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Ministry and Stress: Listening to Anglican Clergy in Wales

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Abstract

This study set out to examine the experiences of stress in ministry among a sample of Anglican clergy serving in Wales. Building on recent quantitative studies of work-related psychological health among Anglican clergy in England, the present study employed mainly qualitative methods to illustrate eight issues: the clergy's overall assessment of their present health; their understanding of the characteristics of stress; their assessment of the levels of symptoms of stress within their own lives; their identification of the causes of stress within their experience of ministry; the people on whom they call for support in times of stress; their strategy for and styles of recreation; their assessment of the pastoral care provision available to clergy; and their views on enhancing initial clergy training to equip clergy to cope with stress. Data provided by 73 clergy (10 female and 63 male) portray a group of professionally engaged men and women who are well aware of the stress-related dynamics of their vocation, who are displaying classic signs of work-overload, and who are critical of and resistant to strategies that may confuse the pastoral care of stressed clergy with the accepted management role of the Church's hierarchy of bishops and archdeacons.

Keywords: Stress, clergy, Ministry, Anglican, Wales

Introduction

A series of recent studies, conducted within the quantitative tradition, has begun to provide detailed insights into the work-related psychological health of Anglican clergy serving within England and Wales. These studies have been predicated on two different (but complementary) models of work-related psychological health.

The first model draws on the conceptualization and operationalisation proposed by the Maslach Burnout Inventory (MBI) (Maslach & Jackson, 1981) as developed and modified for use among clergy by Rutledge and Francis (2004). Maslach and Jackson maintain that poor work-related psychological health may be reflected in three components: high levels of emotional exhaustion, high levels of depersonalization, and low levels of personal accomplishment. The Maslach Burnout Inventory contains three separate scales to measure these three components. Empirical findings from studies employing this established model among Anglican clergy in England have been reported by Francis and Rutledge (2000), Rutledge and Francis (2004), Randall (2004, 2007), Rutledge (2006), and Turton and Francis (2007).

For example, employing this model of burnout among a sample of 1,071 male Anglican clergy in England, Rutledge and Francis reported separately on responses to the three components. Their data provide a profile of a group of professionals who gain a considerable sense of personal accomplishment in their ministry in spite of suffering more than their fair share of emotional strain. In respect of personal accomplishment, four out of five of the clergy gained a lot of personal satisfaction from working with people (82%), and said that if they could have their time all over again they would still go into parish ministry (80%). Over half of the clergy felt that they could easily create a relaxed atmosphere with their parishioners (57%), claimed that they felt exhilarated after working closely with their parishioners (52%), and said that in their parish ministry they dealt with emotional problems

very calmly (51%). Between one-third and half of the clergy felt that they had accomplished many worthwhile things in their ministry (48%), that they were positively influencing other people's lives through their parish ministry (44%), and that they could easily understand how their parishioners felt about things (36%). A quarter of the clergy reported that they felt very energetic (24%). A fifth of the clergy felt that they dealt very effectively with the problems of their parishioners (18%).

In respect of emotional exhaustion, nearly a third of the clergy felt that they were working too hard in their parish ministry (31%), and said that they felt used up at the end of a day in parish ministry (29%). One in five felt frustrated by their parish ministry (21%). One in eight felt emotionally drained from their parish ministry (13%), and said that working with people all day was a real strain for them (12%). A significant minority reported that they felt fatigued when they got up in the morning and had to face another day (9%), that they felt burned out by their parish ministry (8%), that they felt like they were at the end of their tether (8%), that they would feel a lot better if they could get out of parish ministry (6%), and that working with people directly placed too much strain on them (5%).

In respect of depersonalization, more than one in ten of the clergy felt that parishioners blamed them for some of their problems (16%), and said that they were less patient with parishioners than they used to be (11%). A significant minority of the clergy reported that they worried that parish ministry was hardening them emotionally (9%), that they found it difficult to listen to what some parishioners were really saying to them (7%), that they did not really care what happened to some parishioners (5%), that they felt they treated some parishioners as if they were impersonal objects (4%), that they wished parishioners would leave them alone (4%), that they felt nowadays that most people could not be really helped with their problems (3%), that they had become more callous toward people

since working in parish ministry (3%), and that they could not be bothered to understand how some people felt about things (1%).

The second model draws on the conceptualization and operationalisation proposed by the Francis Burnout Inventory (FBI), as developed initially and specifically for use among clergy (Francis, Kaldor, Robbins, & Castle, 2005). Building on the classic model of balanced affect proposed by Bradburn (1969), Francis maintains that poor work-related psychological health may be reflected most economically by two components: high levels of negative affect and low levels of positive affect. The Francis Burnout Inventory contains two separate scales to measure these two components: the Satisfaction in Ministry Scale (positive affect) and the Scale of Emotional Exhaustion in Ministry (negative affect). Empirical findings from studies employing this newer model among Anglican clergy in England have been reported by Robbins and Francis (2010) and Brewster, Francis and Robbins (2011).

For example, employing this model of burnout among a sample of 521 male and female Anglican clergy serving in multi-church benefices in England, Brewster, Francis and Robbins (in press) reported separately on responses to the two components. Once again, these data provide a profile of a group of professionals who gain considerable satisfaction in ministry in spite of experiencing high levels of emotional exhaustion.

In terms of satisfaction in ministry, although the overall levels were fairly high, there were aspects of ministry that were not proving to be so satisfactory. Almost two-thirds of the rural clergy felt that they did not deal effectively with the problems of people in their current ministry (64%). Just under one-half of the sample indicated that they could not easily understand how people among whom they minister felt about things (45%), or that they did not feel very positive about their current ministry (44%). Just under two-fifths indicated that their current ministry does not give real purpose and meaning to their lives (38%) or that they had not accomplished many worthwhile things in their current ministry (37%). One-third of

the rural clergy did not feel that their teaching ministry had a positive influence on people's faith (34%). Exactly one-quarter of the sample indicated that they did not gain a lot of personal satisfaction from fulfilling their functions in their current ministry (25%), and three out of every ten did not feel that their ministry was really appreciated by people (29%). One in five of the rural clergy were not able to report that they had gained a lot of personal satisfaction from working with people in their current ministry (21%).

In respect of emotional exhaustion, exactly one-half of the rural clergy reported that they felt drained by fulfilling their ministry roles (50%), and just under one-half of the sample found they were frustrated in their attempts to accomplish tasks that were important to them (48%). More than two-fifths reported feeling fatigue and irritation as part of their daily experience (42%), and finding themselves spending less and less time with those among whom they ministered (41%). Almost three out of every ten of the rural clergy indicated that they were less patient with those among whom they ministered than they used to be (28%), and just under one-quarter had been discouraged by the lack of personal support for them (23%). Almost two-fifths reported that they were becoming less flexible in their dealings with those among whom they ministered (19%) or that their humor had a cynical and biting tone (18%), and well over one in ten reported that they were invaded by sadness they could not explain (15%) or that they were feeling negative or cynical about the people with whom they work (13%).

While quantitative studies of this nature are able to provide a sound basis for generalization and for establishing an overview of the work-related psychological health of Anglican clergy in England and Wales, such studies nonetheless suffer from two well-recognized shortcomings. First, by approaching the clergy with the clearly defined items of the carefully calibrated measures, such surveys are not open to listening more broadly to the clergy. Second, by reporting the profile of (relatively) large samples of clergy, such surveys

are likely to eclipse the distinctive voices and the unique stories of individuals. There is good sense, therefore, in complementing quantitative studies of clergy work-related psychological health with in-depth qualitative studies. The value of qualitative in-depth studies among Anglican clergy has been illustrated by two recent studies: *The Cracked Pot* by Warren (2002) and *Public People, Private Lives* by Burton and Burton (2009).

Against this background, the aim of the present study was to employ qualitative methods to listen carefully to the experiences of ministry-related stress among Anglican clergy serving in Wales. The open-ended questions posed by the study were designed to add depth to the broader picture generated by the quantitative studies and to replicate among Anglican clergy the open-ended enquiry conducted among ministers of word and sacrament within the United Reformed Church in England and reported by Charlton, Rolph, Francis, Rolph, and Robbins (2009).

Method

Procedure

With the permission of the Archbishop of Wales, the first author sent a postal survey during 2005 to all the clergy serving in the Diocese of Llandaff. Assurance was given that replies would remain completely confidential and anonymous. A total of 178 questionnaires were dispatched and 73 were returned, making a response rate of 41%.

Sample

Of the 73 respondents, 63 were male and 10 were female; 7 were in their thirties, 16 were in their forties, 33 were in the fifties, 15 were in their sixties, and 2 were in their seventies; 54 were married, 12 were single, 3 were divorced, and 4 were widowed.

Instrument

The questionnaire was designed to generate a wide-ranging profile of the work-related psychological health of the clergy, collecting both quantitative and qualitative data. The

present study draws on the open-ended questions to illustrate eight key issues defined as: assessing personal health, identifying the characteristics of stress, assessing the symptoms of stress, identifying the causes of stress, naming the sources of support, finding forms of relaxation, assessing pastoral care provision, and enhancing initial clergy training.

Analysis

The clergy responses to the open-ended questions were interpreted in the light of grounded theory in order to identify recurrent themes. In the following presentation these recurrent themes will be defined and illustrated by brief extracts from the scripts.

Results

Assessing personal health

The project began by inviting the clergy to give an overall assessment of their health, by means of an open-ended question. Content analysis of their responses suggested four main categories of self-assessment which have been characterized as: excellent, good, good with qualifications, and problematic. These data are summarized in Table 1.

- Insert table 1 here -

According to these data, three out of five clergy (43) judged their health to be excellent (very good) or good. Another 25 reported quite positively about their overall health, but at the same time offered points of qualification. These qualified responses are worth considering in some detail since they point both to the positive approach that characterizes many clergy and at the same time to underlying issues that need to be faced. Here is a sample of the things that they said.

Reasonably good.
Fairly good.
Reasonably good for my age.
Chronic illness, diabetes – otherwise very good.
Physically (for a man of 58) quite robust. Mentally – quite sound, mindful of stresses and strains.
Good apart from chronic hypertension disease.
Weary but well.
Good, but with age less stamina and more recovery time needed

The other clergy spoke in less promising ways about their personal health, indicating that there is a minority of clergy whose health may be a cause for concern. Here is a sample of the things they said.

I have had a year of poor health, broken ankle; embolism; dental operation etc. just joined the local gym to improve overall fitness.
Deteriorating slowly.
Could be a lot better, but taking steps to remedy.
Need to be careful not to overdo things.

Identifying the characteristics of stress

In setting the scene for the survey, the clergy were invited to provide their own definition of stress. From the wide range of definitions offered, content analysis identified eight key characteristics of stress. These are summarized in rank order in Table 2.

- Insert Table 2 here -

The most frequently mentioned characteristic of stress, voiced by 37 of the clergy, concerned the general feeling of inadequacy and the inability to cope. This was expressed in a variety of ways.

Inability to cope with life on a day-to-day basis.
Being and feeling overwhelmed.
A feeling of inadequacy.
Knowing you are in a fail-fail situation and having no more to give.
Feeling that demand exceeds resources.

The second most frequently mentioned characteristic of stress, voiced by 25 of the clergy, concerned the feeling that there is just too much to do and too little time in which to do it.

This, too, was expressed in a variety of ways.

Too much to do, too little time to do it in.
Feeling there is too much to do and no time.
Waking to find a lot of yesterday's work has still not been done.

The third most frequently mentioned characteristic of stress, voiced by 13 of the clergy, concerned being anxious and confused. This was expressed in the following ways.

Ill at ease.
Mind shuts down so you can't think straight.
A state of acute inner agitation resulting in general external malfunction.
Feeling the circumstances are out of control, so causing extreme worrying.

The fourth most frequently mentioned characteristic of stress, voiced by 10 of the clergy, concerned feeling pressurized. This was expressed in the following terms.

- A build up of pressure.
- Pressure with no apparent support and no end solution.
- The feeling of being broken down by pressure with which you cannot cope.
- Trying to work at the end of your tether.
- Tense and pressurized.
- Pressures which cannot be managed.

The fifth characteristic of stress, voiced by eight of the clergy, concerned feeling frustrated and trapped. This was expressed in the following terms.

- Frustration.
- Frustration leading to tiredness.
- Not being able to properly manage feelings of frustration.

Smaller numbers of clergy mentioned a further three characteristics. Five spoke simply in terms of feeling tired and exhausted:

- Very tired and agitated at the same time.
- Not having the physical/emotional energy to embark upon certain initiatives.
- Exhaustion.

Five spoke in terms of feeling insufficiently supported:

- No apparent support.
- Dealing with major pastoral situations without support.
- Zero support.
- Being asked to do something without adequate support.

Three spoke in terms of feeling that there was no time to relax or to refresh:

- Continual activity and unable to chill out.
- Very little time to myself.
- No time to relax.

These data clearly identify a group of professionally engaged men and women who are well aware of the stress-related dynamics of their vocation and who are speaking in articulate and informed ways from personal experience.

Assessing the symptoms of stress

Having first elicited the clergy's own definitions of stress, they were invited to assess their own personal experience of stress by checking a list of eight generally recognized

symptoms. They were asked, 'Have you experienced these symptoms when stressed?' Their responses are presented in rank order in Table 3.

- Insert table 3 here -

These data demonstrate that four out of every five of these clergy have experienced tiredness as a consequence of stress and that three out of every five have felt low and suffered sleep difficulties as the consequence of stress. Significant numbers have also experienced headaches and tummy upsets, while others have experienced lack of interest in food, boredom and weight loss.

Such findings clearly demonstrate that today the symptoms of stress are not seen merely among a minority of clergy. Rather these symptoms are part of the wider general experience of a professional group of men and women working under pressure.

Identifying the causes of stress

The next stage of the enquiry invited the clergy to identify what they understood to be the main causes of stress in their ministry. From the wide range of causes mentioned, content analysis identified six key causes of stress. These are summarized in rank order in Table 4.

- Insert table 4 here -

The most frequently mentioned cause of stress, voiced by 17 of the clergy, concerned the overall workload. A number of clergy seemed to feel that they just could never escape the work that came their way. They spoke in the following terms.

When I have committed myself to too much work.
Continually increasing workload.
Constant pressure of work.
Too heavy a workload.
Not enough time to meet all demands.
Too much to do at the same time.

The second most frequently mentioned cause of stress, voiced by 16 of the clergy, concerned the level of conflict experienced in pastoral ministry. They spoke in the following terms.

Conflict situations.
Spending time dealing with petty quarrels.
Meetings with difficult people.'

Sorting disagreements amongst people.
Confrontation.

Third on the list of causes of stress the clergy named paperwork and administration, voiced by 16 of them. For these clergy stress came from:

Dealing with the administration of buildings and churchyards
Administration overload.
Excessive paperwork and administration.
Paperwork.

Somewhat lower down the list, nine clergy drew attention to the pressures that come from the expectations of others and from ways in which such expectations were sometimes quite unrealistic. These clergy spoke about:

Unreal expectations from laity and church hierarchy.
Other people's expectations.
People's demands and expectations if too high.
The degree of expectation placed upon me.

Nine clergy identified lack of support as a key cause of stress. Some looked apparently in vain for local support from within their churches, while others looked apparently in vain for central support from within the Church in Wales. They spoke in the following terms.

Lack of care shown by parishioners when I need help and support.
Lack of support from Church in Wales.
Lack of concern by church hierarchy.
Coping with excess legislation and administrative tasks without any help or support.

Seven clergy named committees and meetings as a significant cause of stress. For some there were just too many meetings, while others saw meetings captured by irrelevant or personal agendas. They spoke in the following terms.

Committees.
Lengthy meetings.
PCCs.
Church meetings that go on forever wasting time on people's personal agendas rather than what needs to be done.
Meetings.

These data clearly point to a group of professionally engaged men and women among whom some are really struggling to keep on top of a set of tasks for which they do not feel adequately supported.

Naming the sources of support

In order to assess the importance of different sources of personal support, the clergy were asked, 'In times of need, where might you seek support?' and offered a list of 15 prepared options. Their responses are presented in Table 5.

- Insert table 5 here -

These data highlight the importance of the personal networks created by the clergy themselves rather than the institutional structures created by the Church. Twice as many clergy draw support from their friends (50), other clergy (49) and their partner (45) than draw support from the archdeacon (27), the bishop (26) or the area dean (21). Within this context the doctor appears high on the list (15) compared with the psychologist or psychiatrist (3).

Finding forms of relaxation

In order to create a broader profile of the life-world of these clergy they were invited to describe what they chose to do to relax. A basic checklist was augmented by a write-in option. Their responses are provided in Table 6.

- Insert table 6 here -

These data demonstrate that for three out of four clergy the major sources of relaxation are provided by reading, going on holiday, and by watching television. By way of contrast, gardening comes very low on the list.

Assessing pastoral care provision

The clergy were divided over their assessment of the existing provision of pastoral care for clergy and over their views on what would enhance the provision. Thus 13 of the clergy considered that the current provision was adequate for the need. They said things like the following.

Plenty of options already.
Pastoral care provision is there if people really want/need it.
This is available now.

Probably enough already.

Six of the clergy took the view that the problem was not with the provision but with the clergy reluctance to access that provision. The view that clergy are not good at accepting help was expressed in the following ways.

I think at the moment many clergy may feel that asking for help may be seen as a sign of weakness.
 Clergy are reluctant to make use of pastoral care provision.
 Clergy are very proud and seeking help seems like confessing spiritual failure.
 Clergy have a tendency to isolate themselves.
 Clerics have a tendency to be loners.

Others took the view that clergy were reluctant to trust formal mechanisms established to support them. Establishing confidentiality may present a huge challenge. These clergy recognized that:

In a small clergy community word gets around.
 I think people are wary of formal provision.

What was overwhelmingly clear from the replies, however, was the view that clergy are uncomfortable in confiding personal problems with the bishop or with other members of the hierarchy. This point was made in one way or another by 19 of the clergy.

The area deans/archdeacons and Bishops are part of a hierarchical system, so are not always the right people to talk to.
 The Bishop can't be both line manager, able to hire and fire and also be 'pastor for the pastors'.
 Pastoral care provision should not be from a member of the hierarchy.
 There is need for an independent person outside the church.
 Clergy health is a seriously neglected issue and demands a specialist approach from someone who is independent of the hierarchy.

Enhancing initial clergy training

The final issue explored in the survey invited the clergy to reflect on whether initial training prepares ordinands to cope with the stress levels to which they become exposed in ministry. Of the total of 73 clergy, only 8 considered that initial training succeeded in this area; 55 were clear that initial training was not successful in this area, and the remaining 10 were non-committal.

Building on the initial question, the clergy were invited to speculate about how initial clergy training could be improved to prepare clergy for facing stress in ministry. Content analysis of their responses suggested three main themes that are summarized in Table 7.

- Insert table 7 here -

The first suggestion, voiced by 34 of the clergy, saw the solution to reside in more time being spent on placements and an engagement with parish life. According to this model, techniques for dealing with stress are best learnt on the job. This point was made in the following ways.

- More training in the parish – not so much in college.
- Placing ordinands in parishes during training.
- More in-depth parish involvement.
- More hands on.
- Placements and contact with parish situations.
- More time for placements.
- More emphasis placed on practical placements and less on academic skill.
- Less emphasis on academics.
- Too much stress on academic at expense of practice.

The second suggestion, voiced by 10 of the clergy, saw the solution to reside in giving more emphasis in the curriculum to time management and to stress management. According to this model, techniques for dealing with stress are best learnt in the classroom. This point was made in the following ways.

- Teach and model good time management.
- Simply by realizing that clergy will face difficulties and giving time to deal with it.
- More emphasis on time management.
- Those responsible for training being aware of the difficulties of stress and acknowledging that stress can be a problem and does exist.
- Discussion of possible scenarios during training and possible strategies.
- Specific stress management courses.
- Include stress management.

The third solution, voiced by 6 of the clergy, emphasized the need for initial clergy training to be more open and more realistic about the real nature of ministry in the parishes. These clergy argued as follows.

- Teach realistic expectations.
- Be honest about the pressure.
- Include realistic expectations.

According to this model, techniques for dealing with stress are best learnt on the job.

Conclusion

A series of recent quantitative studies conducted among Anglican clergy serving in England and Wales, employing either the Maslach Burnout Inventory or the Francis Burnout Inventory, had drawn attention to high levels of emotional exhaustion offset by high levels of achievement, personal accomplishment or satisfaction in ministry. Bradburn's (1969) classic model of balanced affect suggests that engaged professionals can sustain and survive high levels of negative affect as long as this is balanced by high levels of positive affect. In other words, satisfaction in ministry and the sense of personal accomplishment may help clergy to deal with what would otherwise be unacceptable and intolerable levels of stress and emotional exhaustion.

The present study was designed in the qualitative research tradition to test these findings from quantitative studies and to add to these quantitative studies some of the human insights and personal stories that came from listening to the voices of individual clergy. In light of the constraints placed on qualitative studies (in terms of time and length) the present study focused specifically on the negative affect and spoke in terms of the experience and understanding of stress. Five main conclusions emerge from the data provided by 73 clergy serving in the Diocese of Llandaff.

First, the decision of two out of five clergy in the Diocese of Llandaff to take time to participate in the project indicated the importance given to this area of research by the clergy themselves. The interest of the clergy in this field of enquiry suggests that the research tradition is worth extending and building on in other dioceses.

Second, the clergy who participated in the survey revealed themselves to be a group of professionally engaged men and women who were well aware of the stress-related dynamics of their vocation and who were displaying clear signs of work-overload. As a

responsible employer, the Anglican Church would not want to ignore the signs of stress among its professional workforce and would wish to listen to their accounts of the demands of the role.

Third, although the clergy are aware of the pressures and problems of professional ministry in the twenty-first century, comparatively few seem to have established formal procedures to enable them to deal effectively and efficiently with the psychological demands of the job. Friends, partners and colleagues continue to play a key role in their personal and professional support. It would be wise to give further attention to the development and promotion of more formal mechanisms for clergy support.

Fourth, although recognizing the need for and desirability of support systems, the clergy are cautious about and suspicious of support systems that might confuse the very distinct roles of clergy pastoral care and clergy management. Archdeacons and bishops may be seen as managers rather than as pastors. Systems of clergy support may need to be seen to be thoroughly independent of the hierarchy.

Fifth, the majority of clergy were critical of the capacity of initial clergy training programmes (colleges and courses) to prepare clergy for dealing with the stresses of parish ministry, and many recognized that initial training in colleges or on courses may not be the right context in which to tackle such issues. As a responsible employer the Anglican Church may wish to place greater emphasis within continuing ministerial education and training to programmes concerned with identifying, managing and surviving stress.

Building on a quantitative research tradition concerned with the balanced affect approach to understanding clergy work-related psychological health (the balance of positive affect and negative affect), the present study has employed a qualitative approach to provide further illumination into the nature and extent of clergy stress (negative affect). The rich illustration provided by these quantitative data needs to be read alongside the earlier

quantitative data. A complementary qualitative study is now needed to provide similar illumination into the nature and extent of clergy satisfaction in ministry (positive affect).

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Table 1

Assessing personal health

	N
Excellent	11
Good	32
Good with qualifications	25
Problematic	5

Table 2

Identifying the characteristics of stress

	N
Feeling inadequate and unable to cope	37
Too much to do and too little time to do it	25
Being anxious and confused	13
Feeling pressurized	10
Feeling frustrated and trapped	8
Tired and exhausted	5
Insufficiently supported	5
No time to relax and refresh	3

Table 3

Experiencing the symptoms of stress

	N
Tiredness	61
Feeling low	50
Sleep difficulties	46
Headaches	23
Tummy upset	20
Lack of interest in food	8
Boredom	7
Loss of weight	3

Table 4

Identifying the causes of stress

	N
--	---

Too much work	17
Conflict	16
Paperwork and administration	16
Pressure of expectations	9
Lack of support	9
Committees and meetings	7

Table 5

Naming the sources of support

	N
Friends	50
Other clergy	49
Partner	45
Spiritual director	30
Archdeacon	27
Bishop	26
Area dean	21
Doctor	15
Wider family	13
Support group for clergy	11
Siblings	11
Parents	7
Psychologist/psychiatrist	3

Table 6

Finding forms of relaxation

	N
Read	56
Go on holiday	53
Watch TV	51
Drink alcohol	34
Eat special meals	33
Visit the cinema	31
Go on retreat	27
Visit the theatre	20
Have sex	19
Sing	19
Play a sport	17
Play a musical instrument	17
Go on a pilgrimage	15
Socialize at parties	14
Walking	10
Listening to music	9

Being with friends and family	8
Bell ringing	3
Gardening	3
Watching sport	3

Table 7

Enhancing initial clergy training

	N
More of course spent on placement	34
Time and stress management	10
More realistic expectations of future role	6
