**The Sacrificial Embrace: Exploring contemporary English parish clergy lives**

**Nigel Peyton**

Bishop’s House, Dundee, UK Email: bishop@brechin.anglican.org

**Caroline Gatrell**

Lancaster University Management School, UK Email: c.gatrell@lancaster.ac.uk

**Abstract**

Describing clergy experiences ‘in their own words’, this paper reflects on the findings of a qualitative study (by the authors) on the lives of contemporary Church of England parish clergy.[[1]](#footnote-1) From the data, themes of obedience, sacrifice and intimacy emerge to provide an explanatory framework for clergy lives. In applying theological, social science and occupational management perspectives, the research counters the literature about clergy failures. While acknowledging a range of clergy views about the nature of faith and commitment, it nevertheless reveals an enduring and authentic vocational steadfastness among priests across the years.

**Keywords**

obedience, Michel Foucault, panopticon, sacrifice, Nikolas Rose, governing the soul, Peter Berger, Chris Shilling, corporeal realism, intimacy, work/home balance, Arlie Hochschild, emotional labour, authenticity, congruency

**In search of priesthood**

In his poem ‘The Priest’ the Anglican clergyman R S Thomas wrote:

Priests have a long way to go.

The people wait for them to come

To them over the broken glass

Of their vows….

‘Crippled soul’, do you say? Looking at him From the mind’s height; ‘limping through life On his prayers.[[2]](#footnote-2)

For R S Thomas it seems parish clergy tread a thin line between despair and defiance as they struggle to manage the opportunities and challenges of ministry, and to live out their personal hopes and fears on a daily basis. Around the millennium a literature emerged largely concerned with when things go wrong with clergy, perhaps over much. Titles like *The Cracked Pot*, *Bruised Reeds?* and *When it gets too much* reinforced this impression.[[3]](#footnote-3) Certainly some clergy suffer anxiety and stress, others become depressed or experience divorce or even face church discipline. Some priests vacate parishes for other ministries, others leave the ministry altogether – but Church of England definition and database problems make quantifying difficult, with a best estimate of 6% for such ‘disappearing clergy’.[[4]](#footnote-4) Clergy score highly in job satisfaction surveys[[5]](#footnote-5) and despite the challenges of parish life, we consider that leaving, understood as renouncing a believing, active priesthood remains rare.

Just as R S Thomas’s Priest keeps going, so too do our research participants: “I’m not a quitter… it’s never happened, but the nightmare of waking up one day and not believing in priesthood anymore… I couldn’t with integrity carry on… I couldn’t get God off my back… I press on … we have committed to be there for others”.

There seems little doubt that the pressures of priestly life are complex and, for some, appear to present a constant challenge. Nevertheless, most Anglican priests remain steadfast to their vows and consider the commitment of ordination to be lifelong. For this reason, they feel under obligation to be resilient, and to continue inhabiting their particular vocational occupation regardless of whether or obedience to the vows they make when ordained comes easily to them.

**Managing Clergy Lives Research**

The Managing Clergy Lives research was undertaken by interviewing, in depth, 46 clergy (14 women and 32 men) across 42 Church of England dioceses. The research participants were all stipendiary (i.e. paid) and occupied in parish ministry, and in addition were Rural Deans (often now called Area Deans), a voluntary ‘middle management’ role, comprising the supervision of a local area of Anglican churches and their clergy. As such they have received Church recognition as persevering clergy. The data set included a rich variety of personal and professional variables which enhanced the account of these key informants who see themselves as “having influence without authority” and who are well-placed to reflect not only on their own lives in isolation but who also understand the differing experiences of clergy colleagues. Clergy were interviewed in their vicarages for two hours and tape recorded by the research author (an Archdeacon at the time) and later transcribed. A certain amount of ethnographic material was also gathered through observations during visits.

How reliable and truthful are these accounts? As individuals we are not always the most reliable witnesses of our behaviours and motives, and we may experience ambivalence about significant life events.[[6]](#footnote-6) Furthermore, achieving critical distance as an organisational insider is challenging because although the researcher had relevant knowledge and language (enabling understanding between interviewer and interviewee) he also held a position within the Church’s hierarchy. A high level of trust in the promised anonymity in subsequent reporting and was thus required. The contribution of a university sociologist to the detailed research account and theoretical reflection now published [[7]](#footnote-7) enabled the inspection of clergy lives from a perspective that extends beyond the arena of the Church itself.

The interviews with the clergy were semi-structured and explored five topics: (1) The content and morale of their ministry (2) Community expectations, recognition and professional status (3) Key relationships and boundaries (4) Work-life balance (5) Priestly authenticity and endurance. These aimed to explore clergy activity, identity and the extent of personal agency in shaping clergy lives. There were heroic accounts of achievement in challenging circumstances but also stories of professional struggles and personal failings. Virtually all participants seemed only too eager to discuss their experiences which suggests they considered the research space offered to be safe with respect to their anonymity and their position within the Church.

The study does not claim to be representative of the entire population of Church of England clergy. It focuses on comparing the participants’ experiences with existing information about clergy lives and on theoretical consistency. The particular insight has been in allowing English clergy to report qualitatively - in their own words – to an extent not done before. A larger scale ministry investigation is now under way in the Church of England whose results will be interesting.[[8]](#footnote-8)

**Faithful community pastors**

Against a background of declining membership the Church of England has spent many years modernising its theology and liturgy, its structures and personnel – with considerable financial and organisational implications. The ministry has fewer clergy overall, more of them female and non-stipendiary than previously. Debates about whether and to what extent the ‘stained glass ceiling’ for women bishops should be removed, and questions around the full acceptance of same sex relationships in ministry have publicly highlighted the challenge for an Established Church, transmuting in a changing society. While policy decisions may be debated at Synod level, it is parish priests who are tasked with managing changing expectations at an everyday level, adapting to the different contexts, issues and needs of their 21st century parishioners in a context where views are wide ranging and Church policy is still, presently, at odds with equal opportunities legislation in the UK.

Almost without exception, the clergy interviewed believed that ordination had been the right decision. They regarded the priesthood as an uncompromising, lifetime commitment. For most, their faith supported them through this commitment even when the pressures and intrusions of living a priestly life felt onerous and debilitating. However, among those few interviewees for whom faith felt fragile, the lifelong promises of ordination appeared to be a particularly heavy burden. In support of their priestly identity, interviewees found authenticity in their core activities: presiding at the Eucharist, preaching and teaching, marking rites of passage, caring for the needy and bringing people into a Christian faith. They accepted the cost of community involvement and personal restrictions that pastoral embodiment brings: “I believe being a priest is hugely worthwhile. If you see faith as something transformative, that changes people’s lives… I can’t see anything more worthwhile doing really.”

Given previous research on the fragility of the priesthood, the research found that parish clergy felt more significant in local life and more appreciated than had been anticipated. They continue to be faithful pastors, responding to the residual claims of parishioners within the context of a secular British society and the marginalisation of institutional religion, characterised as ‘believing without belonging’.[[9]](#footnote-9) Research interviewees often made a link between their morale and realism, faithfulness and competence: “I am a priest and I am here… we deal with those things nobody else knows quite how to deal with … we articulate the community story at difficult moments”. Nevertheless, most respondents acknowledged that living by their ordinal promises was hard, perhaps especially because such promises marked out priests as requiring to be more constrained in their behaviours than others in their communities.

Residence in the parish is key to understanding clergy lives. The perception of a lived local presence by clergy as diligent community generalists of last resort continues to win admiration. In many ways the fictional TV character *Rev*, faithfully soldiering away in his dysfunctional parish reflects this.[[10]](#footnote-10) Similarly a UK newspaper editorial applauded: ‘from the poorest urban estates to the wealthiest rural communities very few Britons are far from a church. When other professionals have retreated from disadvantaged areas whenever it is home time, the parish minister is still there in the vicarage. From food banks to youth clubs to drop-in services for the elderly, churches punch above their weight when it comes to meeting social needs’.[[11]](#footnote-11)

As the extensive Religion and Society Research Programme has demonstrated, faith and the secular in public and private life in Britain have become a complex landscape in the new millennium, a spiritual marketplace[[12]](#footnote-12). Our research confirms the persistence of clergy as a countercultural, semi-professional vocational group, defined neither entirely by ascription nor task. Anthropologically it seems clergy are an adaptive species [[13]](#footnote-13) occupying the sacred - secular frontier, navigating difficulties as pictured by Thomas’s poem. Clergy are counted among the most trustworthy professionals in the UK[[14]](#footnote-14) and it seems that against some predictions there are enough decent priests in the right posts for the Church not to despair just now.

The five research interview topics introduced above generated a wealth of data. The reporting clergy were busy: providing worship, pastoral care and community leadership in their parishes. They relish “the incredible variety of things that I do every day… that is never the same.” The majority demonstrated a firm personal faith in God and Church values and a continuing energy for mission and ministry. However, participants also indicated a darker side where clergy deal with conflict and challenging people, trying to operate consensually amidst competing expectations.

Clergy continue to receive community recognition for their pastoral care, schools work and involvement in local life. Bringing peace and foot-washing service into a noisy and acquisitive world [[15]](#footnote-15) gains “a kind of special status… some clergy are still revered”. Where parish priests respond astutely to latent Christian expectations they may receive considerable approval. Others are more gloomy or uncertain about their ministry legacy, and all the interviewees regarded God’s approval as determinative: “I guess I’m answerable to God but he hasn’t told me much lately”.

Maintaining the right public / private boundary is particularly difficult. “Some people want to be dependent on you” and no clergy in the sample had found a perfect solution, defending intrusions into domestic life tactically from day to day. Marriage, family and friendship are important but balancing professional and intimate relations is challenging for clergy. Interpersonal distancing, discord and loneliness were experienced. Indeed if relations with colleagues, family and God are in a poor state, especially simultaneously, the research indicates that clergy may find their spiritual life, functionality and health in serious difficulties: “I just didn’t have anything more to give … I was virtually burnt out.”

Because the vicarage is both home and workplace the challenge to achieve work-life balance is a struggle for single and married clergy households alike, “the day off inevitably gets eaten into occasionally.” Clergy attempt precariously to achieve quality time off and those who appeared most relaxed managed to put physical and emotional distance between themselves and the parish.Clergy are not unique in their working arrangements but the disciplinary reach of ordination in the Church of England gives rise to a particular form of pastoral embodiment. The personal intensity of this is both empowering and dis-empowering, authenticating and sacrificial, and until now perhaps not well understood. From this research therefore the themes of obedience, sacrifice and intimacy emerge as significant foci for interpreting the findings.

**Obedience**

At Ordination[[16]](#footnote-16) clergy promise obedience to God’s calling and submit to the discipline and authority of the Church for the entirety of their lives. Ordination is life-changing and requires a whole-hearted personal and embodied focus on God’s service, offering “no opt-out clause”. In keeping with the 20th century-French philosopher Michel Foucault, we find that priests regard themselves as physically, intellectually and emotionally under God’s all-knowing and continual surveillance, ‘the perfect eye that nothing would escape’.[[17]](#footnote-17)

Bernauer and Carrette[[18]](#footnote-18) illuminate how Foucault engaged critically with Christian theology and Church tradition. Specifically we draw upon the Foucauldian metaphor of the Panopticon to crystallise our research interpretation of priestly obedience. The Panopiticon was an 18th century architectural design for a prison, allowing observation of inmates’ behaviour from a central point at all times. Foucault interpreted this as a theoretical metaphor for subjectivized power: individuals who believe they are constantly observed self-discipline: on the prison walls are written the words ‘God sees you’.[[19]](#footnote-19)

Clergy therefore expect to conduct their lives under self-surveillance as obedient servants of God. Priests are required to be exemplary in keeping their ordination promises both in lifestyle and in the performance of their duties. Whatever their theological standpoint, virtually all priests who took part in the research – regardless of age, gender or church tradition – believe the character of ordination to be authentic and ‘abiding’ as defined by the German theologian Pannenberg, who wrote of the ‘lasting marking of ordinands in terms of the … promise and sending that constantly govern the ordained and claim them for Christ’s service’.[[20]](#footnote-20) Clergy are not of course the only Christians under scrutiny. For centuries the consciences of all the faithful have been stirred at the opening of the Eucharist with a ‘surveillance prayer’,[[21]](#footnote-21) more commonly known as the Collect for Purity: ‘Almighty God, to whom all hearts are open, all desires known, and from whom no secrets are hidden, cleanse the thoughts of our hearts’.

We find helpful here the concept of the ‘self-governed soul’ proposed by the sociologist Nikolas Rose[[22]](#footnote-22) - extending Foucault’s ideas about obedient bodies to the interior life of human beings – in interpreting clergy narratives about resolving the asymmetric relations between earthly sacrifices, obedience and self-identity. Several research participants found it daunting that “God has called me to be his hands in the place he has set me”. If the clergy submit to the pantopticon of ordination and an enduring vocational governmentality of the soul are they simply subjugated or do priests retain critical agency, exercising choices in their lives?

Life at the vicarage sharply illustrates this struggle. The requirement to reside in the parish in a tied house is a mixed blessing. The benefit of a visible, available presence for the community has to be weighed against the household intrusions and ‘goldfish bowl’ vulnerabilities commonly described by clergy. Whether serving in affluent or hard places many clergy families feel they pay a high price for vocational commitment: “we lost our privacy… we became public property”. Our research revealed stories of church members riffling through vicarage cupboards, fireworks through a letterbox, bullying at church meetings, occasional physical abuse and regular disregard for clergy spouses and children.

The clerical collar raised similar issues of visibility and vulnerability. In our research the clergy generally persisted wearing the collar as a signifier of being in role as the parish priest, presenting themselves to the public at large as Christ’s representative. An occasional barrier but more common conversation starter, most clergy believed it “a wasted opportunity not to wear it” and a personal reminder that they had been vocationally ‘collared’ by God. Clergy are selected as robust individuals and often appear sanguine but some will admit to being “pretty unnerved” by the darker side of the public gaze. We recorded remarkable accounts of how a maternal priestly body and a minority ethnic clergy body, however obedient, can feel out of place because they challenge the white male norm, confirming research by Puwar into female and black entrants into UK public life.[[23]](#footnote-23)

As the years of ministry service pass some clergy are so driven by their vocation as ‘a priest for ever’ that they neglect proper time off and holidays sometimes leading to ill-health or breakdown, as indicated in a few interviews. We see how the embodiment of priesthood is a kind of ‘everyday death’ manifest in the desire to put God first, and for which there is no finishing line.

**Sacrifice**

Embodied sacrifice lies at the heart of the Ordination Service when ordinands are challenged to ‘be a living sacrifice acceptable to God’.[[24]](#footnote-24) The majority of parish clergy taking part in our research expressed the sense of embracing a sacrificial lifestyle which placed themselves, body and soul at God’s disposal: “I don’t want to lose the concept of sacrifice because it is a recognition of how Christ gave his life for us … that does limit my choices and my freedom for the future in a positive way hopefully … but you know I can’t just decide to do my own thing now … I’ve got to be obedient to God”. Another interviewee spoke of the mixture of joy and fear in “being called to a place of sacrifice … to be a priest”. Here we observe the sacrificial self and pastoral governmentality conceived by Foucault allied to the New Testament imagery of Christ the Good Shepherd evoked in the ordination of priests.

Priestly sacrifice is not of course enforced but sought and as our research shows sacrificial agency remains with individual clergy as they negotiate the competing demands of God, the Church authorities, their parishioners and their home life. We propose the concept of the ‘sacrificial embrace’ as an explanatory metaphor for the inter-relationships between ordination, priests and the Church, echoing Peter Berger’s ‘sacred canopy’[[25]](#footnote-25) description of religion in society[[26]](#footnote-26).

The embracing of personal sacrifice and the governance of body and soul remain an over-arching narrative by which clergy govern all aspects of their lives: personal belief, ministerial work, social life, marriage, family and intimate relationships: “I don’t ever feel ‘not priest’… I can’t say I ever switch off”. The clergy we spoke with adjust their sacrificial agency to the daily circumstances of their ministries with what Chris Shilling terms ‘pragmatism’. We extend his sociological concept of a self-disciplining ‘corporeal realism’ - managing the relationship between body, belief and the agency of individuals - to parish clergy.[[27]](#footnote-27) However, references to the “personal cost” of an ordained life in our clergy interviews suggest that not all self-sacrificial behaviour is healthy, for men or women. From a feminist perspective Green[[28]](#footnote-28) argues that while a priestly vocation is inherently self-sacrificial, there are non-redemptive forms of self-denial for women entering a male dominated Church culture.

A degree of sacrifice is perhaps implicit in all vocational professions. Although Russell described how English clergy emerged in the last century as an incomplete semi-profession[[29]](#footnote-29) our clergy understand what professional priestly identity and behaviour looks like. It is based on a mutually entrusting covenant (rather than contract) between priest and people[[30]](#footnote-30) and on ministerial competence. In addition to the Ordinal, Church of England clergy nowadays have terms of service, professional guidelines and ministerial review by which to calibrate themselves[[31]](#footnote-31). Bridger has suggested a theology of professional responsibility based on virtue in which clergy deliberately seek to cultivate Christian character and healthy habits of the heart[[32]](#footnote-32), because what clergy do is governed (and often judged by the community) by who they are.

Indeed, issues of personal identity, gender and impression management were apparent in our findings, highlighted by the women clergy making their way into the Established Church over the past two decades. In the Church, self-image and organisational image are not always consistent and learning to become more visible without being unhelpfully marked out[[33]](#footnote-33) does not come naturally to many clergy, male and female alike, who may regard self-promotion with suspicion. The Church of England is organisationally flat but, as Area Deans our clergy sample had already been affirmed, unsurprisingly ambition, preferment and disappointments featured in the interviews: “I was pleased that she got the job [as an archdeacon] but I was gutted because I really wanted it … I won’t try again”.

However their careers develop clergy are clearly not in it for the money. While sacrificial ‘labour without reward’ remains a theological touchstone, an unexpected and striking finding in our research was the amount of concern, sometimes resentment, expressed about clergy stipends and tied housing, pension and retirement provision. Perhaps the interviews provided a safety valve for fears not easily expressed in public. Clergy spoke of misunderstandings, injustices and a mistrust of the Church authorities as fuelling anxieties for themselves and their households, with partners and children forced into sacrifices as a consequence of an individual’s obedient vocational deployment.

Within 21st century occupational realities clergy are not badly provided for in the Church of England. Nevertheless our search unearths a clergy desire for a subtle combination of material and emotional compensation for their vocational labour which is perhaps not well understood by the Church. Some clergy do reflect on the secular careers they might have enjoyed, so we propose the notion of an ‘accumulative opportunity cost’ as encompassing the theological, economic and personal, sacrificial complexity of clergy lives.

**Intimacy**

A key finding in our research is that priesthood imprints itself upon all personal relationships and that marriage, ministry and friendship often sit uneasily together: “We are always invited as ‘the Vicar and Vicar’s wife’ rather than as us”. Both spouses become ‘married to the ministry’ and the vocational requirements and public nature of ministry may over time dissociate clergy from their spouses and open friendships. Single clergy can feel particularly lonely and many of our respondents (married and single) reported feelings of isolation and depersonalisation: “I miss having friends most of all … if I have an intimate friendship with parishioners then I am depriving them of their parish priest.” One priest painfully felt that ministry had cut off the path to marriage and children: “nobody has asked me out since I got ordained … I really mind”.

It seems that the transformation of intimacy[[34]](#footnote-34) and postmodern lifestyle options open to the Church’s laity and other professionals are not yet accepted within the disciplinary and sacrificial boundaries of a clergy life. Nevertheless the advent of working clergy spouses, women priests, two-clergy couples, gay and lesbian partnerships has led to a greater variety of vicarage household arrangements[[35]](#footnote-35). During our research civil partnerships became available in the UK, more recently followed by same sex marriage and the variety of faithful relationships compatible with ordination is debated within the Church of England and wider Anglican Communion.

Two clergy emerged in our research sample who reflected thoughtfully on the dilemmas of coming out or not as lesbian or gay within the ministry of the Church. One spoke of her partner as “the basis of my emotional support … the parish knows that we live together … my archdeacon is supportive” but she has anxieties about bishops and being truthful, “there is a huge vulnerability about that … it could skew things and blow the whole thing up you know”. Another priest spoke of an early vocational crossroads, leaving academia and taking a celibate priest route: “I am a gay and I suspect I would have had a partner if I hadn’t been ordained because that’s difficult in the Church … my bishop has strong views on the subject”. There is then a particular dilemma for gay clergy in balancing secure personal intimacy with a successful public Church career.

At Ordination clergy promise to ‘fashion their household’ as a Christ-like example in the Church. Clergy we interviewed recognised that their marriages were under pressure to succeed and that critical incidents occur, usually when the non-clergy spouse can no longer tolerate marriage to the ministry and being tied to the vicarage. Some clergy admitted to distancing from their families by prioritising ministry work: “hiding in the study … my wife always feels she is tenth on the list ... I am not good at saying ‘no’… my children call me ‘meetings man’… Friday teatime becomes a family diary discussion”.

It seems that within the wider social debate about work and life balance English parish clergy are a particular example of the work-home dilemmas identified by Hochschild.[[36]](#footnote-36) We found vicarage households pragmatically negotiating the pressures of work-home life contamination and there were both heroic and dysfunctional examples in our interviews. Although several respondents described elaborate ways of secreting themselves in the vicarage – closing curtains, switching off doorbells, moving to upstairs back rooms - without exception our clergy believed that they best refreshed themselves and their intimate relationships through times away from the parish – through hobbies and outdoor pursuits, on retreats, holidays and catching up with distant family and friends.

For parish clergy ordination brings with it a paradox: access to a wealth of other people’s life stories combined with a personal loneliness caused by the professional contamination of the private sphere. The panoptical surveillance of clergy bodies by parishioners, the Church and God extends even into the bedroom and there is nowhere to hide. Across our research sample it was acknowledged that vocational commitment to an ordained life constrains intimacies and while many of our clergy reported being personally very happy and ministerially fulfilled, others felt caught between a rock and a hard place.

**Clergy Authenticity**

Rose describes how ‘an ethic of authenticity’ is essential for a secure personal identity and a well governed soul in the face of hypocrisy[[37]](#footnote-37) and we suggest that authenticity is a convergent explanation for enduring clergy vocational commitment. We asked our interviewees the simple question: when do you feel most a priest? For many it was as though we had posed a question they had always wanted to answer but had never been asked. Presiding over the ministries of word and sacrament and pastoral care as God’s holy representative were the heart of the matter for many: “moments when I suppose heaven and earth meet in a very profound and present way … praying the words for people … the magic that happens because you are not expecting it … it comes out of the dynamic and conversations with people … bringing someone to forgiveness”. Others spoke of the priest as “midwife” and “the shaman” of community expectation and meaning. We conclude that sacrificial marginality lies at the heart of clergy self-perceptions as they occupy the ‘strange hinterland between the secular and the sacred, acting as interpreters and mediators.’[[38]](#footnote-38)

Our research was not without negative voices but in the main clergy did not blame their ordination as such. So the few clergy who appeared to be losing their way stood out: one confessed, “I have a non-realistic view of God … but that is not my public persona” and seemed uncertain how to continue in post until retirement, “I have twelve years and I shall keep plodding away … it is not a very good attitude”. Another priest summed up her feelings: “I sometimes feel like my outside and my inside don’t match very well”. So clergy can fall victim to a diminishing congruency of person, task and belief which is so corrosive to their wellbeing.

Our Area Deans see themselves as “setting an example”, but are also sympathetic fellow clergy with their own personal struggles. Where are our interviewees now? A limited telephone follow up exercise, two years on, ascertained that only one priest had left ministry - for a serious disciplinary misdemeanour. Some had been promoted or moved diocese for various ministerial or family reasons. The majority were faithfully continuing their parishes. Paradoxically while many of the laity may have ‘gone for good’[[39]](#footnote-39) we argue here the reasons why the clergy stay for good. Indeed the majority of our clergy sample “still feel called after all these years” and despite “problem days … feel challenged and reinvigorated”. Clergy endure when their lives experience a convergent authenticity of Christian belief, professional belonging and personal development – becoming – across the years. Perhaps ‘priest’ is better understood as a verb rather than as a noun. R.S. Thomas was right: priests have a long way to go. Our research participants appreciated their own vocational journey and the insight that priests are not only ordained in a life-changing moment but are becoming priests across a lifetime.

Clergy resist diluting their vocation because it is unlike any other occupation. This pushes against conventional literature about vocational working lives and has not previously been highlighted in this way. Priestly identity is characterised by obedient clergy bodies, not simply instrumental to the Church as an organisation but theologically governed by clergy souls. Embracing personal sacrifice is the hallmark and enduring trajectory of vocational faithfulness and priests need to feel authentic in this regard if they believe they are answering God’s calling. Clergy are an interesting vocational reversal of Hochschild’s notion of emotional labour maintaining the convincing impression a commercial organisation desires: a priest’s outward performance, or ‘managed heart’, disguising inner angst, will ultimately be detected by God[[40]](#footnote-40).

**Priestly Bearings**

‘Why do we find clergy so interesting?’ asked Laurie Taylor, presenter of the BBC Radio 4 flagship social science programme *Thinking Allowed* in interview[[41]](#footnote-41) with the authors of *Managing Clergy Lives*. Our research focused on Church of England stipendiary parish clergy who remain a powerful ministerial paradigm, so the question arises, whether our conclusions about enduring priestly vocation are applicable in other settings. For example in non-stipendiary ministry, chaplaincies and Fresh Expressions ministries fashionable in the UK at present, and in other cultural milieu and ecclesial polities, both Anglican and ecumenical. Our research noted insights from Roman Catholic, Australian and North American enquiries which suggest some similarity of experience,[[42]](#footnote-42) although the feminization of the clergy theory proposed in Nesbitt’s significant study[[43]](#footnote-43) is yet to be tested in the UK.

In his address in July 2013 to bishops in Brazil, Pope Francis affirmed the importance for mission of a committed and enduring priesthood: the Church requires priests who through formation and training are, ‘able to step into the night without being overcome by the darkness and losing their bearings; able to listen to people’s dreams without being seduced and to share in their disappointments without losing hope and becoming bitter; able to sympathise with the brokenness of others without losing their own strength and identity’.[[44]](#footnote-44) Managing Clergy Lives illustrates how an enduring authentic identity finds congruency in the themes of obedience, sacrifice and intimacy. However there remains considerable scope for further practical theological research into ordained lives within 21st century cultures which might be taken up by students and clergy themselves wherever in the world they minister.

**Author Biographies**

Dr Nigel Peyton served for many years as a parish priest in the Church of England and was Archdeacon of Newark. He is now Bishop of Brechin in the Scottish Episcopal Church, and an Honorary Teaching Fellow at Lancaster University UK.

Dr Caroline Gatrell is Professor of Management Studies and Director of Doctoral Programmes at Lancaster University Management School. Her research focuses on sociologies of health, work and the family.

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