay ministers, of which Readers are the most widespread. The same report suggests a decline in the number of Readers in active ministry from 9,620 in 2011 to 7,590 in 2020 (Church of England, 2021, figure 18). Other lay ministers are still relatively scarce (410 across 34 dioceses in the 2020 report), despite the growing awareness of the importance of lay ministries by the Church at large (Archbishops' Council, 2017; Research and Statistics, 2020). The move towards voluntary ministry has largely kept the parish system intact, but clerical ministry in any given parish may be much less frequent or visible than it used to be. If Goldsmith's kindly parson wandered down the streets of a village in his enlarged benefice today, he may get polite nods from the residents (and those staying in holiday lets) but few would know who he was, collar or no collar.

The system of ministry in the Church of England has been creaking under strain for many years, but it is only relatively recently that the gradual change has really begun to bite, with people in rural areas being increasingly aware of what have been called 'fragile churches'. Ann Lawson coined this term after interviews with incumbents of rural benefices (Lawson, 2019). She identified five key areas where the strain of rural ministry was most apparent: financial pressure, inability to replace churchwardens or volunteers, lack of time and energy amongst clergy to start new things, a lack of critical mass to sustain work with children, and tiny, aging congregations. These 'five marks' have

been noted by others with rural experience (Wilson, 2019) and recently revised in the light of the Covid-19 pandemic (Francis, Village, & Lawson, 2020, 2021; Lawson, 2023), when the area of maintaining historic buildings was added to the list. The pandemic has certainly increased the stress of ministers, especially stipendiary parochial clergy (Village & Francis, 2021a, 2021b, 2022a, 2022b), and the latest national attendance figures suggest that, while numbers are recovering from a steep pandemic decline, in 2022 they remained around 20% lower than for 2019 (Church of England, 2023b). The financial consequences of the pandemic on parishes and dioceses have been severe, with the latest available figures suggesting that in 2021 the sharp decline in parish income seen in the first year of the pandemic was only slightly reversed, so that, in real terms, levels of parish income and expenditure had fallen to 2001 levels, while parish share income for dioceses fell by 1.9% from 2020 to 2021 (Church of England, 2023a).

The combination of gradual and sudden change that has affected ministry and finance in the Church of England is likely to require strategic and innovative responses from senior diocesan staff. Now seems to be a good time to take stock of what ministry is needed, what ministry could be provided, and how people can be prepared and supported in those ministries. In 2022, the dioceses of Exeter and Truro decided to undertake a review of ministry and ministry training, and this paper reports on some results of a survey among ministers that was part of that review. Although the initial focus of the review was on training, and especially on the two theological education institutions in the region, it was clear to the review steering group that deciding about training had to go hand in hand with an understanding of what ministry would look like in the coming years, and what gaps there might be in equipping ministers for that ministry. The survey was intended to listen to clergy and lay ministers across the two dioceses in order to try to hear about their experience of training and support, their perceptions of the importance of different aspects of ministry, how well they felt equipped in those areas, and the priorities they felt their diocese should have for ministry and training in the coming years. This paper reports on the latter two areas: the importance and level of equipping for ministry, and views about future diocesan priorities.

Exeter and Truro dioceses

The counties of Devon and Cornwall were both served by the diocese of Exeter until 1876, when Truro was formed from the archdeaconry of Cornwall, meaning Exeter and Truro dioceses now largely serve the counties of Devon and Cornwall respectively. According to *Statistics for Mission* (Church of England, 2023b) the population of Exeter diocese is 1,214,000, compared to 573,000 in Truro diocese. Exeter is geographically almost twice as large as Truro, so the average population density is similar in both (470 per square mile in Exeter compared with 420 in Truro). The two counties have somewhat different cultures and social geography, with Exeter tending to have larger cities and towns and generally less rural isolation. However, these differences can be exaggerated, and there are many parts of Exeter diocese that are as deeply rural as any in Truro.

In terms of parochial organisation, the latest published national figures (2020) reported that Exeter has 484 parishes in 149 benefices (3.25 parishes per benefice) while Truro has 214 parishes in 96 benefices (2.23 parishes per benefice). Exeter reported

152 incumbent status clergy (roughly one per benefice) whereas Truro reported 57 (roughly one for every two benefices). Interviews in the two dioceses as part of this review painted a different picture of how the two dioceses have shaped ministry in the past and how they are moving forward. Exeter has allowed some experimentation with reorganising large benefices, but this has not been widely adopted. It has until recently concentrated on Readers (now termed Licensed Lay Ministers) as the main or only form of licensed lay ministry. Truro diocese has taken a number of decisive steps in shaping ministries over the last decade or more. Examples include the commissioning of local lay ministers (there are currently nearly 250 Local Worship Leaders and about 200 Local Pastoral Ministers), *Accompanied Ministry Development*, *On the Way*, and *Sens Kernewek* (Diocese of Truro, 2023). The latter two initiatives are part of a radical reorganisation which in some cases involves deaneries having the oversight of one or two stipendiary clergy who lead a team of self-supporting clergy, lay ministers and 'focal' ministers who act as the church point of first contact in their local community. These changes were underway at the time of the review but had not yet been established widely across the diocese. Despite the somewhat different approaches to ministry (especially lay ministry) in the two dioceses, the same survey was distributed to all licensed clergy, Readers, and local lay ministers in both. The analysis reported here is restricted to clergy and Readers across the two dioceses.

Research questions

This paper examines three main questions that arise from some of the issues that the review team wanted to address through the survey:

1. How did incumbents, assistant clergy, and Readers rate the importance of different tasks in their ministry?
2. How well equipped did these different ministers think they were for these various tasks?
3. How did these different ministers rate possible future priorities for ministry and training in their dioceses?

Method

Procedure

The contents of the survey were developed in consultation with the steering group appointed by the two dioceses to manage the review process. The main subjects covered were experiences of initial ministry training, ongoing ministry support, the importance and equipping for various ministry tasks, and priorities for ministry and ministry training in the next few years. The survey was delivered online using the Qualtrics XM platform, which enabled slightly different sets of questions to be given to participants depending on their ministry context. The survey was promoted through emails and webpages by each diocese and was available from 6 February to 13 March 2023. There was an accompanying information sheet with an invitation to participate which explained the purpose of the research and how the data collected would be

managed and stored. All responses were anonymous, and participants had to tick a box on the landing page to indicate their consent to participate. The procedures for collecting, storing, and using the data underwent ethical review through the School of Humanities, York St John University, who approved the project (Ethical approval code: ETH2223-0051).

Participants

Of the total of 402 replies received, 199 were from clergy, 189 from lay ministers and 14 from ordinands. For the purpose of this study, a sub-sample was selected that comprised parochial ministers who were either incumbents (or incumbent status), assistant clergy (self-supporting ministers and assistant curates), or Readers (or Licensed Lay Ministers). Other licensed or accredited lay ministers were excluded (three from Exeter and 52 from Truro). The final sample of those who completed all necessary items for this analysis comprised 266, with 164 from Exeter, 98 from Truro, and 4 indicating responsibilities in both dioceses. The sample profile (Table 1) showed no difference in the sex ratios between dioceses, with 47% of the overall sample being women. The Truro sample had a slightly older age profile, with 71% being over 59 years compared to 58% in Exeter. Compared to Exeter, Truro had slightly more people from rural areas (55% versus 46%), and far fewer from cities (1% versus 24%). The distribution across church traditions was similar, with Broad Church being the largest group (47%). There was a slightly higher proportion of incumbents from Exeter than from Truro (40% compared to 27%), with a lower proportion of assistant priests and Readers.

It is not known whether the sample is truly representative of the overall population of these ministers across the two dioceses, but figures obtained from the dioceses suggest a

Table 1. Participant profile.

	N =	Exeter 164 %	Truro 98 %		All 266 %
Sex	Female	50	41		47
	Male	50	59	NS	53
Age	30s	9	5		7
	40s	11	7		10
	50s	22	17		20
	60s	49	31		43
	70s	9	28		16
	80s+	0	12	<.001	4
Location	Rural	46	55		49
	Town	30	44		35
	City	24	1	<.001	16
Tradition	Anglo-Catholic	18	28		22
	Broad Church	49	44		47
	Evangelical	33	28	NS	31
Ministry status	Incumbent	40	27		35
	Assistant priest	11	20		15
	Curate	16	12		15
	Reader/LLM	32	41	<.05	35

Note: The overall sample was slightly higher than the two dioceses combined as four respondents indicated they served in some capacity in both dioceses. Significance of difference between dioceses tested with chi-squared based on frequencies. NS: not significant.

return rate of 44% for incumbents, 36% for assistant priests, 45% for curates, and 46% for Readers.

Instruments

Ministry importance and equipping

Ideally, these measures would have required participants to rank a series of tasks from most to least important and most to least equipped. However, the number of tasks was too large for this to be workable, so each was scored independently. A list of 21 items related to a wide range of ministry tasks was presented with two slider buttons for each, which enabled respondents to score each quickly on a scale of 1–10. The first related to the importance attached to this aspect of ministry and the second to how well equipped the person felt they were to do this task. Average scores were used to indicate the importance of each task for each of three sorts of ministers: incumbents, assistant ministers (assistant priests and curates), and Readers (or LLMs). Level of equipping was treated in the same way. Analysis showed that in all three types of minister the level of equipping was correlated with the level of importance (Figure 1), with those attracting the highest importance scores also attracting the highest equipping scores. So a low equipping score may indicate that this was not a ministry for which the person felt they needed to be particularly equipped. What was needed was a way of assessing the level of equipping relative to the importance score correlation. To allow for this, the gap between importance and equipping was calculated from the regressions of equipping on importance for each type of minister. An individual's unstandardised residual score

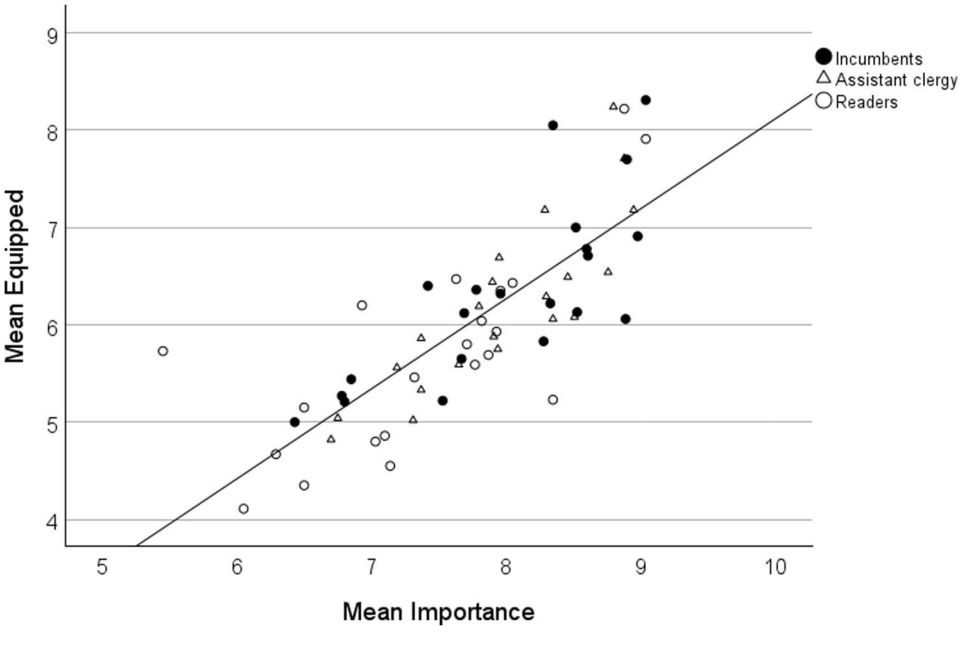

Figure 1. Correlation of average importance and equipping scores for 21 ministry tasks by ministry status.

Note: Line is the regression fitted to all points.

indicated whether their level of equipping for a particular task was higher or lower than expected for the level of its importance. The average residual score of a task therefore indicated for which tasks individual ministers felt relatively under equipped (negative residual), adequately equipped (zero residual), or over equipped (positive residual).

Priorities in ministry and training

Participants were asked to rate a list of 15 ministry areas and 11 training areas on a scale of 1 (=low importance) to 5 (=high importance). Average scores were used to rank priorities and to compare dioceses and ministry types.

Results

Ministry importance and equipping

Across all ministries, tasks rated as most important tended to be those such as preaching and teaching, leading worship, and pastoral care (Table 2). Those rated as least important were management and administration, talking about giving and raising money, and speaking up on local issues. Some of the differences between ministry status groups seemed to reflect the different expectations these ministries. Compared to Readers, clergy rated tasks such as looking after personal wellbeing, equipping others' ministries, occasional offices, handling conflict, setting vision, and management as more important.

Looking at importance ranked within minister type (Table 3), showed some interesting differences between them. On average, assistant clergy rated pastoral care as of highest importance, whereas this was fifth on the list for Readers and eighth on the list for incumbents. Care of personal wellbeing featured fourth highest for clergy, but

Table 2. Ministry importance by ministry status.

Task *N* =	Incumbents 92	Assistant 80	Readers 94	All 266
Preaching and teaching	8.90	8.88	9.04	8.94
Leading worship	9.04	8.80	8.88	8.92
Pastoral	8.52	**8.95**	8.05**	8.49
Looking after my own wellbeing	8.89	8.76	**7.82****	8.48
Encouraging and equipping other people's ministries	8.98	8.46	**7.93****	8.47
Bringing others to faith	8.53	8.35	8.35	8.41
Equipping and empowering disciples	8.61	8.51	**7.77****	8.29
Leadership	**8.60**	7.90	7.63**	8.06
Proclaiming faith	7.96	7.95	7.96	7.96
Occasional offices	8.35	8.29	**6.93****	7.94
Handling conflict	8.32	8.30	**7.03****	7.89
Working with poor in the community	8.28	7.94	**7.14****	7.81
Explaining faith	7.42	7.80	7.87	7.68
Multi-parish	7.67	7.31	7.71	7.58
Setting vision and implementing plans	7.78	7.91	**6.50****	7.39
Working in the digital / virtual world	7.53	7.37	7.10	7.34
Creation care	6.85	7.37	7.32	7.16
Promoting diversity	6.78	**7.65**	6.50*	6.95
Management and admin	7.69	7.19	**5.45****	6.84
Talking about giving and raising money	6.80	6.75	6.05	6.54
Speaking up on local issues	6.43	6.70	6.29	6.47

Note: Tasks are ordered by descending scores of overall importance. Differences in mean scores by ministry status were tested using one way ANOVA and post-hoc range tests (Least Significant Difference). Bold indicates those scores which were significantly different from others in the row. *$p < .05$; **$p < .01$; ***$p < .001$.

Table 3. Tasks ranked by importance for different sorts of ministers.

Incumbents	Assistant clergy	Readers
Leading worship	Pastoral	Preaching and teaching
Encouraging ministries	Preaching and teaching	Leading worship
Preaching and teaching	Leading worship	Bringing others to faith
Wellbeing	Wellbeing	Pastoral
Equipping disciples	Equipping disciples	Proclaiming faith
Leadership	Encouraging ministries	Encouraging ministries
Bringing others to faith	Bringing others to faith	Explaining faith
Pastoral	Handling conflict	Wellbeing
Occasional offices	Occasional offices	Equipping disciples
Handling conflict	Proclaiming faith	Multi-parish
Working in the community	Working in the community	Leadership
Proclaiming faith	Setting vision	Creation care
Setting vision	Leadership	Working in the community
Management and admin	Explaining faith	Digital world
Multi-parish	Promoting diversity	Handling conflict
Digital world	Digital world	Occasional offices
Explaining faith	Creation care	Promoting diversity
Creation care	Multi-parish	Setting vision
Talking about giving	Management and admin	Speaking up on local issues
Promoting diversity	Talking about giving	Talking about giving
Speaking up on local issues	Speaking up on local issues	Management and admin

Note: Rank was determined by the average importance score for each task within each type of minister (see Table 2 for actual scores).

eighth highest for Readers. As expected, leadership ranked higher for incumbents than for assistants or Readers, while management and admin ranked lower for Readers than for clergy. In general, the ordering of tasks seemed to reflect the sorts of priorities one might expect for these different sorts of ministers. What is, perhaps, worrying is that church 'maintenance' tasks tended to rank higher than things that might be less familiar but crucial for the future, such as creation care, talking about giving, working in the digital world, and promoting diversity. Testing differences between the two dioceses (not shown) suggested there were few if any differences between importance scores for any of the tasks.

The gap analysis reveals where ministers considered themselves under or over equipped for various tasks, allowing for the different importance rating of the task (Table 4).

Across all three types of ministers, participants generally felt well equipped to lead worship, preach and teach, and to conduct occasional offices (largest positive residuals). Notably, Readers rated management as of low importance but felt well equipped to do it, possibly because of skills they had gained in other walks of life. The shortfalls in equipping are perhaps of most interest: wellbeing was the highest ranked deficit for incumbents and third highest for assistants, but well down the list for Readers. Other noticeable gaps for incumbents were working in the community, digital world, bringing others to faith, and handling conflict. For assistants and Readers the biggest gaps included equipping disciples, bringing others to faith, working in multi-parish benefices, and working in the community. These results suggest the preparation for traditional church-facing tasks has been good, but ministers felt less confident about mission-orientated tasks. Comparison between the two dioceses again suggested little or no difference in the pattern of gaps.

Table 4. Tasks ranked by gap between importance and equipping within ministry status groups.

Incumbents	Res.	Assistants	Res.	Readers	Res.
Wellbeing	−1.05	Equipping disciples	−0.72	Bringing others to faith	−1.26
Working in the community	−0.74	Bringing others to faith	−0.56	Working in the community	−0.93
Digital world	−0.68	Wellbeing	−0.54	Promoting diversity	−0.59
Bringing others to faith	−0.66	Multi-parish	−0.44	Handling conflict	−0.59
Handling conflict	−0.39	Working in the community	−0.42	Digital world	−0.58
Multi-parish	−0.38	Handling conflict	−0.28	Talking about giving	−0.46
Encouraging ministries	−0.28	Encouraging ministries	−0.26	Equipping disciples	−0.41
Equipping disciples	−0.15	Setting vision	−0.25	Explaining faith	−0.40
Leadership	−0.07	Promoting diversity	−0.25	Encouraging ministries	−0.21
Talking about giving	−0.05	Digital world	−0.20	Creation care	−0.17
Promoting diversity	0.03	Pastoral	−0.11	Multi-parish	−0.15
Proclaiming faith	0.03	Speaking up on local issues	0.04	Speaking up on local issues	−0.10
Speaking up on local issues	0.07	Explaining faith	0.18	Wellbeing	−0.01
Management and admin	0.07	Talking about giving	0.20	Proclaiming faith	0.19
Creation care	0.14	Management and admin	0.23	Pastoral	0.19
Pastoral	0.22	Leadership	0.32	Setting vision	0.21
Setting vision	0.23	Creation care	0.33	Leadership	0.58
Preaching and teaching	0.58	Preaching and teaching	0.49	Preaching and teaching	0.84
Explaining faith	0.59	Proclaiming faith	0.51	Occasional offices	0.90
Leading worship	1.07	Occasional offices	0.62	Leading worship	1.29
Occasional offices	1.42	Leading worship	1.11	Management and admin	1.67

Note: Tasks are ordered by residuals (Res.) calculated from the regression of mean equipped scores on mean importance scores within each group of ministers. Negative residuals indicate under-equipped and positive residuals indicated over-equipped.

Priorities for ministry and training

When it came to prioritising ministry for the future, the top ranked tasks were equipping lay ministries, team working, and supporting those who know how to bring others to faith. The lowest ranked tasks were remaining faithful to received traditions, maintaining the parish system, and developing digital ministries (Table 5).

There were some significant differences by ministry status with, unsurprisingly, Readers rating promotion of lay ministry higher than did clergy. Readers and assistant clergy also gave greater priority than incumbents did to areas such as care for Creation, encouraging diversity, maintaining sacred spaces for all, teaching new ways of being Christian, and developing chaplaincy in new ways. Incumbents were more interested in supporting clergy moving to oversight roles, perhaps through bitter experience.

Training priorities seemed to focus on areas that may have been underdeveloped in the past: ensuring the selection of the right people for training, supporting the mental health and wellbeing of ministers, and teaching new ministry skills (Table 6). Interestingly, the lowest ranked priorities were to reduce training demands on either clergy or lay ministers.

There were fewer differences by ministry status, though Readers especially wanted training for new ministry skills, and with assistant clergy they rated bringing clergy and lay ministers together and using local training with less travel more highly than did incumbents. The latter may be especially important for people in rural areas, where trips to a training centre could take several hours each way.

Discussion

This survey of 266 incumbents, assistant clergy, and Readers in the dioceses of Exeter and Truro has revealed what they thought was important in their various ministries, how well

Table 5. Ministry priorities.

Ministry sphere	Incumbents	Assistants	Readers	All
Equipping lay people for lay ministries	4.35	4.37	**4.67***	4.46
Team working	3.98	4.12	4.19	4.09
Supporting those who know how to bring others to faith	4.07	4.11	4.00	4.06
Putting more resource in lay ministries	3.51	3.65	**4.25*****	3.80
Growing and retaining clergy from within the diocese	3.73	3.68	3.64	3.69
Supporting clergy moving to oversight roles	**3.98**	3.46	3.55*	3.68
Showing care about Creation	3.33	3.69	**4.04*****	3.67
Encouraging more diversity in our congregations	3.20	**3.80**	**3.73****	3.56
Ensuring churches remain sacred spaces for all	3.13	**3.72**	**3.85****	3.55
Teaching people new ways of being Christians	3.23	3.57	**3.71***	3.49
Developing chaplaincy in new ways	2.75	**3.58**	**3.61*****	3.28
Creating new sorts of lay ministries	3.04	3.35	3.17	3.17
Remaining faithful to the traditions we have received	3.05	3.08	3.17	3.10
Maintaining the parish system	3.04	3.02	3.08	3.04
Developing digital ministries	3.06	2.97	3.01	3.02

Note: Spheres are ordered by descending overall priority scores. Differences in mean scores by ministry status tested using one way ANOVA and post-hoc range tests (Least Significant Difference). Bold indicates those scores which were significantly different from others in the row. *$p < .05$; **$p < .01$; ***$p < .001$.

equipped they felt to do various tasks, and what they think should be priorities for ministry and ministry training. Alongside the wealth of detail, a few important issues are raised by the results.

The importance of maintenance and mission

The Church of England has for some years noted the need to move the 'maintenance' model of ecclesiology to one of 'mission' (Archbishops' Council, 2004; Croft, 2008; Gaze, 2006). The underlying assumption is that maintenance is inward looking and self-serving, and cannot meet the urgent need to grow the Church by making more disciples of Jesus. In a world where socialisation into the Christian faith through family habits and early childhood exposure to church life is no longer common, the Church must find new ways of reaching people with the Gospel. The data here are mixed in this regard. On the one hand, it is clear that these clergy and Readers rated the liturgical and pastoral tasks of preaching, teaching, leading worship, and pastoral care as among the most important of their many tasks. Oliver Goldsmith's country parson would probably concur with this. On the other hand, things like bringing others to faith, equipping

Table 6. Training priorities.

Training sphere	Incumbents	Assistants	Readers	All
Ensuring we select the right people for training	4.43	4.52	4.51	4.48
Supporting the mental health and wellbeing of ministers	4.41	4.42	4.36	4.40
Teaching new ministry skills	3.52	3.75	**4.00****	3.75
Specialist training for particular ministries	3.60	3.65	3.91	3.72
Putting more resources into theological colleges and courses	3.73	3.66	3.37	3.59
Bringing clergy and lay ministers together more often	2.86	**3.72**	**4.00*****	3.49
Employing external resources that are easily accessed	3.64	3.37	3.35	3.46
Employing more local training with less travel	3.16	**3.42**	**3.67***	3.40
Developing more online training	3.18	3.11	3.03	3.11
Reducing the demands of training for lay people	2.90	2.77	2.69	2.79
Reducing the demands of training for clergy	2.28	2.42	2.23	2.30

Note: For explanation, see Table 5.

other people's ministries, and proclaiming faith were also near the top of the list of tasks. When it came to priorities for ministry in the dioceses, the 'maintenance' of the status quo or parish system were low on the list, while developing lay ministries and supporting evangelists were near the top. These ministers seemed to sense the need to re-imagine ministry in terms of making it shared beyond the clergy and focused on bringing people to faith. Nonetheless, at the moment, they still see the provision of worship, in-house teaching, and pastoral support as the things that are most important. Shifting the culture will probably not be easy and takes time: Truro diocese was undergoing radical and rapid change during the period of the review, and interviews with parochial ministers suggested some, but not all, were unlikely to be able to move to a different kind of ministry. Others, however, seemed up for the challenge.

Equipping for new kinds of ministries

The gaps between importance and levels of equipping revealed some clues as to what dioceses might need to be aware of when shaping training and support. Clergy, and especially incumbents, recognised the care of their own wellbeing was important, but this appeared high on the list of under-equipped tasks. The pandemic brought the issue of the wellbeing of clergy to the fore, and it is no longer acceptable to train someone for a few years, send them to an isolated rural parish, and check up on them once a year or so. The idyllic days of Goldsmith are too far gone to imagine that clergy can easily find enough positive enjoyment of their vocation to overcome the stresses imposed by contemporary ministry. Research on clergy psychological health (Francis, Kaldor, Robbins, & Castle, 2005; Francis, Powell, & Village, 2020; Francis, Robbins, Kaldor, & Castle, 2009; Village & Francis, 2022b, 2023) suggests that the best way to encourage wellbeing is to enable clergy to find the positive things in their lives that will offset the negative things that can debilitate their ministries. Clergy in this sample recognised the need, but generally felt ill-equipped to meet that need.

Low on the importance list were some of the less glamourous or difficult tasks such as talking about financial giving, management, creation care, promoting diversity, or working in the digital world. Many of these are relatively new but significant tasks that may become more important in the future. Some, such as digital competence and working well in multi-parish benefices, were also ones where the skills gap was evident, especially in some ministries. One area that appeared mid-table in importance for clergy was handling conflict. But it was in the top half of the table when it came to being under-equipped. This was certainly born out in interviews during the review, when several people said that this was sometimes a crucial issue and one for which past training in conflict management had proved invaluable.

Finding the right ministers for the right ministries

It was interesting that the highest ranked priority for dioceses when it came to ministry was to select the right people to train. This seems obvious, but it is not necessarily how discernment works in the Church of England, which has at times relied on rather over-spiritualised and under-pragmatic assessment of vocations. On more than one occasion during the review I heard senior staff bewail the fact that such a high proportion of clergy seemed

unable to 'get on with people'. The grassroots seemed to recognise that no amount of 'training' will help if the wrong people are being trained in the first place. There was no appetite for reducing training, but a sense that getting the right people and training them for the tasks facing the Church today is what the dioceses should be focusing on. This points to a wider issue that may need further research as it applies not only to the initial selection of ministry candidates, but also to the processes of appointing senior leaders.

Conclusion

Both dioceses in this study, but especially Truro, are undergoing rapid changes in the kinds of ministry they offer and how ministers are trained and supported. Listening to those currently in parish ministry suggested that, while the traditional tasks of parochial ministry retain their importance, there is an awareness that supporting personal well-being is crucial in allowing ministry to continue in a time of transition. Outward facing 'mission' orientation is seen as having importance, but there may be a need to encourage clergy and Readers in new tasks related to our changing views on Creation, work in the community, and diversity. There was a surprising, and perhaps wise, recognition that what may be key is encouraging the right sort of people to find a niche in doing the different sorts of ministries that parishes need today.

The findings of this study have important consequences for dioceses that are moving away from having lone stipendiary clergy covering pastoral, liturgical, and leadership roles in a few parishes towards having multi-minister teams serving large areas and many parishes, led by a single incumbent. The sample here seemed to stand on the cusp between recognising the reality that traditional roles are still the most important part of what they do, while recognising the necessity of developing new skills and ways of working. Such evolution is going to involve both selecting people suited to the new tasks, preparing and supporting them appropriately, and ensuring that those tasked with senior oversight roles can ensure that the Church adapts to changing society. This may look very different from older ways of ministry but may be no less effective. It would be good if a modern-day Goldsmiths could eulogise as eloquently about the ministry of God's people in God's contemporary villages.

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Ethical approval

This study received ethical approval from the School of Humanities, York St John University (Ethical approval code: ETH2223-0051).

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Notes on contributor

The Revd Professor Andrew Village is Professor of Practical and Empirical Theology at York St John University, York, England.

ORCID

Andrew Village http://orcid.org/0000-0002-2174-8822

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