

St Luke's Virtual Clergy Wellbeing Programme

A Message for Clergy Spouses in the time of Covid-19 and beyond

No time to Breathe?

**Spouse: in the context of this paper I am using the term 'spouse' to refer to, and be inclusive of, the diversity of partnerships which exist through being in relationship with a member of the clergy.*

Clergy mental wellbeing has, for some time, gathered much attention but, by and large, little thought has been extended to spouses and partners. At this time of Covid-19 as many clergy have been challenged to work and go about their daily lives in an entirely different way this seems the right moment to stop and address what it is like for those who support them. So this piece is written specifically with *you*, the clergy spouse, in mind.

We know from research that clergy often prioritise the needs of the parish and the community in which they serve over their own self-care and as a clergy spouse you may feel that your own needs are often overlooked or are not as important or significant as the needs of others. The additional demands of lockdown have meant that the sustaining rhythms of life have been undermined and ministry sometimes reduced to your clergy partner being driven by the need to be 'doing' and 'producing' things alongside their pre-existing work. Daily Offices perhaps are the one opportunity where there is a sense of permission to 'be'.

This state of 'doing' can easily be passed onto you, the spouse, along with your own stresses - whether these are internet connectivity, learning new technological skills, or juggling home-schooling and child-care with both of you working. Much of this way of life is inherent in the state of lockdown for us all, but in the 24/7 life of the vicarage it can prove unremitting. It may leave you both with a sense of no time to breathe.

So the emerging theme in the lives of both the clergy and spouse may manifest as a preoccupation with 'doing' rather than 'being'. For the clergy, live streaming, Zooming, Microsoft Teams, writing newsletters, producing podcasts, alongside telephoning parishioners, preparing for funerals, comforting the sick and dying, supporting the most vulnerable in the community, have been more or less conducted from home and, whatever changes are underway, much will remain like this for some time to come.

Chaplains returning from days and nights in the hospital comforting the dying and their relatives will carry very different strains and preoccupations, sometimes wishing to share their experiences; at other times feeling too overwhelmed to want to speak of it. That can leave you with a sense of

exclusion. Your frustration with the poor internet connection or concerns about your own job may seem just too mundane to talk about.

The spouse of a member of the clergy spoke recently of his exhaustion with the sense of responsibility for 'keeping the show on the road'. As the clergy half of this couple struggles to manage in a demanding and alien ministerial world, he feels it is selfish to want time together, with the opportunity for fun and laughter, time for 'being' rather than yet more 'doing'. But for his own wellbeing, and the wellbeing of all clergy and their families, this is *exactly* what is needed to flourish and to sustain clergy in safe and creative ministry.

So whether you are a couple engaged in separate careers, or committed to a joint ministry, perhaps both ordained, now is the time to stop and reflect upon the importance of nourishing yourself and your relationship. Grasp the moment and the opportunity rather than think you will hold on until 'it's all over': it's time to breathe!

Finally, where faith is important to you remember to nurture it; you too have been bereaved of your usual pattern of worship and must find other ways to be both consoled and uplifted.

Kate Woodhouse July 2020

If reading this has led you to want to seek additional support or signposting please contact St Luke's via its website or on [020 7898 1700](tel:02078981700).