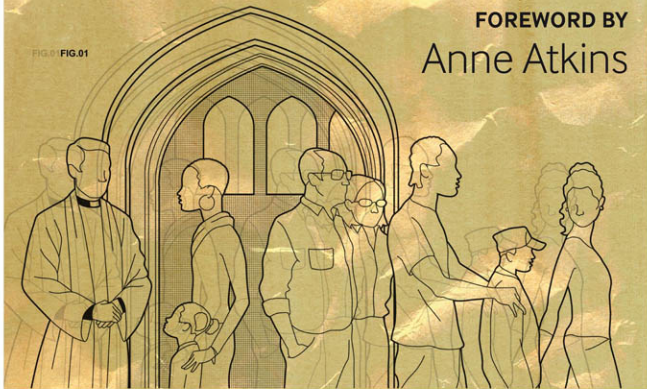


FIG.01 FIG.01

FOREWORD BY
Anne Atkins



Public People, Private Lives

TACKLING STRESS IN CLERGY FAMILIES

FIG.02 FIG.02



Jean & Chris Burton


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PUBLIC PEOPLE, PRIVATE LIVES

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Public People, Private Lives

Tackling Stress in Clergy Families

Jean and Christopher Burton



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For our sons Mark and Tim

*who shared with us the rollercoaster road of clergy family life
with such humour, patience and support*

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gave us much support and also helped us to realize the relevance of our work for the families of rabbis. We have valued their friendship, care and support over many years.

Those who have turned an academic thesis into a book will appreciate particularly the skill and patience of those who helped us to convert not one, but two, theses into *Public People, Private Lives*. Our special thanks, therefore, go to Matthew Dieppe, Peter Jones, Virginia Hearn and Professor John Shack in Chicago for reading the different drafts and for all that they contributed to make the book a reality. Our managing editor at Continuum, Caroline Chartres, has given us warm support and guidance for the final stages of producing the book.

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We are deeply grateful to them all.

Preface

The content of this book is shocking and at the same time inspiring. Although it is written in the cool prose of an academic study, the muted and anonymous accounts, given by the Anglican clergy families of the situations in which they live, are startling and shaming. From the time of entering theological college, and certainly following ordination, most clergy families move frequently and these moves don't necessarily suit the needs of children taking exams, of working wives or elderly parents. Often the cleric appears to be treated as if he were an individual unit, called to meet the needs of the Church. Children suffer from loss of friends on top of the sad and seemingly inevitable disadvantages of being a clergy child amongst their peers. Nor are the moves always made easy by the congregation; we could make such a difference, but often do not.

Not owning the house which is their temporary home is a constant worry not least for the children, as the comment by one small child showed when saying it would better for Mummy to die first because they would then have a house. It is less certain that they actually would, since many clergy made clear they did not think they could go on in the job without their wives.

But the account is also inspiring. The obvious question for me is why do these families put up with this difficult life? The answer is the faith and commitment of the couples. How fortunate the people of the Church of England are to have such faith and commitment in their clergy families – it is more than we deserve. I only hope that since this research took place things have at least begun to improve. Congregations now have a much larger role in the financial support of their clergy which could be a force for good.

Jean and Chris make suggestions for change, based on their extensive research. Many of their recommendations depend upon action by senior people in the Church, whose lives did not form part of the research, but the comments from the groups with whom the Burtons discussed their findings suggest that these leaders probably live equally stressful and difficult lives. The book hints that new

entrants to the ministry may not accept the kind of conditions which the research families disclosed. I wonder whether women priests take a different stance when trying to balance the needs of their vocation against those of their husband and children. Things have changed greatly in society since the end of the last century; the challenge will be to improve the living conditions of clergy families and hold onto their inspiration. And this is a challenge as much for us in the congregation as for the Church leaders.

Professor Phyllida Parsloe

Foreword

If you had asked me, five or ten years ago, to write an introduction to a book about the stress on clergy families I would have said, 'Stress? What stress?'

Yes, honestly.

If you'd pushed me, of course I could have instanced aspects of our lives which we experienced, because of my husband's calling, which the laity in our church didn't have. The night we moved in to our vicarage, for instance, nearly twenty years ago – a night of thick December snow, even in London – a woman rang our doorbell and said she had nowhere to sleep so could she move in... she and her children, as we obviously had plenty of room.

Not long afterwards, someone got us out of bed one Saturday morning, asking for the keys to the church. When I explained that we didn't have them and they were held by someone who lived in the next street, she exclaimed, horrified, 'But I couldn't disturb him at this hour of the morning! It's barely eight o'clock...'. A little later, a member of the church with children the same age as ours, who was a trained counsellor, said she wished to volunteer her services. We responded enthusiastically, suggesting perhaps her name could be on the church noticeboard offering help, alongside Shaun (my husband)'s name and address. 'Certainly not!' she replied. 'It would be extremely dangerous, advertising where I live, with young children in the house...'

We laughed at such inconsistencies, and just got on with the job. Admittedly, until we acquired an answering machine, we never had time to bath our children, feed them or put them to bed: the hours between six and eight were just when everyone else was getting back from work and wanting to ring the vicar. And, until we learned to say, 'No cash, ever,' to callers at the door (though this didn't stop all of them), we had con men calling in an endless stream. We were disturbed at all hours of the day and night, robbed under our noses for years by a friend in the congregation, and people often strolled in and out of our house as if they owned it without bothering to ring the bell.

So our lives were different from those of the laity, it's true. But stress? The only thing that really stressed us, year on year, was the lack of money – but, despite this, we were very, very happy. Forgive the saccharine quip, but we didn't consider ourselves so much stressed as blessed. Shaun had a job he believed in and loved and one of eternal importance. Unlike our neighbours with families at a similar stage, he didn't have to leave the house at seven in the morning and come back after seven at night.

He read our children stories every bedtime (after we got the answerphone). He and I took our coffee breaks together, had lunch and tea together, and often worked in the same room, companionably, side by side. And we, the whole family, were all in it as a team. Our children prayed the Sunday School into being. They all joined the small music group I started, and eventually led it. They helped run the Harvest supper, looked after the elderly and entertained strangers. Their home was constantly being used for parties, wedding receptions, picnics – and, yes, sometimes rather noisy, musical prayer meetings, but never without their permission and presence. And, perhaps the greatest privilege of all, they often shared their supper with tramps, and made toasted sandwiches and sweet tea at midnight, and learned what it is that can reduce anyone to sleeping under Putney Bridge... They made friends their schoolmates would never have dreamed of, and saw an underside of England which others only read about in the papers. The result is that they can now get along with anyone: Bishop or bag-lady, Prime Minister or pauper.

We loved it. If you'd asked me about stress when we were living in an old-fashioned vicarage, being an old-fashioned clergy family, with an old-fashioned pastor-Bishop looking after us, I would have said, Come on. Don't be daft. Don't feel sorry for us. We are privileged. Our children have experiences none of their peers enjoy. We love it.

A few years ago, therefore, I would have found this book rather an alarming eye-opener. I might have thought, Perhaps the researchers saw what they set out to find. I would have recognised quite a lot of what they describe: the unspoken expectations and the irreconcilable demands, the unequal relationship between vicar and curate (and how easily it can be exploited). But I would have said, generally speaking, the Church of England muddles through somehow. It's not a bad way to live. Underpaid – and consequently, in a highly capitalist society, grossly under-valued and under-appreciated – but a lot of fun.

That was then. Since then I have seen things, witnessed comments,

had experiences that I wouldn't have believed – that we didn't believe – possible. I have heard Christians say, of woefully inadequate housing, 'It's surely good enough for the clergy.' Or, from those whose incomes are ten times a vicar's stipend, 'It's not appropriate for those in ministry to earn more.' Or even, from someone whose house was worth over a million pounds, 'The congregation finds it inspiring when we see the clergy going without.'

I have heard of discrimination, injustice and abuse that would not be tolerated for five minutes in secular employment. I've seen bullying that would be reported, and promptly dealt with, in any other context of work. I have known clergy treated in a way that you wouldn't treat your dog.

So, sadly, nothing in this book surprises me now. Not only do I recommend it as strongly as I can, but I believe it to be essential reading for any who employ clergy, care about them and their families, have their welfare at heart or indeed have any contact with them at all. If you ever go to a church service, if only at Christmas and Easter; if you wish Anglicanism to outlast this generation in any recognisable form; if you have any interest at all in an ordained clergy being able to continue, then you must read this book. It contains objective research, expertly analysed, conducted according to recognised methods over several years. It makes for sombre reading.

By contrast, I can only give you my own personal, anecdotal explanations for the changes that have taken place. I can only tell you how we have found it; how our many clergy friends and their families have experienced and continue to experience it; and how my grandfather's life as a clergyman was so very different from what it would be now – fulfilling a high status, low stress role as he was then, which has become a low status, high stress one today.

Mine is a highly subjective response, and I realise many may disagree with me. But, unless you live with a member of the clergy or you are one yourself, dare I suggest you do so tentatively? For I'm sorry to say that my experience – our experience as a clergy family at the coal face – is that the changes over the last few decades to 'modernise' the church and bring it in line with secular society have been almost universally disastrous: certainly for the clergy themselves, and their wives (or husbands) and children; but also, though they may not realise this yet nor for some time to come, for the laity whom they attempt to serve. They have added to the stress of ministry to an almost unbearable degree. They have frequently made it difficult,

sometimes almost impossible, to be effective. They have turned what was a wonderfully fulfilling and worthwhile vocation into what could accurately be described as a dead end and undoable job.

Perhaps there was an argument for overhauling it all. After all, no doctors that I know of still live at the surgery, and very few shopkeepers now live over the shop. But in that case it should have been done properly, in a businesslike way. If the Church had ruthlessly capitalised on church property at the right time, raised the bar rigorously for clergy admission, planned to employ a quarter as many for five times the salary in houses which they buy themselves and own, then it might still be a respectable profession attracting talented candidates. It would be very different, and I for one would be sad to see it go that way, but it would be justifiable and it might work well.

But the Church of England has not done this. As far as I can see, it has got rid of all the rather untidy and anachronistic aspects of clerical life which worked remarkably well, and replaced them with a poor, cheap, badly-run imitation of the secular world which doesn't work at all.

In every area, in my experience, this process of supposedly bringing the Church in line with modern life has added hugely to the stress of it, and indeed has often stopped clergy being clergy. Doing away with livings, and the introduction of compulsory retirement, for instance: time was when a clergyman had security, if not much money; and when it didn't matter so much that you didn't own your own house, because no one was going to take it away from you – at least not until you went to heaven when we all tend to lose it all anyway.

Multiple benefices, half stipends, house-for-duty (which, for the uninitiated, means you are not paid a bean)... all these make it impossible to fulfil a 'living'. How can you live out the life, if your pay only enables you to live half the time? How can you live in the community, if you are shared between six different communities? And how can you work part time, when the whole point of the clergy is to be, not to do? If someone rings your doorbell at three in the morning, distraught, are you supposed to stop and calculate whether it's still yesterday (which was one of your on-duty days for the parish) or today (which is an unpaid day) before you jump out of bed and open the door and put the kettle on, and try to persuade him that his life is worth living after all?

The most distressing change of all, in my view – because it is the

most irreversible and has had the most devastating effect – has been the widespread selling off of arguably the Church's most precious material asset (perhaps even more than the church buildings themselves, which communities and heritage organisations might preserve if the Church could no longer afford to do so): her wonderful, versatile, priceless vicarages.

For it was our home, above all, which kept us going as a family when things were tough within the church – as, to be honest, they often were in the early years. Yes, even more than the support of other people, which is unpredictable after all. Having a spacious, solid, superbly well designed-for-the-purpose Victorian vicarage gave us a refuge which nothing else could have provided. And it was perfect for the job. It had, for instance, a porch for gentlemen of the road to shelter in when the weather was bitter, with a sturdy oak door that could be bolted to protect the family, but which had opaque, fortified glass in the top half so we could see whether our visitors were still there. It had a door in the bottom corner of the garden which led directly to the back of the church, so the congregation could spill out into the vicarage garden for coffee on sunny days. We had plenty of large rooms to accommodate the Sunday School; a kitchen big enough to feed twenty or more sitting down; a study which could comfortably accommodate as many and a drawing room just the same; and a room at the back of the house which couldn't be seen from the street so we could keep it as messy as we liked. It was a house built for the needs of ministry, and I've yet to see any modern clergy housing half so suitable.

Perhaps even more to the point, no matter what difficulties Shaun faced at work, no matter what strain this put on his family, no matter what other material deprivation they faced, he knew he was providing for his children a wonderful, hospitable home to invite their friends to, which more than compensated for never being able to afford holidays abroad or wear designer labels.

A year ago one of our children, after much sober reflection, told us he had decided to get ordained. After my initial shock, I found myself deeply thrilled: not only because it is always exciting when any young person discovers his future (the more so when that future is a selfless, idealistic vocation); but also because I found it such a vindication of his own upbringing. Yes, it has been full of love and laughter, and his decision said so.

But as the months have gone by since he made his announcement,

I confess I have found a chill settling on my heart. For years, Shaun has warned me that he is not confident there will be anything left in the clergy pensions pot by the time he is eligible and we need it (when we will also be needing to find our own home).

Now I find myself questioning whether there will be any stipends, any single benefices, any traditional vicarages, indeed anything to enable clergy to fulfil their livings at all in ten or twenty years' time. I long to support my son's decision, but it fills me with an awful dread. He had already come to his own conclusion that he could not study theology until he has worked to earn a living for some years: I have added the proviso that he must have a stake in his own property before he contemplates it, too. (And, I have thought but haven't said, probably a very high-earning wife. . .)

Recently, when I asked how many full time clergy there are in our diocese I was told, to my astonishment, that there is a shortage of young people with a vocation. My son believes he has just such a one. A generation ago, he would have gone straight to theological college from university, as his father did: young, energetic, and with his life's work ahead of him; confident that, whatever the other pressures, there would at least be a job for him after ordination, securely (if meagrely) paid employment for the rest of his working life, and decent housing for his children.

How could he do so today?

Anne Atkins

Authors' Note

Our experience in a broad range of professional and personal contexts has contributed, often in unexpected ways, to this study of clergy families.

Jean: Initially I worked as PA to a City director, a diplomat and the editor of the *Sunday Times*. I then joined the Chelmsford diocesan social work team where my brief included counselling clergy and their families. This showed the wide-ranging issues that clergy handle and the impact of the job on family life. Work consultancy to clergy and membership of bishops' committees for the care of clergy families in two dioceses for 20 years highlighted the hidden stresses faced by all family members.

After qualifying as a systemic family therapist, I joined the NHS in a Child and Adolescent Mental Health team. My private practice has specialized in issues of work/family stress and has included working with an employee assistance programme.

Chris: After National Service in The Black Watch, I became a Chartered Accountant in the City. Jean and I lived in East London at the Mayflower Family Centre and learned much about Christian work in urban areas from the vibrant thinking of those years. Following ordination, I served in three diverse parishes before becoming Team Rector of a large ecumenical parish in Harlow. Three years of family therapy training gave me new insights into work with families at the key stages of weddings, baptisms and funerals.

These experiences led to our PhD research at Bristol University. We carried out interviews with whole clergy families, parents and children together, so that the rewards and stresses of clergy family life could come into the public eye, and add a new dimension to previous studies of clergy and clergy couples. One group of six Church leaders, including three bishops, and another of counsellors to clergy families reflected with us on our findings after each of the three rounds of interviews. From these diverse perspectives we have been able to present a broad picture of dilemmas faced across the whole Church spectrum.

We hope our book will provide new insights for all ordained church leaders, as well as lay members such as churchwardens, church council members and others in key positions. Members and clergy of other churches feel our work resonates with their situation. Jewish friends and work colleagues have introduced us to their rabbis, suggesting that many of the issues have relevance for rabbis' families, and leaders in synagogues. Adult children of clergy families have expressed a keen interest throughout our work.

The issue of work/family stress currently has a high profile and many professionals, especially those involved in public roles such as personnel in the Armed Services, have questioned us closely about the general issues involved. We offer this book as a resource to them all.

PART ONE

Setting the Scene

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