Briefing Document on Class in Theological Education

Sharon Jagger (York St John University: s.jagger@yorksj.ac.uk
Becky Tyndall (Durham University): rebecca.j.tyndall@durham.ac.uk
Alex Fry (Bournemouth University): afry@bournemouth.ac.uk

Introduction

As part of wider Living Ministry longitudinal research into clergy wellbeing, the Church of England's Ministry Development Team commissioned a satellite project into the wellbeing of working-class clergy in October 2022. The researchers were Dr Sharon Jagger (York St. John University), Dr Alex Fry (Bournemouth University), and Becky Tyndall (Durham University). Following interviews with 50 working-class clergy and 4 working groups, the report *Let Justice Roll Down Like Waters* was published in October 2023 and is available here: https://www.churchofengland.org/sites/default/files/2023-10/focussed-study-4-working-class-clergy-wellbeing.pdf.

Participants ranged from new curates to senior clergy and those with chaplaincy and diocesan roles, including stipendiary and non-stipendiary ministers. There were near-even numbers of women (26) and men (24) participating. The cohort was exclusively white, with no participants with Global Majority Heritage (GMH). This is a limitation of this research, and it should be borne in mind that the full report and this briefing document are derived from the experiences of white working-class clergy only. Selina Stone's report into the wellbeing of GMH clergy *If it Wasn't for God* is available at https://www.churchofengland.org/sites/default/files/2022-10/focussed-study-3-gmh-clergy-wellbeing.pdf

In-depth research into theological education was beyond the original scope of the working-class clergy wellbeing project. However, we found participants regularly recounted experiences of their theological education in their interviews which impacted their sense of

wellbeing and belonging throughout their vocational journeys. This echoed Selina Stone's experiences researching GMH clergy wellbeing. She stated in her report that 'it was common for people in answering questions about their wellbeing as clergy to refer to patterns, experiences or problems which started before ordination.'[1]

To honour the stories shared with us and to reflect the importance many participants gave to theological education, we have prepared this document to add further detail and nuance to the analysis which was presented in the report on pages 20-23 under the heading 'Educational and Training Issues'. This briefing document was not itself part of the work commissioned by the Ministry Development Team, but we hope that, by highlighting the stories shared with us about classed experiences in the context of initial training, it will support work already being done to create diversity and social justice in theological education, where working-class ordinands can flourish without having to negotiate class-based barriers to belonging.

Theological Education Institutions (TEIs) can play a significant role in addressing class-based marginalisation in the Church. Strategies can include ensuring staff represent a variety of different social backgrounds, and refreshing reading and resources to include more diverse authors and scholars. We include at the end of the discussion some discussion questions designed to support thinking about policy and practice in TEIs. Equally, much of this work begins with awareness-raising of what might be hidden class barriers.

We reiterate our message from the main report: we orientate our discussion towards the structural, the systemic, and the cultural milieu of the Church and training establishments. We do not suggest that people from working-class backgrounds ameliorate their own non-belonging by enforced adaptation. However, we also uphold individual agency to enjoy and benefit from the expanding of cultural tastes and practices as part of a person's time at a TEI. Most importantly, many participants warned against assumptions that those without experience of higher education require non-academic learning environments. Whilst there are practical considerations regarding learning studying skills, resources and time, many participants enjoyed and thrived in the academic environment.

[1] Selina Stone, *If it Wasn't for God*, p. 14.

We focused on wellbeing, though some of the stories spilled over into statements about mental health.[2] These stories are not always exclusively to do with class backgrounds, though sometimes they are deeply connected because of the stress and strain of the additional emotional and social labour required to 'fit in'. Where we talk about provision to enhance and support good mental health and wellbeing, we are not suggesting ways of supporting people to fit into a dominant culture and develop extra resilience to mitigate systemic class bias. However, there may be ways in which TEIs can provide different types of support for people from a variety of backgrounds.

We open with one of the most fundamental issues raised in our research; the feeling of not belonging. As one of our participants, Rosalie[3], stated:

> It shouldn't be for the working-class candidates to have to try and ram themselves into the right shape to get through the experience, but rather the Church seeing what they bring, the gift. And I think there's more that can be done around that. It makes such a difference if you are met with understanding and acceptance. And it is that business of, do we value this person for who they are and what they bring, or do we try and ram them into a mould that fits our predetermined categories and ideas about how this should be?

Culture and Belonging

Our participants spoke of a pervasive middle- and upper-class culture in the Church of England. They sometimes experience this culture as alienating, taking a toll on their wellbeing, partly because of the extra energy and effort required to 'fit in'. Many participants recounted the exhaustion of having to navigate an unfamiliar classed environment and

[2] In the report we defined wellbeing as a broad equilibrium between challenging life events and our ability to draw on a resource pool to deal with them (see Dodge, R., A. P. Daly, J. Huyton and L. D. Sanders, 'The Challenge of Defining Wellbeing', *International Journal of Wellbeing* 2.3 (2012), pp. 222–35). This would be distinct from mental health, something that is often diagnosed by a medical professional. However, we acknowledge in lived experience the two cannot be neatly differentiated.

[3] Participants have been anonymised and will be referred to using pseudonyms.

dealing with microaggressions and explicit prejudice.[4] Many participants illustrated this sense of not belonging with examples from their time in theological education. For some participants, particularly those in residential training, this was the time they felt most culturally alienated and 'feeling like a fish out of water'. As Beth said, 'I've never been so much aware of class as when I was training.' In his interview, Jamie recounted, 'I would say the most sort of culture shock distinction, if you like, between my class background and the Church was definitely at college.' He pointed to differences in his background which were reinforced daily:

> The whole sort of social skills of sitting and eating in groups – you know, I'm not saying I couldn't do it – but actually I suppose I realized how hard it was and taxing it was on me because I wasn't used to that world ... like anyone going to theological college, you're looking for an amazing kind of time of fellowship, you're meeting with other people who are, you know, at a similar stage in life to you, who are embarking on this incredible new vocation. And I found that I just didn't have points of connection with people… Just a sense of feeling like I was an outsider.

Another participant, Amelia, felt uncomfortable at theological college from the moment she arrived:

> I remember driving up and it was all shut off from life, behind a hedge. And you're driving into the car park that looks over the tennis court. And then you walk over the croquet lawn to go into the [college] and I was just like, I sat in the car park and cried because I was just like, why? Why are you doing this God? Why would you call me and then bring me to this awful place which is so removed from life? ... And it was a very difficult time.

Amelia was not the only participant to describe symbols of elitism such as croquet and the disorientation that these things created at theological college. Other participants described

[4] For those unfamiliar with the term 'microaggression' the university of Edinburgh has this explanatory resource: https://equality-diversity.ed.ac.uk/students/microaggressions/what-are-microaggressions.

black tie formals, cocktail dresses, canapés, cheese and wine, gin, rugby, punting, supper, and dinner parties which they felt were assumed to be 'natural' points of social connection at theological college, but for them were entirely unfamiliar and isolating. Jason recounted a formal meal early in his time at his TEI:

> I remember sitting there whilst a guy in a tweed jacket talked about punting, and daddy was a surgeon and he loved punting, and he punted here, and he punted there. And he was from Cambridge, and he always went punting and he turned to me and he said, 'what about you? Are you a good punter?' And I was like, 'my dad was a miner, mate. Answer your own question!'

Rosalie recalled a similar experience, from a different TEI, that felt 'totally alien':

> From the, how many knives and forks do you need at one place setting and what are all those glasses for? To the ability to make conversation with academics that you've never met and feel that you have anything interesting to say. A sort of confidence thing that I think gets inbred if you go to a public school from the word go.

Pastimes such as croquet and punting, perceived as elite, are likely to be alienating to working-class ordinands. However, multiple participants mentioned more everyday elements of the pervasive upper-middle-class culture at theological college, requiring constant negotiation by working-class ordinands. For example, Eve described the etiquette around alcohol at college as 'a whole world to navigate'. She remembers being expected to 'bring a bottle of wine' for a social event and having to learn about gin when 'none of my friends from home drink gin'. Karl reflected similarly:

> You'd go to events and there'd be wine on the table. Now, that's probably the first time I saw wine, or had wine available, you know, because you drank Fosters or Carlsberg, where I came from… And then suddenly I was thrust in, what do I do with this? It was kind of, it was horrible. But then after a while I learned yeah, it was alright. So, drinking red wine, eating cheeses and different cheeses, French cheeses. Yeah, it was one of the

> things. But there was no understanding or even acknowledgement that we didn't know how to act in this situation or how to dress or what conversation…

When the work of translating, adapting and masking is one-sided and unacknowledged this means working-class students carry an unfair load at theological college. Furthermore, the social aspect of a TEI is considered a significant element of ordinands' formation, meaning working-class students feel additional pressure to adapt to unfamiliar social norms. Karl remembered this 'pressure' despite having completed theological training many years before:

> You'd invite people round for 'tea' or what they would call dinner, and then it was like what am I expected…? Do I have to do a starter? You know, I mean, normally I'd be doing Findus crispy pancakes and chips or what? But what do I do? But then it was one of things that, there was a pressure to conform, I think because you wanted to not seem out of place and you wanted to honour the other person almost. And ultimately, I found that people didn't care and they just wanted to be with you in the social aspect. But there was that pressure.

Karl's description underlines the anxiety around belonging or 'seem[ing] out of place' and how cultural expression can play a significant role in this. These stories suggest that white middle-class culture and language is often taken as the unspoken norm in TEIs, which can diminish and invalidate the experiences of those from different backgrounds. These unexamined power dynamics prevent working-class ordinands from feeling they contribute equally to shaping the college community. Jamie suggested that not only should 'pastoral tutors [be] briefed to help working-class ordinands integrate well and be free to bring themselves to the college culture', but there should also be 'an expectation that that culture will change as a result of working-class people being there.' We argue the latter suggestion is key and that raising awareness of the discomfort felt by those from working-class backgrounds will lead to a change of culture rather than a requirement for individuals to change who they are.

Our participants highlighted differences in accent and dress as further instances where they felt othered in theological education. Those with regional accents were made to feel self-conscious. Eve remembered this from her time in training:

> One of the things that came up in training when I was leading morning prayer there, my accent comes out more when I'm reading. I don't know why. And I led morning prayer and people laughed. I still remember people laughing at this, you know, and it wasn't markedly different. It just comes out more when I read it and I remember just looking around the room and what you all laughing at? You know? Because I'm not conscious of that. It's not a deliberate kind of 'right, act Geordie now'. But yeah, and just thinking, I need to watch this when I do this, you know?

In her interview Beth recounted the anger she had felt when her accent was highlighted at college:

> I got really kind of 'I will not have my accent mocked.' 'Cause I've had my accent good naturedly mocked like my entire life. You know, I left the North to go to uni and I've always lived in different cities and I've lived in the Northwest a long time so my accent's been out of place my entire life. But I just decided I will not be mocked for my accent in my own birthplace. But it was different to them. Because this was a higher education bubble of people from, you know, very different areas and classes and backgrounds. I was very different.

Barbara had a broadly positive experience in theological college, but also remembered challenges around her accent:

> I loved training. I'm not gonna say I didn't… I absolutely loved it, and I threw myself into it wholeheartedly and enjoyed every minute of it. And there were challenges ... there was a few of us with northern accents and that became a bit of a butt of jokes from others and about the northern accents ... sarky comments around 'oh well, you know people in the

> Northeast only know anything about football.' That became a bit of a running joke

Comments about Barbara's accent did not only come from fellow students, but were also made by teaching staff:

> When we were doing preaching training there was a few times I was pulled up on pronunciation and accent, and I haven't got a pretty strong accent, but I was pulled up. Not just me, there were others from other, you know, there was a lad from Birmingham and there was a lad from Liverpool, you know? So, it wasn't just me

These experiences reveal fundamental class dynamics that are entwined in an institution's culture, shaping a person's sense of self in the long term. Classed differences in language, accent, and dress are part of a person's identity and subjectivity, which are undermined when class distinctions are reproduced. Hazel reflected that she was made to feel uncomfortable about the way she dressed at theological college as a working-class woman:

> I was often inappropriate without realizing, and they would always talk about my clothes. They would always talk about what I was wearing. And I'm not ridiculous, you know I'm aware of who I am and what I look like, but I don't see why I need to be mummy-fied. I'm not a nun! And I'm married and I've got children and I'm not chatting up my fellow classmates – I'm not interested in you in that way. But I think there must have, there must have been something about me and I think it was, no one could define it, but I think in part it is that working classness. And I was the only one, I think. I think partly it was that that meant people didn't quite know how to hold me because I wasn't, I didn't behave like everybody else.

Hazel's experiences highlight the intersecting identities at play in ordinands' experiences in theological college. Hazel was acutely aware that her experiences were gendered, but over the course of her ministry she has come to realise that they are both classed and gendered; she felt othered and undermined at college as a *working-class* woman, not just as a woman. Such an intersectional perspective complicates the understanding of what might be helpful

for ‘working-class ordinands’ in theological education as ‘working-class’ is far from a homogenous category.

Material Challenges

We highlight in this report the *structural* ways class differences are reproduced. For example, when participants detailed their challenging experiences navigating theological college, they often underlined a lack of support and understanding of social class within the TEI structures themselves.

Participants accepted that theological college was a time for reflection, change, and growth, where their identity and self-understanding would be expanded. However, some regretted that there was little acknowledgement of the additional cultural barriers they faced, and that space was rarely made for them to explore and discuss these challenges. For Karl, class was ‘the elephant in the room’ and ‘it was something I was extremely conscious of but didn't know who to talk to about it. It wasn't addressed anywhere; it was almost like it was ignored’. Participants specifically noted that they would have valued pastoral staff and personal tutors having more awareness of classed-based challenges experienced by students from working-class backgrounds. Dylan felt this was an issue both in theological college and throughout the discernment and training process:

> If there was some recognition somehow, of the unique types of struggles that working-class people might have, I think, particularly in the discernment, training and deployment and curacy process, that would be good for DDOs and training incumbents to just have some sense of, these might be the sorts of things that this person might struggle with, talk to them about it, you know, ask them about it. Because a lot of people I've spoken to just haven't got a clue.

Our participants mentioned both practical and emotional challenges during training that were not handled with sufficient class-based awareness. Beth’s experience around housing at theological college exemplified the practical challenges. As a single ordinand at residential theological college, she was placed in a hall of residence. The accommodation policy was

built around the assumption students would have alternative accommodation outside term times, which Beth did not have. She joked about the fictional ideal middle-class ordinand, whom she had named Toby:

> You know, he has another place to go in the holidays. He probably has some possessions stored elsewhere. He doesn't have to bring all of his clothes and store it in that room. He probably doesn't have the need for privacy that I had… probably doesn't bother Toby because he went to a private school, you know, he probably went to boarding school. It's all probably fine, but the notion that I was homeless and the accommodation that they've given me wasn't a home was really, really difficult while I was training.

Whilst Beth was able to laugh about 'Toby' she had found her time at residential theological college a strain. She was angry about the assumptions made about her financial and housing situation as a single ordinand. These assumptions were not only about her material situation but also about the emotional impact these erroneous assumptions had on her. She acknowledged that her accommodation was the only option available for the TEI, however, she lamented the lack of institutional understanding around the issue. For some ordinands, there may be past experiences of housing instability or financial precarity. Beth's story highlights the need for TEIs to develop policies that take in the variety of backgrounds and situations of ordinands, with a view to addressing the material issues that are sometimes overlooked. Whilst financial provision and grants for ordinands are managed by their sending dioceses, TEIs may still play a role in advocating for fair material provision for their ordinands, raising issues when they arise and being alert to the different material circumstances of their ordinands on entering theological training.

The challenge of 'social mobility' and pastoral support

Many of our participants expressed a feeling of disorientation when considering the possibility of 'social mobility'. This phrase was often used to capture the adjustment to a different environment, the expansion of tastes and interests, and the exposure to cultural experiences not usually associated with a working-class background. For some, there was

pleasure in expanding into a different cultural milieu, but some participants expressed a struggle around how to identify. Feelings of guilt or betrayal of their roots were not uncommon – Karl, for example, described himself as a 'working-class man masquerading in a middle-class lifestyle'. For some, as ordinands this conflict was challenging. Jason struggled to resolve the potential of a new way to identify at theological college and ended up having to deal with a mental health crisis:

> A lot of it was due to my own self-image and existentialism. Had an existential crisis… Asking a working-class kid to ask big, deep questions about who they are as a person… And so you need a lot of support, which – I mean, it's a totally different place now, totally different staff and everything – but at the time I didn't get the support that I needed

Support that is based on awareness of the impact of the dominance of middle-class culture on those who do not share this background is key in Jason's story, strengthening the argument for awareness-raising about social class amongst staff, particularly pastoral tutors.

The notion that entering the priesthood means a person is considered middle-class (according to the Office for National Statistics clergy are in the second highest occupational band) is not without problems, since the labelling erases a working-class person's background and culture. Our participants also challenged the cultural myth that upward 'social mobility' is an uncomplicatedly positive experience (perhaps given that it is a one-way trajectory creating a cultural hierarchy). We suggest that space is required for the ambivalence and loss which can be experienced by working-class ordinands as they make their journey towards priesthood in the Church of England.

There could be a very positive role for theological colleges in making provision for the development of peer networks where these challenges can be discussed amongst those with shared experiences. It is notable in our research that the ordinands who struggled most with the classed differences at theological college felt isolated. Jamie was visibly unsettled during his interview when he reflected on his time in training:

> When I was at college, I mean, you know, it was a, it was a nightmare. I was not well, mentally. I had to have counselling. I mean, it wasn't

> specifically just because of that, but it was the, I think it was the culture shock that sort of cued that off. And yeah, it left me with a sort of bitter taste in my mouth really, the college experience and, you know as I said to you, it should have been, I was expecting it – probably naively – to be a really amazing experience, college. But really within a couple of weeks, I'd already set myself an Excel spreadsheet up with the countdown for how long I had left.

Amelia also found residential theological college a strain on her wellbeing:

> I just found it very, very difficult and super middle-class place to be and the tutor, even the principal of the college at the time, in fact, even wrote a letter to my DDO that she copied me into without my permission at the time saying that she thought I was depressed. I was showing symptoms of depression. And I was like, 'how dare you!' I went to see her, made an appointment. And I was like, 'how dare you say that? For a start, the minute I leave this place, miraculously my depression is healed.' It was just a horrendous place to be in the college; I hated everything about it. And I just missed real life, you know, and normal people. And the minute I was away or had a weekend away or was on holiday or it was the weekend, I was completely happy again. As long as I didn't have to be in the college... So, I escaped [college] anyway and I had to train then part-time over two years.

This participant is clear that not belonging in a middle-class environment caused significant discomfort. This was compounded by that discomfort being misread as an individualised mental health issue. The most important lesson from our research is that participants reject the individualised project of building personal resilience to absorb or manage systemic othering and inequality. Our commitment is, therefore, to orient the narrative towards structures, systems, and policies that require changing, rather than emphasising forms of individualised pastoral care. Whilst there are times when pastoral support is appropriate, in the case of othering, non-belonging, or discriminatory environments and practices, we want to place the focus on the systemic and institutional.

The Classroom

Several participants noted alienating experiences in the classroom. These experiences can be grouped into three areas: use of classist stereotypes, absence of materials that relate to issues around social class, and for some participants, a lack of familiarity with academic language and processes.

Stories were told to us, often with humour, about when an assumed 'we' in the classroom did not relate to the experiences of our working-class participants. Mission, social action, and money were highlighted as topics where lack of class awareness was particularly problematic and where stereotypes emerged. Whilst social activism in theology and practice is supported by our participants, they troubled the use of stereotypes which can be condescending and paternalistic. Several participants remembered times when prejudiced representations of working-class people and communities were employed during training. Barbara recalled an experience with a visiting speaker:

> There was one lecturer they got in, he came to talk about social action and then basically stood there and told everybody that the Northeast was a rubbish place to live and was basically full of people who were working-class and didn't know how to behave and didn't know how to work. I mean, it was appalling!

The discourse around 'the poor' is often othering and in both the Church and the classroom setting. These abstract discussions were critiqued by our participants. In one discussion, Karl stated:

> When we were at theological college and they were talking about 'The Poor', well that was my family they were talking about! And that was the thing. When they were referred to as 'The Poor' – and I consider myself working class, not poor – but the way that they were talking about 'The Poor', you know, people have to go out and work and they don't go on holidays and they don't have a car and so on

Language highlighted in our research included ‘The Poor’ and ‘indigenous leaders’ or ‘indigenous communities’. When we see this language through the lens of internal colonialism, it reveals how stereotypes are reproduced and given a place in social hierarchy, elevating middle-class tastes and values and devaluing or even eradicating working-class culture. It would be helpful for colleges to be particularly alert to these phrases in the classroom and interrogate the underpinning assumptions, encouraging students to reflect on the language used to talk about sections of society.

Participants reflected that just as harmful as the presence of stereotypes was a lack of discussion, teaching and awareness around social class. Dylan, for example, regretted that whilst doing a diploma at a TEI, even when some effort was made to consider more diverse scholars, social class was a missing perspective:

> Where is the opportunity to talk about class struggle given the fact that the Bible has so much to say about the poor and the labourers and the rich and labour exploitation and etc etc? That changed over time, and we had conversations and they started to bring a bit of that in, but it was very clear that not many people had really thought about that in the discussions we'd have. It was quite hard to find good reading material that was relevant to the UK context. You know, you got the Latin American liberation stuff, but that's a very, very, very different context to the UK. So yeah, I found it challenging... I did a year to turn my diploma into a degree at a different common awards college. That college I found absolute hell…. It was very much lecturer at the front… shut up and listen, you know, do the essay we say you should do. Don’t ask difficult questions. And I’d wanna start bringing in some of my kind of class critique into my essays and that was really not welcomed at all. So that then massively knocked my confidence in my academic abilities… everything about that environment said ‘you do not belong here’

As the Common Awards team work to diversify the curriculum, social class should be on the agenda. Hearing and learning from those with lived experience is also part of the conversation about widening participation. Beth remembered how her college ‘held a

mission to those in Poverty week, and we never heard from a person in poverty.' Jamie similarly struggled with social class being unacknowledged in his TEI:

> The main thing was when I was with lots of other people in in the college setting where, you know, class wasn't really acknowledged and wasn't, you know, there was no kind of cultural – what's the word? Uh, kind of allowances made for that. It was just assumed that everybody would understand and would go along with the things. We had a week at college on diversity and class didn't come up.

Jamie found his alienating experiences at college so painful because they were intimately tied to his understanding of his faith and vocation:

> I think it's about justice, you know, it's a justice question for me and which obviously is wholly tied up in my faith. You know, so my belief that in Christ, we have someone who brings, you know, a levelling. You know, when we come and receive communion or share communion we are, we are one. There's no distinction, no difference between us, Paul talks about that in his letters; there's no Jew or Greek, slave or free. All one in Christ. So, you know, I find it really difficult then that the institution that employs me is so you know, monocultural in many ways. And I think it's a tension within me, I suppose

These comments suggest a desire to think theologically about lived experience and to bring the whole of a person's identity into the classroom as part of formational theological education. Our participants' experiences often highlighted a lack of awareness of the different class perspectives represented in the classroom and their value.

Academic Assumptions

Participants told us how much they valued the opportunity for academic study, and many excelled academically in their training. However, some critiqued the academic credentialism they saw as privileged in the Church of England. On the one hand, some participants discussed ways academic elitism and credentialism are barriers to those who had left school

to go straight into work. But on the other hand, there was a strong challenge from participants to any suggestion that those who had not experienced higher education could not learn and study at a high level. Some participants expressed frustration over the simplistic discourse around class and academic ability. As one discussion group participant wryly commented:

> When you talk about the nature of theological training and how academic it's gonna be and stuff like that, there's almost a smack of kind of like, widening the goal posts for working-class people as if we actually can't be academic … Honestly, without the word of a lie, I've had genuine surprise from people when they find out that I've got a degree in theology and it's a first.

Other participants told similar stories about being faced with assumptions that they were not 'academic', or not 'intellectually curious', which was felt to be because of their backgrounds or how they spoke. At the same time, some participants also highlighted that academia should not be narrowly conceived and that a scholarly intellect can be expressed in a variety of ways and contexts.

The key point made by our participants was that lack of familiarity with academia should not be taken as a measure of intellectual ability. Multiple participants highlighted that their childhood experience of education had differed from the middle-class norm. This difference in background became emphasised when entering theological training, where assumptions and presumptions were made. For Karl, these assumptions largely came from peers:

> People couldn't understand that I hadn't been to university. Or that when I did go university, I was the first person in my family, as long as I can remember, that ever went. Even though I got in through the side door, through the Church of England, it was like, they couldn't understand they were like, 'you didn't go university? What did you do?!' …. Academia is a huge thing that we haven't all accessed, and it doesn't mean you're thick, just because you don't have the qualifications to show how intelligent you are.

Educational trajectories are varied and can be class-related; barriers to higher education can be economic, cultural, the influence of family expectations, lack of knowledge, and dampened aspirations because of the experience of the education system. In short, our participants emphasised that the absence of previous academic achievement does not reflect ability to flourish in an academic environment. Those from working-class backgrounds may have followed trajectories into other types of work, and participants stressed this experience should also be valued.

Those with non-academic backgrounds told us how they flourished once they had the chance to access higher education in their training. Gail discussed the hidden aspects of her story which she felt were not considered by her TEI:

> I think there is something about education being, not making assumptions, but also recognizing the challenges – when I was growing up, I've got really rubbish GCSEs. But actually, looking back, I beat myself up over that for a really long time because I thought I was never gonna get anywhere. But my family didn't believe in education. I had to take it, to do the night lambing and go and do [my schoolwork] in a shed somewhere. So actually, my B C D and loads of Es were actually quite impressive really, but it took me a really long time to realize that ... I went off and got a First in Theology and now have a Masters … I suppose that's what I was saying about the theology around this, are we really about releasing potential in people?

Gail came from a rural working-class family who expected her to prioritise helping on the farm over her schoolwork. Like many of our participants, she had to juggle competing demands alongside schoolwork from a young age which shaped her relationship with education. Barbara also discussed the values in her upbringing which formed her relationship with academia:

> There is something about working classness there, that sense of being on the ground, not, I don’t mean not getting above yourself, but valuing education and learning yes, but not being an academic.

Barbara's distinction between academia and learning was echoed by a number of other participants who stressed the difference between the prestige and classed milieu of academia and the importance of learning.

In her interview Eve described her upbringing thus:

> We read pretty well as a family growing up and certainly like my friends still read, they're not, well, I think the image of working-class people being thick is vastly wrong. They're often much more well-rounded in their knowledge than lots of other people I work with. But I don't remember a bookcase full of books in anyone's sitting room. At all. I cannot think of anyone who has a bookcase full of books…

Dylan's family had similarly been voracious readers, self-taught, but with a suspicion of the formalised world of (middle-class) education:

> I've been brought up with a love of reading. So, my mum was a bit more sort of like an old school, left-leaning, educate yourselves kind of person… So, for me, I've never had this sense that being working-class means that you're stupid or that you don't have any ideas. However, I have, I did have a very strong resentment of formal education because I felt it was something that had failed me and that I didn't identify with….It was feeling like education felt like a straitjacket and it felt like I was being done to by people and they very, it was very easy to associate those people with the Them, the 'Them' that my nan and my dad and my granddad talked about. And this real resentment of 'Them' as a sort of establishment that don't understand people like us.

Theological colleges can be at the vanguard of changing the classed power dynamics described above, particularly as they receive people who have had jobs and careers unrelated to formal academic training. This will involve challenging unconscious bias and assumptions about the academic abilities of ordinands from working-class backgrounds. Working-class ordinands who feel like academic outsiders are well placed to help TEIs reflect on how to create an environment in which those without academic backgrounds can flourish

as well as those with academic experience. Gail summarised the thoughts expressed in one of the discussion groups we held as part of the research: 'is theological training something that is an academic pursuit or is theological training something that we live and breathe and is it praxis or is it just, is it just a dream?' This comment challenges the aims of the academic training undertaken by ordinands and highlights how abstract intellectualism should be accompanied by praxis, rather than be a privileged form of training for ministry.

Some participants told us that one way people are alienated when they enter higher education for the first time is the lack of familiarity with the language and mores of academia. Some noted that there was often a broad awareness that academia can be intimidating at first, this was not always reflected in the experience of our participants. For example, Ellie's assessment was that colleges still have a long way to go to become more accessible:

> When you go at the beginning they say to you, oh well we know we've all got different learning styles and we know there are people here who aren't used to writing essays and then once you start it's just like, it's just writing essays! I'm thinking, you know we used to sometimes do like reflections and talks and then we've had to go home and write an essay on it! It was just, if you weren't comfortable with writing and language that would be difficult.

Ellie's comments reflect a steep learning curve for people who are not used to an academic style of writing and that although there is often talk about different ways of engaging with ideas and resources, academic institutions lean heavily on formal essays as the main intellectual activity.[5] These thoughts were echoed by Jade:

> Some people really struggle with the academic side of things and at the moment – I know that they're supposed to be changing it but at the moment if you don't do the essays there's not much support there, you

[5] For the full range of assessment types that can currently be offered under the Common Awards scheme, see https://www.durham.ac.uk/departments/academic/common-awards/policies-processes/assessment/marking-assessment-types/.

> have to get on with it. I can do it, you know, I had to work damn hard but I did it. I'm still studying now. But it doesn't come easy.

In her description of theological education Jade stressed how overwhelming it could be even for those with some previous academic experience:

> It felt like being in a foreign environment because even though I got an accidental degree and did a PGCE and went on to become a teacher, and then assistant head teacher, I hadn't been in that university environment and studied at that level. And also, not coming from a, not done any theological training or education, just felt like I'd entered another world with a different language, and I didn't understand it … everybody else seemed to, but I didn't, I was out of my depth, you know. And I remember the first lesson in doctrine, and I didn't understand a word of it. And I thought well I have a choice here, whether to say I don't understand and feel stupid, or whether just to carry on and look it up later. I just had to say, 'I don't really understand'. So, they'd pitched it at a level that maybe the majority of the group was at, they'd had Reader training or they'd been to university or an interest in theology, I was completely sort of new to it all.

Hazel was also new to the academic environment which meant the language used at college was initially inaccessible to her. Her story is worth quoting at length:

> I went to theological college on the very first day. And my tutor … led this introduction thing. And he said, 'Undergrads meet in [room] 1, Postgrads, can you make your way to [room] 3?' And I sat there and sat there and kind of looked around me and everyone else seemed to understand what that meant. And they all got up and moved. And I had to go and say to [him], 'I don't know what I am.' And he said, 'what do you mean you don't know what you are?' And I said, 'I don't know what I am. I don't know what that means. What you just said.' So, like massively on the back foot, I don't know what you just said to me. It's like another language. Was that Greek? Have we started Greek already? I don't know if I'm postgrad or

> undergrad. Well. And it took him ages to be able to find the right question to ask me to get the answer. Which was eventually, have you been to university? Because it didn't occur to him that there might be someone in the room who had never been to university and I was doing a degree as well because I was, I was 30… You know, it didn't compute for him that there was someone in the room who hadn't already got a degree. Uh, so that was my starting point. I was a massively on the back foot.

Our participants mainly reflected on their own experiences during theological education, in some cases having recently completed this training. But they also observed the experiences of others they were supporting. For example, Beth shared her ongoing experiences of supporting a contextual ordinand in her area. She reflected that this ordinand needed much more academic support than they were receiving in the TEI:

> Last week I taught her how to use the cut and paste function. She's been there since September. You know that they're coming in expecting a level of education that this woman has not had. And is finding it incredibly difficult to access. Like I've spent hours of tutoring. And what happens to those ordinands that don't have a curate with the time, the inclination and the skills to help? Like I think working-class ordinands are drowning… I felt like a fish out of water, but I was able to swim in the sea because I'd been to college and I had a BA. But like so many of my contemporaries were drowning because they didn't have the skills, like the academic skills to cope in the environment and the support was not there.

These comments highlight the need for institutions to be vigilant of the assumptions made that permeate their processes and seek opportunities to be proactive in ensuring that even those who lack confidence to ask for help are adequately supported.

Hazel also described the importance of flexibility and understanding for working-class ordinands studying part-time, where thought has to go into practical arrangements such as travel, timings, expenses and extensions (and we would add

there are further pressures for those with caring responsibilities). In a recent conversation with a middle-class colleague, Hazel had been frustrated by the lack of willingness to move beyond surface level inclusion when there are multiple levels of disadvantage for some ordinands. She stated, 'I wanted him to understand that there was room for people like me, but we had to create the space for there to be room for people like me.'

Some of the points mentioned above are connected to the widening participation agenda across higher education as a sector. Some of the connecting points are; improving access for those students who need to work or who have caring responsibilities; ensuring there is support for those catching up with study skills; ensuring processes are not based on assumptions of knowledge, wealth, and access to resources.

Power and Vulnerability

Throughout our research, the power embedded in structures and culture was a prominent theme. Participants noted that the nature of theological training as a time of both formation and assessment created a power imbalance which made them feel particularly vulnerable. Although colleges sometimes offer additional help to those who require it, participants suggested that consideration needs to be given to the systemic barriers preventing ordinands asking for such help (such as stigma attached to non-academic backgrounds, the discomfort involved in asking questions in public, the methods of signposting and messaging, the non-normalising of asking for support etc.). Furthermore, students may be unlikely to raise complaints about alienating environments or classist interactions for fear of being seen as difficult or disruptive, disguising many of the issues we have discussed above. Beth discussed the power dynamics at play in her struggles at residential college and raises the important point of needing to be seen as 'worthy' and not disruptive or overly challenging:

> There's a big pressure on ordinands to be worthy of that call, you know, to pass, to be recommended by your training institution. So, everything that

> kind of makes you feel a little bit out of kilter, it's like, it's not seen as their problem, it's seen as my problem.

Connor had internalised the pressures of selection to such an extent that he struggled to ask for the accommodations he needed:

> I mean the one thing I found somewhat intimidating, certainly in ordination training, and the sermons and selection was that you are expected to have all this together. You know, you are expected to be this somewhat perfect package and I struggled with that. I struggled with asking for help, asking for more. You know, asking for resources, for time...

Eve's comments echoed those of Connor and Beth:

> You're so vulnerable in that process that you are, you're so scared of being that that person who asks for more or needs more help. So, I think there's a particular issue there regardless of what the help is, whether that's an education need or something to do with class or gender or culture, you're still worried about trying to fit in that process.

These pressures can discourage working-class ordinands from discussing their challenges at theological colleges and critiquing their TEIs. The barriers preventing access to resources and support can be hidden and revolve around the fundamental issue of belonging and feeling comfortable enough to ask for help, or to challenge classed perceptions and stereotypes.

Conclusion

We hope that these stories of working-class clergy experiences of training and studying will be useful in supporting the work of TEIs in deconstructing classed environments and making theological scholarship an arena for working-class voices. Discussions around the topics we have presented need to be approached with nuance, acknowledging that working-class ordinands are not a homogenous group. We provide below some discussion questions drawn from the themes raised by our participants. We are available to for further conversations about our research; please feel free to contact us.

Summary of talking points:

1. How can TEIs examine how their culture is constructed and ensure a more expansive and inclusive approach to activities and socialising?

2. How can TEIs work to eradicate class-based stereotyping and prejudice?

3. In what ways can TEIs challenge negative attitudes to ways of speaking and presenting and promote the valuing of diversity of cultures?

4. Our participants have experienced assumptions about intellectual ability because of their backgrounds. How can TEIs avoid and deconstruct these assumptions about how intellect is honed and expressed? How can TEIs build a learning environment that does not privilege some educational backgrounds over others?

5. How can TEIs ensure access to their courses is suitable for a wide range of people?

6. How can TEIs ensure those who have not experienced higher education previously are able to develop study skills that might be taken for granted by tutors and other students?

7. How can TEIs ensure their programmes are accessible and sustainable for those who need to continue to earn money whilst studying?

8. How do policies and procedures of TEIs reproduce inequalities for working-class ordinands and how might this be addressed?

9. What changes need to be made to ensure the material requirements of working-class ordinands are met?

10. How can TEIs ensure the institutional environment supports the wellbeing of all students, regardless of social class?

11. How can TEIs ensure that different social classes are well-represented in reading lists, in teaching staff, and in guest speakers invited to contribute to the educational programme?

12. How can TEIs build a classroom environment that encourages critique of language, imagery, and assumptions that lead to class stereotypes?

13. How can TEIs ensure that there is scholarly discussion about class and theology?

14. How can TEIs approach pastoral support to ensure the structural and systemic are scrutinised as part of an ongoing assessment of the institutional environment?

15. How can TEIs ensure issues can be raised safely without fear of a complainant being seen as disruptive or problematic? How can TEIs identify systemic class barriers and how can asking for help and support be normalised, not public, and without stigma?