

# accord extra

Association of Christian Counsellors and Pastoral Care UK

## Ground rules and boundaries

By Bill Merrington

As any minister will tell you when we approach Christmas, everyone keeps telling you, 'This must be your busiest time of the year.' As a university chaplain I used to say, 'Well actually no, once term ends I try and have a well-earned rest.' Alas, most people don't want to hear this, so I just collude with them and gain their sympathy.

Of course, every minister will tell you that they are actually busy all year round! In fact most clergy may show a high level of job (if you can call it that) satisfaction but actually work much longer hours than the average lay-member of the church, which is strange, as the Anglican tradition is to say that clergy are not paid a wage, but a stipend – a sum of money just enough so that they do not have to work, but can be free to follow their vocation.

So how is it that ministers, rather than setting an example contrary to the world, end up



performing the same workaholic tendencies as busy London bankers? Is it just the result of the protestant work ethic or is there a deeper underlying issue?

Actually, having supported a number of head and deputy head teachers over the years, I notice the same re-occurring problem in their profession as well. They handle a very full timetable and at the same time fire-fight issues ranging from bullying, stealing, aggressive behaviour and verbal assault. You might assume I'm referring to the pupils, but actually it can come from parents and staff.

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So here we have two professions who might see their work as a calling and a vocation, yet working beyond the healthy limits of the body and mind. Research often looks at the effects of overload upon the physical body but we often neglect the impact of this workload upon the soul and the spiritual well-being of the individual.

Some dioceses now suggest that good practice for clergy is to have two days off every month. But is this enough to care for the well-being of the individual and to set a godly example to the congregation?

Now, I have to self-declare that I work long hours and struggle with this balance as much as any minister. But after 30 years of ministry I have observed that I am far healthier spiritually if I have time to play. I also find that if I have one day off a week, the rest day is spent sleeping and feeling exhausted. But if I have two days off, I am able to do something new and refreshing on the second day that tops up my energy levels. I actually perform far better for the five days than when I work six days and drag my feet!

In supervision and spiritual direction sessions with clergy, I constantly hear the message, 'My role can't be done in five days, let alone in six days!' And of course, they are right, as the job itself is in fact impossible and will never be complete, this side of the kingdom. Until ministers realise this, they are on a 'hiding to nothing'.

What is strange is that we now have a much greater lay involvement than ever, but due to the lack of clear boundaries and expectations, this can lead to more work for the clergy, even though we now have a whole range of new tools such as PowerPoint, computers, mobile phones, e-mails and printers. All of this change has not reduced the workload, it has just changed the emphasis. The needs of our church and community are just as demanding as ever.

So, what is it that the church is lacking in its ministry?

*Do we actually need less to achieve more?*

Church life has developed naturally over the

centuries. It has tried to be a sharp contrast from the way of the world. However, that doesn't mean that there aren't developments in the world that the church could learn from. One area that the church has always been rather casual about is the issue of clear boundaries. We all need boundaries in life: they are there to protect us from harm, from over-stretching into a dangerous territory. There are times when we have to learn to say no, that this is not my ministry but someone else's, even though we might not know who that other person is. Indeed, we have to learn to live with the fact that there may not always be someone who can step into the breach. It still doesn't mean that we have to fill the gap. Boundaries enable us to know where our responsibilities lie and what is beyond our domain. Boundaries also remind us that before we begin any work (whether we acknowledge it or not) the ending is always present at every beginning.

Jesus seemed to work within his own framework rather than be pushed into someone else's agenda. We see this with a number of one-to-one encounters that he had with people. He was clear and direct with people without taking on their problems or robbing them of their own responsibility.

- What did Jesus say to the rich young man that reflected Jesus' boundaries? (Mark 10:17-27)
- What did Jesus teach blind Bartimaeus? (Mark 10:46-52)
- What did Jesus expect of the man at the pool of Bethesda? (John 5:1-9)
- What did Jesus show in regard to his own needs? (Mark 1:35; 4:37-41)
- What did Jesus teach about discernment and priorities? (Mark 1:29-31; 5:21-43; John 11:1-6)

All of this reflects the need for ongoing discernment in ministry in order to develop an awareness of when to respond to a need immediately, when to defer and when to refer to another. Some of us are good at responding spontaneously to an emergency situation; indeed, we get an adrenaline rush, which gives a buzz to the calling. But this doesn't necessarily mean that the response is right. Others are less adapted to crisis ministry and will more naturally delay any action. All of this shows how important it is to be as self-aware as

possible so that we can control our natural temperaments. What marks our ministry out from other types of workers is the theory that we soak our ministry in prayer, Bible study and fellowship, allowing the Holy Spirit to direct us and attune us to his will. All of this takes time if we are to truly incorporate a spiritual dimension in our work.

*Boundaries are to protect life, not to limit pleasure.*  
(Edwin Louis Cole)

All of this is radically different from the world I live in when I am a counsellor or supervisor of counsellors. Boundaries are very clear in the counselling world with written and verbal contracts. I have to pay for monthly supervision if I am going to call myself a counsellor. I also have to follow a code of ethical behaviour. The Association of Christian Counsellors ([www.acc-uk.org](http://www.acc-uk.org)) provides a framework for me to work from, that keep both my client and myself safe. They also provide a similar framework and guidance for pastoral workers ([www.acc-uk.org/pastoral-care](http://www.acc-uk.org/pastoral-care)).

Pastoral care appears to have a greater number of grey areas to its ministry than counselling. Sometimes, I find myself as a chaplain going from a pastoral encounter with a student or staff member to having to identify that we are heading into a counselling situation. So, I need to clarify the difference and negotiate what the person wants. Both forms of support are acceptable but they both need boundaries if I am to be clear about my role and keep both parties safe.

If Clergy (and Headteachers?) do not have supervision, perhaps peer support groups should be mandatory?

I have run Peer Reflective Groups for clergy for many years. This involves a small number of clergy meeting on a monthly basis for about 2–2.5 hours per month. The clergy make a commitment to these groups for two years. What marks these groups out from a relaxed, prayer triplet or a chapter meeting is the boundaries that we set right from the beginning. The ground rules include confidentiality. This means that everything that is said in the group, stays in the group. We agree not to contact each other between sessions and if we meet

each other outside the group, we agree not to talk about the group sessions. This allows the clergy to gradually build up trust until they feel confident to begin to share deep issues of work, life and faith.

Secondly, we make the group our first priority in the diary ahead of funerals and even the Bishop asking to see us to offer us a Curate! Otherwise, it is amazing how often clergy suddenly decide something else is more important than our group meeting. Ministry is full of 'others' who want a bite of our time and energy. The sad result is that the tail wags the dog and we just end up endlessly chasing other people's needs.

Other ground rules include a willingness to listen and not give advice to colleagues, to participate and be willing to be vulnerable. My role as the facilitator is simply to keep the group to the ground rules and to keep the group process safe.

I have come to deeply believe in the importance of such groups. I have seen how clergy can be confidentially supported through some very difficult and lonely experiences, have an opportunity of talking about their crises of faith and have space to process where they are heading in their work and family life.

ACC has helpful ethical policies for churches in regard to their pastoral care and provides a list of counsellors and supervisors who could support peer groups. Pastoral Care UK produce a training programme for church pastors ([www.acc-uk.org/pastoral-care](http://www.acc-uk.org/pastoral-care)).

### **About the author**

Canon Dr Bill Merrington was until recently Chaplain of Bournemouth University and author of Pastoral Care: A Practical Handbook (Kevin Mayhew). He is currently a chaplain of a high secure prison. He also runs Bmerri –a training programme in pastoral/counselling issues ([www.bmerri.com](http://www.bmerri.com)).



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