

GUIDELINES FOR THE PROFESSIONAL CONDUCT OF CLERGY

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I have just been reading the revised edition of the Church of England's *Guidelines for the professional conduct of the clergy* which also contains a concluding theological reflection on ministry by Francis Bridger.¹ It makes for thought-provoking reading for ministers and church leaders of whatever denomination.

The primary aims of these Guidelines are:

- To encourage the clergy to aspire to the highest possible standards of conduct throughout a lifetime of ministry
- To identify certain minimum standards of behaviour
- To seek to ensure the welfare and the protection of individuals and groups with whom the clergy work, and of the clergy and their families
- To provide safe and effective boundaries for clerical ministry
- To encourage personal and corporate ministerial development

Let me share some of the 'nuggets' I came across in the 36 pages of the booklet. In the Foreword by the Archbishops of Canterbury and York there is a key paragraph: "The care of souls and the proclamation of the gospel are demanding roles, but profoundly fulfilling. If we are to be effective we need to take proper care to refresh our learning and to refresh ourselves". I was struck not just by the emphasis here not just on refreshing ourselves, but on refreshing our learning: the two go hand in hand. Continual ministerial development is a means of sustaining our ministries.

But there is another strand that is necessary if we are to remain effective in ministry. Both in the Foreword as also within the guidelines themselves ministers are encouraged to remember the source of their strength. Twice these words from the Anglican ordinal are quoted: "*You cannot bear the weight of this calling in your own strength, but only by the grace and power of God. Pray therefore that your heart may be daily enlarged and your understanding of the Scriptures enlightened. Pray earnestly for the gift of the Holy Spirit.*" Those ministers who decry professionalism need to take note that spirituality and professionalism actually go hand in hand. In this regard Francis Bridger reflects: "'Profession', in a clergy context, must be seen as possessing not one meaning but two: on the one hand to describe the sociological reality of a group of people who operate according to conventions and practices developed by the group; and on the other, as an indication that this group stands for – professes – a set of transcendent values and principles which derive from a theology of vocation".

In the section on care a clear distinction is made between pastoral care and counselling. The Guidelines state that "at no time should they [ministers] provide formal counselling for those in their care". It seems to me that pastoral care is compassion in action and is always proactive; by contrast counselling never takes the initiative and is always reactive.

¹ *Guidelines for the Professional Conduct of the Clergy* (Church House, London revised edition 2015)

In the section on learning and teaching, only one topic is specifically mentioned as needing to be taught: “It is part of the mission of the clergy to teach those whom they serve both the ways and the delight of prayer, being open to learning these things as they do so”. I wonder, what proportion of time does the average minister give to the teaching of prayer? Yet prayer is a key mark of a being a follower of Jesus. So when Paul was converted, the first thing he appears to have done was to pray (Acts 9.11).

In the section on life and conduct, the emphasis on giving time to partners and children significant. Marriage “should not be thought to be of secondary importance to their vocation to ministry. Being a parent is likewise a holy calling and so ordained ministry should not take priority over bringing up children with Godly love, care, time, and space”. The suggestion is made that time given to family life, as also to recreation and renewal, should be part a minister’s annual review.

In more than one section reference is made to the use and misuse of power. So in the section on trust we read: “In all forms of ministry, in leadership, teaching, preaching and presiding at worship, the clergy should resist all temptation to exercise power inappropriately. This power needs to be used to sustain others and harness their strengths, and not to abuse, bully, manipulate or denigrate.” Later Francis Bridger makes the comment: “When seeking to achieve our objectives – whether with a group of people or in a one-to-one relationship – we must ask ourselves what kind of power we are seeking to exercise and for whose benefit”. Sadly, it is all too easy for ministers not to be self-aware: hence the need for a spiritual director or pastoral supervisor.

The last section deals with the minister’s own well-being: “In exercising their ministry, the clergy respond to the call of our Lord Jesus Christ. The development of their discipleship is in the discipline of prayer, worship, Bible study and the discernment of the prompting of the Holy Spirit. The clergy should make sure that time and resources are available for their own personal and spiritual life and take responsibility for their own ongoing training and development”. Would that all ministers would see that continuing ministerial development is an aspect of our Christian discipleship!

Ministry is indeed a challenging calling! May God give us all the gifts and graces to fulfil our calling.