

Parish Ministry: Addressing the Crisis in Stipendiary Clergy Numbers in the Church of England

Monday 23rd – Tuesday 24th March 2026

**Save the Parish led Consultation at
St George's House**



Contents

Participants	3
Background	3
The Report	4
Problems.....	4
a) Vocations.....	4
b) Training	4
c) Retention and Support.....	5
Addressing the Core Problem: Creating an Anglican Vision of Priesthood	5
Recommendations and Actions	7
1. Create a course on Anglican basics.....	7
2. Improve the existing IME 1 & 2.....	7
3. Convene a conference on the priesthood.	7
4. Remove financial and age barriers.....	7
5. A covenant of care	8
6. Change the metrics of ‘success’	8
Conclusion.....	8
Appendix: Tasks for Save the Parish	9
Using our convening power	9
Produce online materials commending parish ministry	9
Partner with a TEI to organise a conference on Anglican Ordained Ministry	9
Participants	10



Participants

Those invited were deliberately chosen to represent the breadth and diversity of Anglican traditions from across the whole Church, from parish clergy to theologians, college principals and others involved in theological education. Our group included four Church House staff, two members of UNITE, two bishops, two TEI principals and four lecturers, two archdeacons, two Diocesan Directors of Ordinands, representatives of the English Clergy Association, people working in mission, health and wellbeing and in journalism, with a range across Anglican traditions. We were looking for a challenging, ideas-testing discussion rather than an echo chamber. The consultation was chaired by the Right Reverend Martin Seeley, who has long experience of parish and diocesan ministry as well as theological education and we were fortunate to have a working bishop among our number as well as the Director of Ministry for the Church of England. Participants noted that they had never before taken part in free-ranging conversation on these topics, or with such a mixed group. It was surprising and a real joy to find a strong degree of synergy and agreement between us and a great deal of positive energy in seeking solutions.

Background

Save the Parish is all too aware that flourishing parishes rely on equally flourishing clergy with manageable numbers of parishes in which to exercise a pastoral cure of souls. Yet stipendiary clergy numbers have been in steady decline ever since the 1960's. The latest figures, published in May 2026, reveal only 6682 in stipendiary ministry, compared with 2440 self-supporting ministers.¹ The majority of active clergy are those who hold a PTO and are retired, numbering 8368. Of those in stipendiary ministry, 3153, nearly half, are over 55. For the first time, the numbers leaving ministry in the last year were included in the ministry statistics. We know that 379 of them resigned, which is a higher figure than those retiring, who numbered 278. Until relatively recently, numbers of those entering training for ordained ministry held up, with a peak of 591 in 2020 (notably after an effective campaign led by the late Bishop of Guildford, Andrew Watson),² but there followed a steep decline to 370 in 2024, albeit with a partial recovery to 417 in 2025.³ In a national Renewing Ministerial Vocations Conversation in 2024 in York, involving heads of theological colleges and Diocesan Directors of Ordinands, the primary factor that militated against vocations, according to participants (71%) was clergy well-being, which far outweighed demographic changes and lack of resources for the work.⁴ Incumbents consistently report worse mental and financial wellbeing than other clergy groups according to the longitudinal Living Ministry survey

¹ All figures on clergy are from the Church of England Ministry Statistics, published in May 2026 at <https://www.churchofengland.org/about/data-services/resources-publications-and-data#na> Accessed 29 May 2026.

² See Andrew Watson and Magdalen Smith, *The Great Vocations Conversation: A Year of Inspiration and Challenge for Ministers* (London: Church House, 2018).

³ Figures up to 2024 are from the article by Madeleine Davies in the *Church Times*, 'Number of Ordinands Plummet Synod Hears', 12 July 2024 at <https://www.churchtimes.co.uk/articles/2024/12-july/news/uk/number-of-ordinands-plummet-synod-hears>

Accessed 29 May 2026. The partial recovery to 417 was by personal communication from the Revd Canon Nicholas McKee, Church of England Director of Ministry.

⁴ Davies, *Church Times*, 12 July 2024.



(2017-2025).⁵ Research on clergy wellbeing in the same survey has uncovered evidence that 29% of clergy have scores indicating possible mild to clinical depression, two out of five feel isolated, while administrative workload is the major source of stress rather than the number of hours worked, specifically because it takes time away from cure of souls.⁶

Given the complexity of the situation, which is as much about retaining as attracting stipendiary clergy, Save the Parish decided to convene a consultation on parish ministry, following a threefold approach, dividing the consultation into: 1 Inspiring Vocations; 2 Effective Training; and 3 Supporting and Retaining Clergy.

The Report

Problems:

The following points were articulated in small group discussions, plenaries and in later written comments reflecting on the consultation.

a) Vocations

1. **Loss of confidence in ordained ministry.** The major obstacle was the lack of a clear affirmation at all levels of the Church of the Church of England's foundation in threefold ministry and in the priestly vocation itself. We lack confidence in the vocation and an inspiring vision of priestly ministry.
2. **Mixed Messages.** Potential ordinands should be able to be confident they have a secure place in the Church's future. On the one hand the Church calls for higher numbers of ordained ministers, while on the other clergy numbers are cut in a number of dioceses.
3. **Resourcing.** Dioceses often lack resources to do vocations work and candidates have no access to grants for travel or books, which disadvantages the less affluent.
4. **Preparation.** Many candidates have little idea of the Church they seek to minister within and no knowledge of Anglican liturgy, ecclesiology, orders or theology. They struggle when they encounter parish ministry in their curacy.

b) Training

1. **Utilitarian training.** The great majority of participants across disciplines believed that theological education has become functional and managerial.
2. **Lack of Anglican content.** An overwhelming majority also believed that in many cases students were not learning enough about Anglican ecclesiology, liturgy, history and theology. This is essential for teaching, evangelism and leading worship.
3. **Lack of Theology.** The majority believed that theological and biblical training needed strengthening, especially at a time of secular challenge.

⁵ See Fiona Tweedie and Liz Gravelling Fox, with Charlotte Hobson and Elaine Farrow, *Lord for the Years: Clergy Wellbeing 2017-2025* (London: Church House, December 2025) at <https://www.churchofengland.org/sites/default/files/2025-12/living-ministry-wave-5-panel-survey-report-lord-for-the-years.pdf>, pp. 35, 49..

⁶ Tweedie and Gravelling Fox, *Lord for the Years*, pp. 22, 35..



4. **Lack of clarity in the relation of IME1 and IME2.** Pre-ordination training and that carried on afterwards are not properly integrated or distinguished. Nor is it clear what it is reasonable to presume priests can learn once in a parish. There was concern that off-loading theological learning to IME 2, without the resources of a TEI to train new curates on complex matters, means these important topics will not actually be learned.
5. **Lack of full funding.** There is a failure to properly fund ordination training, especially residential colleges.

c) Retention and Support

1. **Demoralisation.** Participants agreed that parish clergy are often deeply unhappy. They feel undervalued, under-resourced, overworked, frustrated and vulnerable. They are in no good place to act as vocations advisors.
2. **Distrust.** Many clergy feel disconnected from the centre and pawns in pastoral reorganisation. For some, not all, there is a perceived lack of pastoral care.
3. **Metrics of success.** Competitive bidding for SMMIB funding and managerial modes of leadership puts enormous pressure on parish clergy and sometimes sets them up to fail.
4. **Little ongoing spiritual and theological formation.** Even when sabbaticals are available, the emphasis is on utilitarian knowledge.
5. **Undervaluing older and retired clergy.** They provide about half of all services, yet have no representation and are sometimes forcibly retired when active and able.
6. **Dealing with distrust.** Several groups identified a breakdown in trust between clergy and the centre or diocese, whether through the emphasis on numerical growth, reorganisation, lack of job security and impossible jobs, parish finances or a feeling the hierarchy are unaware of local anxieties and hardships. The constant focus on mission initiatives has a demoralising effect on parish clergy. We need to challenge secular ideas of success and failure and value the advice and experience of clergy and their parishioners. Time-limited or part-time central jobs were suggested, so that senior clergy could be refreshed with parish ministry and be close to their clergy, as well as better understanding their concerns.

Addressing the Core Problem: Creating an Anglican Vision of Priesthood

It became clear in our conversation that our entire project to attract, train and retain clergy relies on a strong and confident theological understanding of what it is to be an Anglican priest, which will be what inspires a postulant and supports a minister throughout long years of service. It is also what enables good, clear and trusting relationships with the parishes in which these clergy are to serve. Confident and joyful priestly ministry will itself engender vocations whether to ordained ministry or to lay callings. A priest is both a walking sacrament and the first vocations officer. This is a virtuous circle, but one which we need to strengthen. Parishes with regular discernment groups are strong providers of candidates for ordination, year on year.

One link in this circle that is practically necessary is financial support. Each and every ordinand should be properly financed for their course, in order to pursue the best course for their ability and circumstances, whether residential or non-residential. The



Church at an institutional level is sending out very conflicting messages about the value and long-term security of stipendiary ministry. On the one hand it seeks to grow vocations but on the other, at diocesan level, it cuts stipendiary posts due to the size of deficits. The Church must commit to a model that will support a young person in stipendiary ministry for their lifetime, or there will be no meaning to their strapline, 'a Christian presence in every community' or any real cure of souls. There must be job security. Bishops who say openly that they will not cut clergy posts attract more clergy. A second link is diocesan support, not only financially to resource vocations work, but theologically and pastorally. Part of the renewal of understanding of ordained ministry includes the pastoral role of the bishop and the episcopal leadership in enabling a household of faith in which each one of their clergy is valued and supported. It emerged in the conversations that bishops too lack formal training in their theological, pastoral and teaching roles and would find it helpful.

A third link is a national narrative of theological formation, which will undergird and reinforce the local work in parish and diocese and show that we are all, from archbishop to young children being formed as Anglican Christians by our worship, scriptures, creeds and orders, however varied our traditions and interpretations of these treasures. A fourth link is ordination training, where too much utilitarian training is pushing out the nourishing biblical, historical, liturgical and theological knowledge and understanding that will sustain ministry over time and within an often hostile and challenging secular context. People, longer-established and newly searching Christians, are thirsting for theological credibility and depth from their priests. We must make sure they are resourced to offer this. As such, we need a revaluing of deep learning and of theology in the whole Church, making more use of academic theologians, and nourishing our priest theologians. Without drinking deeply from the wells of salvation we will wither and die.

Having our clergy in their parishes, how do we sustain them? It is clear from so much research that there is a loss of confidence, much weariness and anxiety. Only 3.9% in the Living Ministry survey saw their Church leadership as 'a source of hope'.⁷ We welcome the improvements in stipend and pensions, but participants agreed that we need a change of culture away from secular models of growth to a more parochially friendly model of impact, which values the unseen and unquantifiable work that SMMIB projects ignore. We had the biblical injunction, 'love one another' put before us by Bishop Martin at the start of the consultation. Our clergy, reports tell us, are drowning under burdens of administration, which is often the most frequent mode of engagement with their diocese. No doubt bishops too are equally beset. A consultation such as this has no power to change diocesan culture to one of greater relationality and mutual love. Yet so many of the answers to our problems of attracting and retaining clergy come down to a loss of a sense of the importance of having time to love one another. We give clergy multiple churches to care for, in which they struggle, making it ever harder to be a true parson: a person, whose vocation is to 'be' in a place and fully present to it.



⁷ Tweedie and Gravelling Fox, *Lord for the Years*, p. 31.

Recommendations and Actions

1. Create a course on Anglican basics

Ordinands are being accepted for ministerial training with little understanding of the Anglican Church and its traditions, and emerging without much more. This is partially a consequence of no longer living within a culture saturated with Christianity. We suggest the creation of a suite of in-person courses which could be delivered in parishes or at deanery level. This would have easily accessible online materials and would begin as a pilot but is intended to be rolled out nationally. This would be open to anyone wishing to understand their faith better, but we would hope that any prospective ordinand would study these materials prior to going to a selection board. This would ensure that a candidate had knowledge of the Bible and modes of exegesis and interpretation, the Church of England and her liturgies, some theology and history to prepare them for Anglican ministry. Professor Jane Williams and Harvey Howlett have volunteered to take this work forward, working with Marcus Walker. We believe this could be transformational in candidates fully understanding the nature of the Church and ministry to which they hope to commit their lives.

2. Improve the existing IME 1 & 2

This task may well be part of the review of theological education to be led by Bishop Martin Seeley. Our participants wanted to stress the importance of a national framework and funding model that paid properly for residential as well as non-residential training. Every ordinand should be properly resourced to enable them to study at the deepest level of their capacity and equally having the opportunity to study residentially as well as non-residentially. Many saw the value of some kind of mixture of the two modes. The majority strongly urge resisting managerial leadership models and utilitarian training and returning to a more theologically robust understanding of theological training. We want to see the practical aspects of ministry in IME2, where they are most relevant. Agreement on this was strong across traditions. IME2 could be provided by TEIs and avoid the huge discrepancies in training as well as make better use of our TEI expertise.

3. Convene a conference on the priesthood

A conference on the nature of Anglican priesthood is a vital step in articulating the confident vision of the ministry on which its renewal depends. This conference would include speakers from all traditions across the breadth of the Church of England to discuss the nature of Anglican priestly ministry. Ridley College, Cambridge was suggested as a possible venue.

4. Remove financial and age barriers

1. Provide financial support for candidates: travel and books, possibly through NCI funding.
2. Make ordination training fully funded for all in whatever mode, including residential training, where ordinands learn to live with students of varied traditions.
3. Remove the set retirement age for clergy. There are ways of ensuring clergy are fit and effective to carry on working. Current Safer Working Practices sometimes treat them with little respect as if they were new interns rather than experienced clergy. They should have proper representation on synods at all levels. This is technically allowed for individuals but rarely promoted or encouraged.



5. A covenant of care

1. Halt clergy cuts as a way of saving money, so that clergy have the security of work. This will restore trust and has proved effective in dioceses where it has been openly embraced.
2. Enable every ordinand to have a cell group for support and study throughout their ministry.
3. Enable every cleric to have a mentor/supervisor (possibly suitably trained retired clergy) to accompany them throughout their ministry. This is not to be part of formal assessment in any way.

6. Change the metrics of 'success'

1. Ministry is too often assessed in (often highly questionable) measurable ways and in terms of numbers. It is completely unfair to compare effectiveness between a well-resourced multi-ministry team in a resource church and the local parish priest juggling a number of churches alone. This is the source of much clergy demoralisation. Revd Dr Gillian Straine of the Guild of Health will work on a new model of impact, which will value ministry in terms rather of numbers of lives touched, funeral by funeral, cup of tea by cup of tea. This will capture much more authentically the value and effectiveness of parish ministry. This would begin with a pilot scheme, and be accompanied by research into the wellbeing of the clergy involved.
2. A move back to part-time or time-limited diocesan roles would enable the higher clergy to understand better the pressures and challenges of ordinary parish ministry.

Conclusion

This consultation took place against a background not only of a crisis in clergy and ordinand numbers, but also of nearly bankrupt dioceses tragically making cuts in the stipendiary clergy they already have. Our recommendations may seem slight in such a context. Yet Christ never told us we would be successful but only bid us be faithful in preaching the gospel and feeding his sheep. If there is a thread running through this conversation, it is a call to steadiness, faithfulness and appreciation of the treasures old and new that God has given us. As we ourselves delved more deeply into our problems and opportunities, we rejoiced in something one might call 'deep Anglicanism', which the hospitality of St George's House itself embodies. It was a privilege to hear from so many diverse perspectives and in a place with such a rich tradition of generosity and intellectual exploration.

This call to deepen our self-understanding through theological study and reflection should not be thought of as nostalgic or backward-looking in any way. In the Roman Catholic Church, the radical changes of Vatican II happened through a process of *ressourcement*, by which they went back to their ancient theological, biblical and spiritual roots to find renewal. The great ethicist, Alasdair MacIntyre wrote, 'I can only answer the question "What am I to do?" if I can answer the prior question "Of what story or stories do I find myself a part?". Without a confident account of who we are and how we understand our ecclesial story, we cannot preach the gospel effectively or live it as God's people. This is as true of the ministry of a bishop as a local priest or deacon. Our proposed course in Anglican basics is as much a resource for lay people and their own vocation as clergy, but it aims to clarify their respective orders and roles, which we believe will help everyone.



Ministry is a partnership between priest and people, which should be mutually affirming. One participant coined the phrase 'covenant of care', which expresses the responsibility we all as Anglicans have to our clergy. We will only have the outwardly focused and effective clergy we so desperately need if we honour their commitment by giving them financial security, manageable jobs and modes of ongoing support. We cannot address the great problem of administrative burden, which any managerial system tends to produce, but we hope that a renewed vision of what ordained ministry consists in and what it is for will begin to turn the great ship of the Church in a more heaven-focused direction, so that a true Augustinian ordering of our loves puts secondary goods where they belong. For as Archbishop Sarah reminded us in her Installation sermon: 'May we have the audacity to believe in the promises of God, for with him, nothing will be impossible'.

Appendix: Tasks for Save the Parish

Using our convening power

The participants praised STP's convening capacity, which brought such a wide variety of people together and hoped initiatives like this consultation would be repeated. STP represents all parts of the Church of England, which makes it a gift to the whole Church in our fractious times.

Produce online materials commending parish ministry

Save the Parish would seek funding to produce short videos, particularly aimed at young people, stressing the relational and community aspects of the role, the autonomy and creativity, as well as its challenges. It is important to realise the attraction of a job that resists reduction by AI in today's job market.

Partner with a TEI to organise a conference on Anglican Ordained Ministry



Participants

The Reverend Dr Rebecca Aechtner	Director of Ministry for the Two Cities in the Diocese of London
The Right Reverend Jonathan Baker	Bishop of Fulham
Admiral Sir James Burnell-Nugent, KCB, CBE	Steering Committee Member Save the Parish
Canon Professor Mark Chapman	Professor of the History of Modern Theology University of Oxford
The Reverend Canon Dr Mark Clavier	Canon Theologian Diocese of Swansea & Brecon, Church in Wales
The Reverend Canon Charlotte Cook	Interim Head of Vocations Church of England
Mrs Madeleine Davies	Senior Writer Church Times
The Reverend Canon Derek Earis	Vice Chair English Clergy Association
The Reverend Dr John Fitzmaurice	Director of Ordinands and Vocation Diocese of Worcester, Church of England
The Reverend Dr Peter Groves	Associate Archdeacon of Oxford Worcester College, Oxford
The Reverend Preb. Dr Isabelle Hamley	Principal Ridley Hall
Mr Harvey Howlett	Lecturer in Liturgy and Worship / Deputy Director, National Church Governance Programme St Augustine's College of Theology / National Church Institutions
The Reverend Canon Peter Johnson	Treasurer English Clergy Association
Dr Emily Kempson	Lecturer in Theology and Ministry Durham University
The Reverend Dr Jo Kershaw	Tutor for Liturgy The College of the Resurrection, Mirfield
The Reverend Sam Maginnis	Team Vicar Horsham Parish
Miss Wendy Matthews	Head of Mission & Pastoral Services Church Commissioners for England
The Reverend Canon Nicholas McKee	Director for Ministry National Church Institutions



The Reverend Canon Professor Alison Milbank	Professor Emeritus University of Nottingham, Canon Theologian and Priest Vicar at Southwell Minster Save the Parish Steering Committee
The Reverend Dr Richard Moy	National Director SOMA UK / Christ Church W4
The Right Reverend Martin Seeley	Retired Bishop of St Edmundsbury and Ipswich
The Reverend Dr Gillian Straine	Chief Executive Officer The Guild of Health and St Raphael (GoHealth)
Mrs Emma Thompson	Journalist, Save the Parish Steering Committee, General Synod member, House of Laity, St Albans
The Reverend Marcus Walker	Chairman, Save the Parish Rector, Great St Bartholomew
The Very Reverend Dr Frances Ward	Retired Priest Church of England
The Reverend Dr Harri Williams	Principal St Stephen's House, Oxford
Professor Jane Williams	McDonald Professor of Christian Theology St Mellitus College
Mr Robert Woods, CBE	Former Trustee St George's House
The Reverend Dr Tom Woolford	Vicar of New Longton (Diocese of Blackburn) Tutor in Theology (Emmanuel Theological College)



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