The Deployment of Self-Supporting Ordained Ministers

Discussion Document produced by:
The National Network of SSM Officers and Advisers
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A Discussion Document

Background

2020-2021 has seen unprecedented pressures on the Church of England. Covid-19 has had a huge impact, not least on church finances. This has accelerated reviews which were already taking place into ministerial provision. Longer-term issues include a reduction in stipendiary clergy, and the ‘cliff edge’ now being experienced of clergy reaching retirement age.

Dioceses are giving urgent consideration to clergy allocation and deployment, taking account of:

- Resourcing ministry to enable mission, growth, and evangelism.
- Reviewing and advancing good practice in how ministerial resources and individual gifts are used.
- Rethinking, modestly or fundamentally, the way lay and ordained ministers are attracted, selected, trained and deployed.
- Focusing on mission strategy rather than simply ‘plugging gaps’.

Some of this thinking will involve Self Supporting Ministers (licensed clergy not including PTOs). SSMs play an important part in the life of the church and their ministry often also extends into other contexts, including places of work. In 2019 there were 2,870 SSMs in post (27.15% of licensed clergy). The majority work alongside stipendiary clergy (including curates in training posts).

How SSMs are currently allocated

- To date, SSMs have almost universally been allocated to a local parochial context rather than deployed away from their home area to match changing needs. Generally SSMs are licensed to benefices, in an assistant or associate capacity, under the direction of an incumbent. In practice this means how they work and what they do is at the discretion of an incumbent, even in ‘collaborative’ teams.
- SSMs already provide cover during periods of study leave taken by stipendiary clergy and where there is long-term clergy illness. They frequently provide considerable levels of additional support during vacancies, which are at times extended.
- Research suggests that post-curacy SSMs are seldom offered opportunities to develop their ministry. SSMs have to date rarely been invited to take on more varied or challenging roles, and often remain in the same parochial context in the long term.
- Diocesan strategy very often appears to assume that SSMs are not deployable. This is further evidenced, anecdotally, by the dominant notions of senior clergy which have been built upon the traditional structures of Diocesan resourcing. Current research significantly challenges these assumptions. Those dioceses that have completed the Diocesan SSM Research Survey show that between 31% and 49% of SSMs agreed or strongly agreed with the sentence “I believe that I am freely deployable within the church”. While most expressed

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2 Self-Supporting Ministry in the Church of England and the Anglican Churches of Wales, Scotland and Ireland: Report of the National Survey 2010, Teresa Morgan, Oxford, 2011. This research is now 10 years old, but there is no evidence to suggest that much has changed over the decade since it was undertaken.
a preference for “a parish reasonably close to where I live”, many indicated a willingness to travel to another context (approximately 42%), and up to 10% a willingness to consider moving home.

- Since the introduction of Common Tenure in 2007 it is now possible for SSMs to be made incumbents. In recent years, a small number of SSMs have been appointed in this role. Others have filled a wide range of roles including: Acting Dean of a Cathedral, Acting Archdeacon (both in the Diocese of Exeter) and other roles such as Rural/Area Dean, DDO or ADDO, and Training Incumbent. Such opportunities are not common. There are few examples of experienced SSMs working as interim ministers or being offered fixed-term appointments.

KEY ISSUES IN SSM DEPLOYMENT

Key Issues - [1] GENERAL

- Rethinking SSM deployment will require creative thinking and may challenge some aspects of church culture. As a network of SSM Officers we can see the merits of national policy as opposed to individual diocesan experiments.
- Initiatives such as Focal Ministry\(^4\) may present useful opportunities for both SSM deployment and the appointment of experienced SSMs with appropriate professional and managerial experience as Oversight Ministers, including supervising teams in which stipendiary clergy or lay ministers serve.
- It would be good to revisit the concept of interim ministry. Although set-up is now potentially flexible, implementation is often difficult. Parishes sometimes assume that an interim minister is provided for remedial purposes, or as a second best option in comparison to making a stipendiary appointment.
- Clergy allocation has traditionally been focused on parochial staffing, but could also be focused on the needs of particular groups of people (e.g. BAME communities) or sectors of employment (e.g. the tourism and hospitality sector within a geographical area).
- Deployment should mean a great deal more than covering for clergy shortages. In 2021 the National Ministry Team started a project suggesting new ways of attracting and retaining SSMs. This project emphasises the need to consider the broad contribution SSMs will make to the next decade of the life of the church, rather than seeking methods to provide parochial cover at reduced cost and in an uncoordinated manner with no strategic input.

Key Issues - [2] TRAINING

- It will be useful to think about the whole training ‘pipeline’ to reflect on the way SSMs are trained, before and after ordination, so they are better equipped for team and flexible working.
- Those training for oversight/ incumbent work need to be better equipped to lead teams with a wide range of ministers and volunteers. Both residential and non-residential courses need to train people in team leadership working with a wide range of ministers and volunteers. Those training for associate posts need to be prepared to work flexibly in such teams.

Key Issues - [3] THE DIOCESE

- A dedicated SSM Officer or Adviser should be a key voice in developing policy around ordained ministry generally, not simply as a support for SSMs. There is also evidence of the benefits of stipendiary clergy being involved in SSM policy (the SSM leadership team in Carlisle Diocese being a positive example). Dioceses which do not yet have such an Officer/Adviser or policy are urged to consider these as a matter of urgency.
- It would be useful to focus on growth rather than maintenance in any deployment policy.
- In pastoral reorganisation the main focus is usually on stipendiary clergy and there is often little or no attention given to the deployment of SSMs who often have a great deal more to offer than is currently recognised.
- SSM deployment and development relies heavily on the leadership capacity, imagination, and sometimes whim of local incumbents. We should look imaginatively at SSM licensing and accountability. Licensing SSMs to Archdeacons, for example, or some form of informal supervision from them, might transform the process.
- Many dioceses are considering developments such as the use of SSMs in Focal Ministry, multi-parish benefices, opening up all vacancies to invite applications from SSMs, and putting forward most SSMs to be presented as ‘incumbent status’ candidates in national selection processes. Where SSMs meet the Learning Outcomes for ‘Incumbent Status’ at the end of IME Phase 2 this needs to be recognised rather than simply relicensing them as an Associate Priest in the same benefice, even if they do not wish to serve in an incumbent role at that point or there is no suitable vacancy immediately available.
- The deployability of SSMs needs to be higher on the agenda. Their deployability is generally only discussed during a vacancy, and then only rarely. It would be useful to have more regular reviews.
- An equally important point for a review is where a new incumbent is installed. In these circumstances SSMs sometimes find themselves side-lined and under-engaged, and sometimes their ministry is curtailed significantly for no objective reason. The ministry of the SSM needs to be seen as valid in its own right, not simply in terms of how it might assist the ministry of a new incumbent.

Key Issues - [4] THE SSM

- Deployment needs to be tailored to individual SSMs rather than a blanket policy. Planning around SSMs needs to encompass calling, ministerial skills, development needs, and geographical mobility.
- Deployment and ministerial development are diversity issues. Ministry Statistics indicates that 32% of all active ordained ministers are female, but just over half of SSMs are female.
- Where SSMs have a focus of ministry outside the parochial context (for example as Ministers in Secular Employment or as Chaplains) this needs to be recognised and affirmed and taken into account in deployment recommendations.
Going Forward

- The Church of England could encourage more posts to be advertised on the basis that both stipendiary and SSM candidates can apply. Good practice will then require consideration of whether long-term SSM coverage is an option whenever a vacancy arises.
- Best practice is already identifiable and can easily be shared. Deployment also depends on the attitudes and development needs of SSMs, who will benefit from greater support and encouragement.
- A great deal more can be done through temporary secondments and a more imaginative approach to interim ministry.
- Many tools are already available and can be used more creatively: better use of MDR, and review meetings at times of transition or pastoral re-organisation which include updating the Working Agreement. At this time of change it would seem healthy for all SSMs to review their Working Agreements and for questions to be asked about deployability. This can be reinforced by SSM surveys and focus groups.
- The key factor in new thinking around deployment is a change in culture. SSM needs to be integrated rather than seen as marginal, and this thinking needs to be applied to the recruitment, selection, training and development of the next generation of SSMs. Successful deployment will depend heavily on accountable, consistent team leadership and – in many contexts – objectively measured skills in oversight ministry exercised by a wide range of ministers, including SSMs.