



Cascade Project: Background

The wellbeing of lay and ordained leaders in the Church of England is vital to a thriving and flourishing church, yet the signs are that the physical and mental health of our leaders is challenged by a range of factors which are if anything becoming more intense.

Healthy, well-motivated, and properly supported frontline leaders are critical to the church's effective service of our communities. Cascade was conceived as a project aimed at building resilience for frontline leaders, in both churches and church schools, creating a healthy culture within which church and school leadership can flourish and thrive, and improving institutional resilience. The aim is to support leaders in their various roles, to enhance their contribution to the many communities they serve.

Existing provision

In the past the Diocese of Rochester partnered with the Burrswood residential centre to offer a 'clergy wellbeing' package. Since Burrswood closed, the Diocese has focussed on developing a Counselling Service, which has proved an effective, but mainly reactive, response for people after they have got into difficulties. Most dioceses have struggled to provide a comprehensive response to the expectations of the Clergy Covenant (aimed at improving the wellbeing of clergy) and there is limited support for the wellbeing of lay leaders across the country. Cascade is designed to build on existing provision, coordinate the different strands to maximum effect, present clear pathways to different types of support, and provide wellbeing support to leaders.

Gap filling and coordination

Cascade is designed to fulfil two key roles. Firstly, it will significantly increase the provision available by offering more and better support to both clergy and lay leaders and church school head teachers through a programme of retreats, talks, counselling and more. Secondly it will provide a clear 'brand' or 'front door', bringing together the support that does already exist into a clear programme which is easier for leaders to understand and to access.

Community Links

Our clergy, lay leaders and head teachers have a superb level of links into their communities and are incredibly active in supporting the mental health and wellbeing needs of other people. The regular work of clergy and lay leaders includes pastoral counselling of people facing some of life's most challenging issues – illness, bereavement, work pressures, self-harm, family trouble, separation and divorce, unemployment, money issues and more. Our leaders support other key community figures with their challenges including police officers, healthcare workers, school leaders, and elected officials. Schools are increasingly the one local place that families turn to with needs that stretch well beyond the provision of a good education, and headteachers find their remit expanding year on year. The ultimate aspiration of Cascade is to

enhance the ability of our church and school leaders to impact their communities in a positive way.

The St Benedict's Centre

The St Benedict's Centre is an Anglican retreat centre in the grounds of Malling Abbey, which was founded as a Benedictine community in c1090. Its tradition is continued by the presence of today's Anglican Benedictine sisters who govern the whole Abbey and, in the tradition of radical Benedictine hospitality, have given some of their buildings into the care of the St Benedict's Centre which offers the space for individuals and groups to meet, study, retreat, and pray. The Centre is a place of great beauty, a liminal space which draws on its deep-rooted Christian tradition to welcome people of all faiths and none, offering a setting for education, training, counselling, holistic therapy, study days, quiet days, workshops, and much more. The Centre hosts this activity and has developed an extensive network of providers who deliver programmes of retreat, learning, and professional development.

The St Benedict's Centre is ideally placed to host a project like Cascade. It is independent of the Church's institutional structure but bears the 'family likeness' and carries a deep understanding of the ministries of the church. This means that we are a trusted partner for the Diocese, a name that is well known to many clergy and lay people, and a safe space to deliver a programme that requires a degree of discretion and anonymity for participants.

Development phase

The St Benedict's Centre, in collaboration with the Diocese of Rochester, has spent the past year working on the development phase of Cascade. Alongside the Diocesan commitment to 'safe and healthy cultures', Cascade wants to help create a healthy culture within which the church's leadership can flourish and thrive.

With funding from the Dorothy Kerin Trust, the St Benedict's Centre appointed a development worker on a 12-month contract to oversee the development phase of the project. This phase of work has involved 3 main consultative strands:

- Structured consultation with a wide range of potential partners (eg the Clergy Support Trust, Sheldon, St Luke's, St Marylebone's Health & Counselling, Canterbury's 'Living Well', CPAS's 'resilience' courses, Thrive Worldwide, Wellbeing People, etc)
- A questionnaire sent to clergy, clergy spouses, licensed lay ministers, youth workers, headteachers of church schools, chaplaincies, church wardens, and diocesan and cathedral staff. 404 responses were received and the data from the survey has been broken down category by category
- A report commissioned from a wellbeing consultant who conducted a series of 'listening groups' with the categories of leader detailed above

The purpose of this wide-ranging consultation was to discover where the wellbeing issues are most acute, and to propose an appropriate role for Cascade alongside other initiatives.

One further key aspect of the development phase has been to seek funding for the implementation phase. This has been secured via the Church Commissioners, who have made an initial 4-year commitment to the project.

Summary of findings

The 404 responses to the questionnaire produced some striking findings. By far and away the biggest factors affecting wellbeing were 'not having enough time and work pressure' and 'being over busy'. These two categories have significant overlap, showing an enduring culture of busyness, and how wider cultural and technological changes have penetrated into people's lives. Other notable pressures concerned families, including caring responsibilities and health concerns, and also the wider institutional challenges facing the Church of England.

When asked how much time people had to look after themselves in the course of a day, 56% of respondents said they had less than one hour a day, with 10% having no time at all. More than one in four respondents said they do not access any support at all, including from friends.

There are many other findings which, when interpreted, will help with programme development.

Proposed role for Cascade

Alongside the diocesan workstream of 'creating safe and healthy cultures' – which aims to address some of the more structural issues that lead to pressures on the wellbeing of church leaders and head teachers – Cascade has identified the following areas where it feels it can add genuine value:

- Workshops: to provide a series of workshops, delivered centrally or locally focusing on wellbeing resources and education.
- Day conferences on wellbeing with keynote speakers
- Access to mental health support (there is a counselling service provided through the Diocese)
- Group work (peer support groups, group mentoring, group therapy, etc)
- One-to-one support (eg individual pastoral supervision; therapeutic coaching, etc)
- Wellbeing tools/resources
- A digital wellbeing hub, providing access to supportive materials, tools, organised events, peer groups, and signposting to specialised/professional services.
- A focus on contemplation and prayer, drawing on the setting alongside the abbey, developing the acknowledged links between contemplative practice and wellbeing

The implementation phase of Cascade will turn these proposals into a workable and deliverable scheme.