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The State of the Clergy  
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RESEARCH

## Introduction: The Church Pension Fund, Research and Clergy Wellness

It is with great pleasure that I present the first of what I hope will be a series of triennial reports on the state of the clergy in the Episcopal Church. The information presented here and the conclusions drawn are primarily from three data sources: ordination data as collected by the Recorder of Ordinations, employment data as recorded by Clergy Pension Services at the Pension Fund, and research findings from the Episcopal segment of the multi-denominational survey of clergy commissioned as part of the Duke University Pulpit and Pew Project.

While we cannot predict the future, we can ascertain current trends relating to the ordination of clergy and so assess the current state of clergy wellness. From these data sources, there are **seven core findings** that I believe should be of importance to the Church at large, three that address the issue of clergy supply and four that relate to the state of clergy wellness.

*On the issue of clergy supply and demand:*

- As of now there is no large-scale **absolute** shortage of priests, as is occurring in the Roman Catholic Church; that is, there are enough ordained priests today to fill the current ordained positions either on a full or part-time basis. But there is a **structural** mis-match between where clergy are available and where they are needed, mostly caused by mobility restrictions and income requirements created by family obligations. This has resulted in locally acute shortages;

- There will be an **absolute shortage** of priests in the future if ordinations maintain their current level and age pattern. The number of clergy expected to retire in each of the next ten years is driven by baby-boomers coming to the end of life-long service in the church and mid-life ordinands reaching retirement age after ten or fifteen years of service. The current average age at ordination of 47, which indicates an average working life span of fifteen to eighteen years, necessitates twice as many ordinands each year than if the average age were 30 to 35. Instead, the number of ordinands has dropped to an historically low level in the post WWII period;
- There is a significant clustering in the age range of clergy with very few “Gen X” clergy, but with continuing new additions to the “Baby Boomer” cohort due to mid-life ordinations. It is not clear whether late and mid-life ordinations will continue at their current rate. Just as first career ordinations turned sharply lower with the arrival of “Gen X”, so might second career ordinations as this group reaches mid-life. As the “Silent Generation” retires we could easily see a church whose clergy leadership and outlook is almost entirely mono-generational.

*And on the issue of clergy wellness:*

- The greatest source of stress for clergy is dealing with members of the congregation and centers around the issue of authority. One-third of the

clergy regularly experience stress as a result of interactions with members of the congregation;

- Conflicts about leadership and the everyday operation of the parish are the predominant issues that create divisions within a parish. The “hot button” issues of doctrine, sexuality, and clergy sexual misconduct are close to the bottom of the list of what concerns congregations;
- The stresses of work feed into a relatively low level of satisfaction with family life, something that particularly affects women clergy;
- The result of this is that approximately one-sixth of parish clergy regularly consider leaving parish ministry for another ministry in the church, a figure that is even higher for female clergy and clergy who have children at home.

These findings are particularly significant because of the current ecclesiastical environment and the challenges that clergy face ministering within this changing context. Before exploring the research findings in greater detail, I will briefly describe the new context for ordained ministry in the Episcopal Church.

### **Where We Stand Today: Clergy Supply and Clergy Wellness in an Era of Dynamic Equilibrium**

If one had to pick a moment when a sense of inevitable decline took hold of the Episcopal Church it would be with the 1972 publication *Why Conservative Churches Are Growing* by Dean Kelley. During the 1970's and 1980's the Episcopal Church saw itself as

part of a larger narrative of the decline of the Mainline American Protestant church. For clergy, this sense of impending institutional breakdown came into sharp relief with the publication of Jackson Carroll and Robert Wilson's 1978 book *The Clergy Job Market*. A rising number of new clergy ordained each year, coupled with declining church membership fueled Robert Wilson's statement, “there will be an Episcopal priest for every lay member ... in the year 2004.”<sup>1</sup> Today we are in a different world, and, while it is not one of large-scale growth in the Church, it is one characterized by a small but steady national increase in attendance at Episcopal congregations. This relative stability, however, may only be true from a big picture perspective. The life of the Church from the ground up could better be described by what The Rev. Dr. William Sachs of the Episcopal Church Foundation has described as “dynamic equilibrium.”

What does this “dynamic equilibrium” look like? It is a church situated in a religious landscape that is extremely fluid and characterized by a lessening of enduring ties to denominational identities and structures, both by the congregations as entities relating to dioceses and by individuals in the pews as they relate to their congregation.<sup>2</sup> The evolution

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<sup>1</sup> “Oversupply Seen”, *The Living Church*, June 4, 1978. I would like to thank John Schuessler of the *Living Church* for tracking down this article.

<sup>2</sup> See, Robert Wuthnow, *The Restructuring of American Religion: Society and Faith Since World War II* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1988).

of the person in the pew from *dweller* to *seeker* and the move away in church statistics from counting members to counting attendance, both speak to a world of looser denominational ties. These looser horizontal ties have come at the same time as looser vertical ties so that clergy operate in a world of an empowered laity in a church that emphasizes the ministry of all the baptized. Ironically, clergy thus live in a world in which the laity simultaneously have more power and responsibility, but less investment and loyalty to the institution over which they have so much more control. This is not necessarily all bad news. A world of seekers provides many more opportunities for Episcopal congregations to grow in areas of the country where Episcopalians have not traditionally had a strong presence, just as it means that historic churches can no longer rely upon being part of the “establishment.” And where clergy and laity find a true synergy of energies and responsibilities the result can be a congregation of tremendous vitality. Thus while some congregations are indeed declining, many others are experimenting and expanding.

Such a landscape presents new opportunities and challenges for clergy, in some ways more challenging than the decline narrative of recent past. While certainly depressing, the decline narrative at least provided clergy with an explanation of why the health and vitality of their congregations did not match their hopes and aspirations. More importantly, it located the cause of their predicament in forces beyond their control. In a situation of dynamic equilibrium, I would argue, clergy’s perception of themselves

changes to one in which they can affect the destiny of their congregations, but they see no well-defined formulas of how that might happen, a combination that introduces uncertainties and raises anxiety levels. From a diocesan and national perspective the world has also become harder to predict. The decline narrative of the 1970’s and 1980’s created a straightforward imperative to restrict the supply of clergy, particularly of young clergy. A situation of dynamic equilibrium, with pronounced regional and local variations in congregational growth, makes predicting future clergy demand much harder. Thus the issue facing the Church is not simply one of adjusting course back towards encouraging more ordinations, but making sure that those who we prepare for ordination are ready for the Church they will be serving and ensuring that those who are serving the Church currently have the resources and training and support to meet the challenges and take advantage of the opportunities offered by today’s religious environment.

The following two sections outline the findings in these two areas of research in greater depth and we will outline some further avenues that the Church needs to explore to gain a clearer sense of the challenges we will face in the coming years.

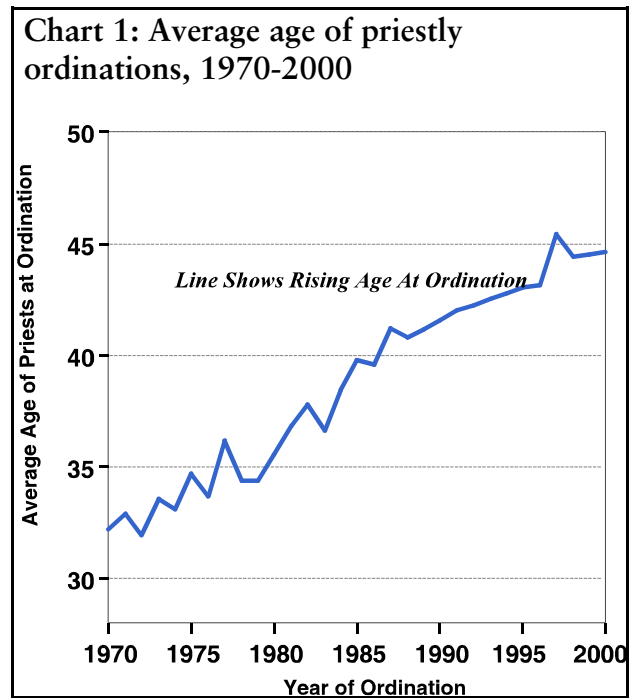
### **The Issue of Clergy Supply**

A simple look at the numbers would indicate that the Episcopal Church does not have a shortage of priests. The Episcopal Church has approximately 9,500 priests under 65 years old for its roughly 7,500 congregations, which indicates no absolute clergy shortage. But of these 9,500, only

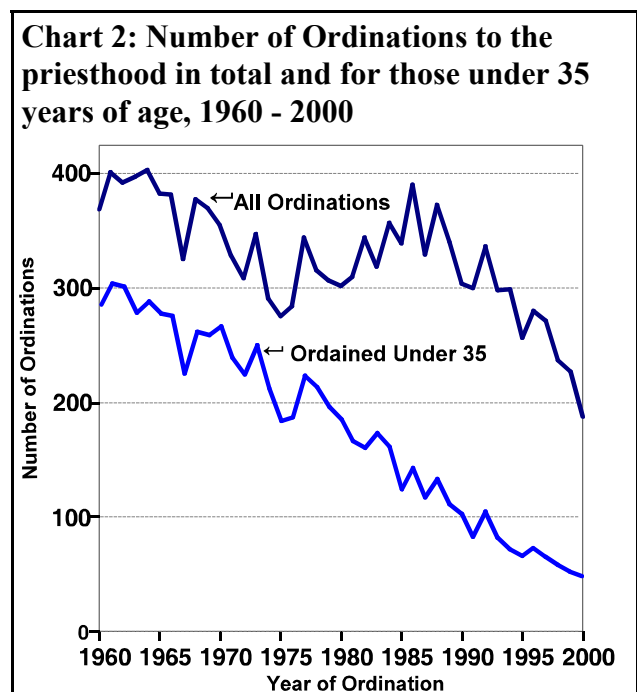
about 6,100 are stipendiary clergy working in congregations. Of the remaining 3,400 priests, approximately 1,000 work in non-parochial Episcopal organizations such as dioceses, schools, hospitals and social service agencies and the remainder gain remuneration from a variety of different occupations. We know from the Episcopal Clerical Directory that the great majority of these officially “non-parochial” clergy work as priest-associates or supply priests in churches and are vital to the life of the Church. It is uncertain, however, what proportion *wish to be* stipendiary parish priests. We know from research done by Dr. Sachs that a large number of priests see their main ministry as being outside the parish. Moreover we hear from deployment officers that many non-parochial clergy have severe mobility problems due to family commitments. Thus we could not say that the 3,400 non-parochial priests represent a “reserve army” of parish priests waiting for leadership openings among congregations. We would conclude from this that the *relative* clergy shortage experienced by many dioceses is likely to continue. Could the relative clergy shortage become an absolute shortage?

There are a number of factors that point to this possibility in the future. First, the rising age at ordination, which is depicted in Chart 1. As clergy careers become shorter the turnover of priests will increase. Thus, in order to keep the same number of working priests the number of ordinations would have to rise. As can be seen from Chart 2, the number of ordinations declined significantly during the 1990s.

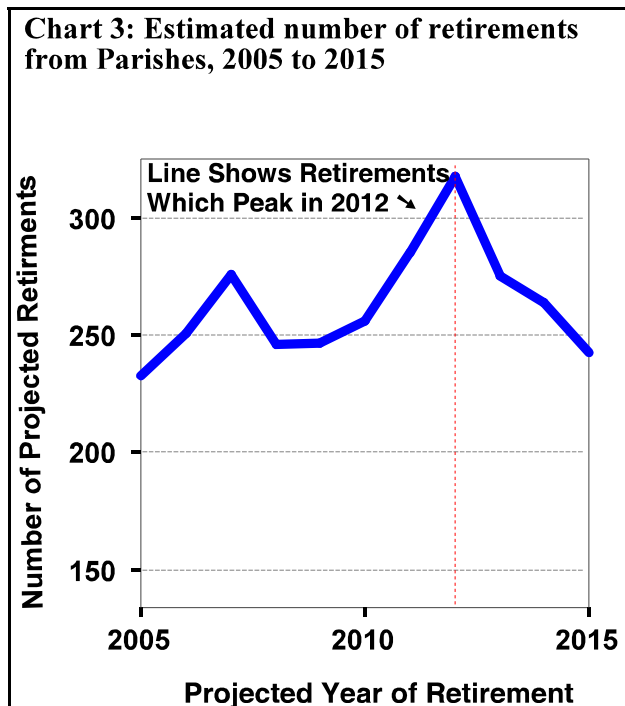
Although ordination levels declined significantly over the last ten years, it is



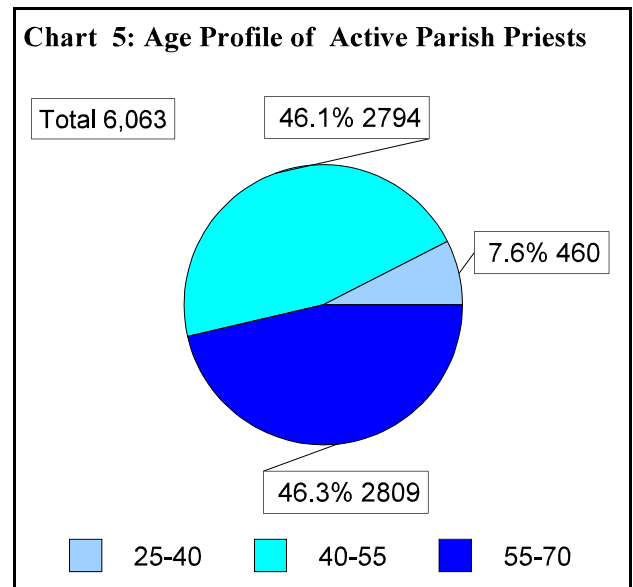
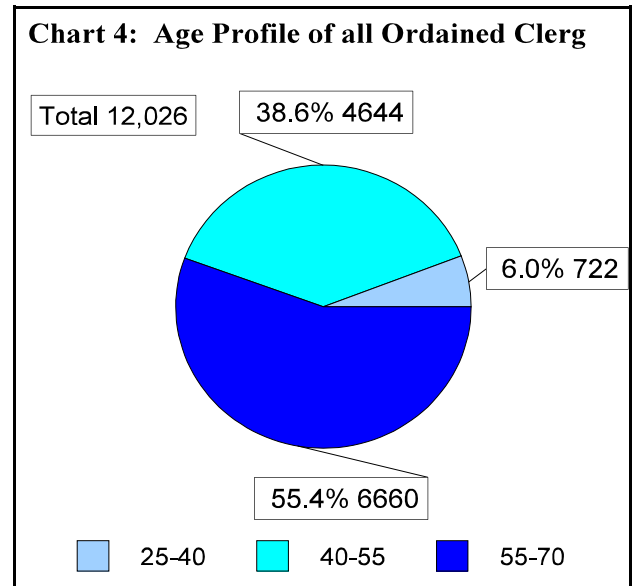
reported that the numbers of persons applying to take the General Ordination Exams rose in 2001 and 2002; nevertheless, a sustained upturn in the annual number of ordinations seems unlikely without systemic change.



Moreover, the influx of late ordinands will start to affect the retirement figures over the next ten years. As can be seen from Chart 3, the estimated number of retirements of clergy now working in churches rises sharply toward 2012. Its subsequent decline is driven by the lower ordination numbers shown above.



The estimated cluster of retirements between roughly 2008 and 2012 is being driven by the concentration of the clergy into the upper age brackets, clearly seen in Charts 4 and 5. From these charts we can see that of the three fifteen year age segments, the oldest segment represents the majority of all clergy and close to a majority of parish clergy. Moreover, with an average age at ordination in the mid-forties, the cohort that is growing fastest right now is the 40-55 cohort, but this ordination pattern simply adds more people to this “Baby Boomer” group, most of whom



will retire in the next fifteen to twenty years. The question arises as to whether the currently very small Generation X cohort, (those born in 1960-1975 and now aged 25 to 40), will grow any larger in the next fifteen years and thus be able to replace those who will retire. This is not clear. One great unknown is whether the pattern of mid-life ordinations, which rose significantly with the entry of women into the priesthood, will continue. If

the current high rate of mid-life ordinations is a time specific phenomenon, linked to the reservoir of women who were unable to fulfill their call to the priesthood when they were younger, then when the 55 to 70 age segment (often referred to as the “Silent Generation”) retires we will have close to a mono-generational priesthood of Baby Boomers. Such a scenario would be unhealthy for the Church, and not simply because the retirement of the Baby Boomers would create an acute clergy shortage, but because the Church will lack the variety of perspectives on the world created by a multi-generational clergy.

### The Issue of Clergy Wellness

#### *The Pulpit and Pew Study*

In 1998 the Lilly Endowment, worried about the steep decline in the number of young people electing a vocation to the ordained ministry, decided that the clergy might have become a ‘troubled profession.’ The Endowment commissioned a major study, based at the Divinity School at Duke University, which included a multi-denominational and international survey of clergy. The survey was mailed out in the late spring of 2001 and included a sample of 1,200 Episcopal rectors; 682 rectors returned their survey and based on national demographic data we were able to ascertain that this was a representative sample.<sup>3</sup> The study asked a series of questions concerning the stresses and strains associated with the life

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3 In order to make the results compatible with the other denominations we limited the Episcopal sample to full- time senior or solo rectors in the US. This represents about 5,500 of the 7,200 active clergy within our system and thus does not include part-timers, assistants, associates, curates, diocesan clergy and other non-parochial.

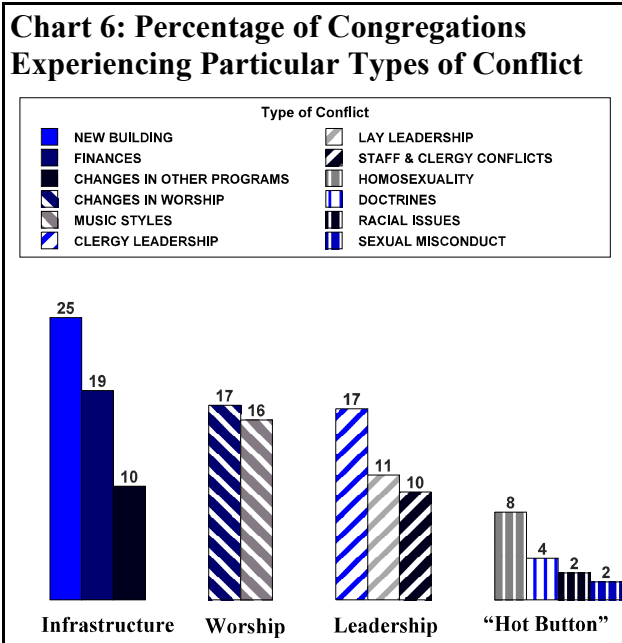
of clergy. While the majority of clergy are very satisfied with their work lives, a significant number experience high levels of stress centered around work and interactions with members:

<b>Tables 1 &amp; 2: Stress in the workplace</b>		
How often do you experience stress due to challenges in your congregation?		
	Male	Female
Very Often	17%	27%
Fairly Often	33%	34%
Once in a While	46%	38%
Never	3%	1%
Total	100%	100%

How often do you experience stress dealing with members?		
	Male	Female
Very Often	8%	11%
Fairly Often	23%	29%
Once in a While	61%	57%
Never	7%	4%
Total	100%	100%

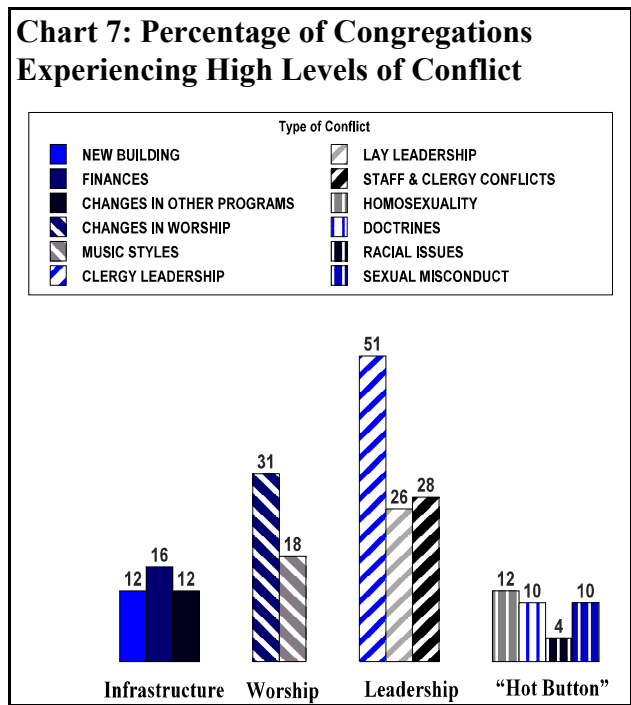
Thus, roughly 50% of male clergy and 60% of female clergy regularly experience stress as a result of challenges faced working in the parish, while 30% of male clergy and 40% of female clergy regularly experience stress dealing with members of the congregation. No one would argue that being a parish priest is a stress-free occupation, but are clergy prepared for an occupation that is both high stress and is driven by a significant amount of conflict and confrontation?

The experience of stress is driven by conflicts within the congregation, but these conflicts are not the ones that occupy the church at a national level. As can be seen in Chart 6, they are based in the everyday life of in the parish related to the maintenance of the “infrastructure” and to “worship”.



A further analysis of these conflictual situations points towards an underlying theme. Examining in particular those conflicts that lead to a significant loss of members, or the departure of clergy or lay leaders, the categories of conflict that grow are not the “hot button” areas, but rather center around congregational “leadership”, as can be seen in Chart 7.

Clergy tend to carry these burdens alone, particularly female clergy, with approximately one-third of clergy regularly reporting that they felt isolated and alone while at work. This feeds into a worrisome level of satisfaction with family and friends as can be seen in Tables 3 and 4.



**Tables 3 & 4: Clergy satisfaction with their personal lives**

How satisfied are you with your family life?	
Very Satisfied	58%
Somewhat Satisfied	31%
Somewhat Dissatisfied	9%
Very Dissatisfied	2%
Total	100%

How would you describe your relations with your family and friends?	
Extremely Delighted	26%
Somewhat Delighted	43%
Little Delighted	18%
Mixed Feelings	11%
Terrible	2%
Total	100%



One factor that might be driving down satisfaction levels with family life is the sense of a time crunch for families. We found less financial anxiety among clergy than we had expected, but this also may be related to the fact that over 90% of female spouses of male clergy work outside the home, with the figure being near 100% for male spouses of female clergy. The cost of the easing of financial anxiety has come in the form of a time crunch with approximately 20% of clergy reporting that their spouses regularly complain about the amount of time they spend working. Moreover, among clergy women with children, 30% report that they felt that their ministry did not allow them to spend enough time with their children. The consequence of this combination of work stress, long hours, isolation and loneliness, a compensation level that requires a second income, and the attendant time crunch with its stress on the family can be seen in Tables 5 and 6. From these tables we see that such stresses lead almost one-fifth of rectors with children in the home regularly considering leaving parish ministry for another form of ministry.

<b>Table 5: All Rectors</b>			
How often do you think of leaving pastoral ministry for other ministry?			
	Male	Female	Total
Very Often	4%	2%	3%
Fairly Often	10%	16%	11%
Once in a While	44%	39%	44%
Never	42%	43%	42%
Total	100%	100%	100%

<b>Table 6: Rectors with Children at Home</b>			
How often do you think of leaving pastoral ministry for other ministry?			
	Male	Female	Total
Very Often	5%	0%	4%
Fairly Often	11%	33%	14%
Once in a While	46%	46%	46%
Never	38%	21%	36%
Total	100%	100%	100%

**In Conclusion:**

The Episcopal Church is already taking action on many of the issues raised in this report, both at the diocesan and national level. In many dioceses ambitious programs are under way to recruit younger persons to the ordained ministry, and we can see in our seminaries and in the recent numbers of those taking the General Ordination Exams that these initiatives are beginning to bear fruit. At the national level, there are a number of relatively new initiatives focused on the recruitment, mentoring and wellbeing of clergy. The Fund for Theological Education’s Pastoral Leadership Search Effort (PLSE), of which the Episcopal Church is a partner, seeks to mentor young people with gifts for leadership during their high school and college years so that when they make vocational decisions, the ordained ministry might be perceived as an option. Fresh Start is a collaborative effort among Episcopal Church Foundation, the National Church and a number of dioceses that provides mentoring and support for all clergy who are beginning new ministries. CREDO focuses specifically on the wellness issues which this paper addresses. All of these efforts are relatively new, and we believe that

their cumulative impact will be highly beneficial to the Church. Clergy wellness is not just important for the sake of current clergy, but will affect the potential clergy shortage. Not only will a high attrition level for parish clergy just add to the numerical problem of clergy supply, but disheartened clergy are unlikely to encourage young persons to seek ordination, or to point those seeking ordination toward a life in parish ministry. Moreover, it would be extremely unfortunate if the Church were to succeed in recruiting young people to ministry in the parish only to have them leave disillusioned a few years later. Nevertheless, this report has addressed issues connected with authority and conflict within the life of the parish that are having a negative impact on the family lives of parish clergy, issues which we are only just starting to address at a national level. In an era that has seen a welcome and important rise in the power of the laity, the role of the parish priest is still in flux which has an impact on both wellness and recruitment. We believe that an important component of the solution is a greater awareness by the congregations of their pivotal role in ensuring clergy wellness and encouraging our very best young people to consider a life in the ordained ministry, this will go a long way to solving the problems we now face. The Pension Fund continues to be a willing and cooperative partner in these efforts.