The Ordained Vocations Working Group SSOM Research Project
Interim Report on Focus Groups, June 2021

Purpose of this report
One of the 2021 objectives for the National Officer for Self-Supporting Ordained Ministry is to gather information about the experiences of SSMs nationally through a series of Focus Groups. This report aims to outline the history of the project to date and present initial findings from the online questionnaire only. This report is presented to both the OWVG and the National Network of SSM Officers and Advisers.

Project leads and external facilitators
Lead member of the OVWG: John Lees, National Officer for SSOM, and Bishop’s Officer for SSM, Exeter.
Research lead: Jenny Gage, Bishop’s Officer for SSM, Ely, and experienced researcher.
(Both are Co-Conveners of the National Network of SSM Officers and Advisers).

Project outline and research method
9 focus groups were undertaken between February and June 2021 in the following carefully chosen range of dioceses: Carlisle, Chester, Coventry, Durham, St Edmundsbury and Ipswich, Exeter, London, Manchester, Oxford. 63 participants were involved. Participants signed consent forms acknowledging the aims of the project and the way data would be used, with all personal information removed, so that nothing is attributable to any person or individual diocese.

Participants completed an online questionnaire in advance. Each focus group involved 7 SSMs and lasted for approximately 75 minutes. The local diocesan SSM officer acted as host and observer and an external facilitator led each discussion. All sessions used the same two open questions, provided in advance:

• As an SSM, what gets you up in the morning?
• How have the challenges you face changed in the past 12-15 months?

The sessions were recorded and professional transcripts obtained, funded by the national Ministry team. The local Diocesan Officer and Facilitator also took notes contributing to the overall findings.

Key findings from the online questionnaire
The questionnaire was designed to gather data about participants’ background and experience, together with information on factors which might impact on their ministry.

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<tr>
<th>Question topic</th>
<th>Key Data</th>
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<tr>
<td>Gender balance</td>
<td>Of our 63 participants, 34 (54%) were female and 29 male (46%) – closely mirroring the national picture for SSMs.</td>
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<td>Age range</td>
<td>50 participants (79%) were aged between 50 and 69, with 11% aged 70 or over. Only 6 (10%) were under 50.</td>
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<td>Date of ordination</td>
<td>45 participants (71%) were ordained deacon in 2010 or later.</td>
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<td>Current role</td>
<td>Over a quarter of participants were curates. 51% are in associate or assistant roles. 10% are in incumbent status roles. 43% have been in their role for 5 or more years.</td>
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Personal situation | 86% do not live alone. Participants outlined a range of care responsibilities and other factors which have the potential to affect their ministry including the demands of secular work.

Whose choice is it to be SSM? | 59% wished to offer for SSM. More than 20% became SSMs even though that was not their first choice. Age was often a decisive factor.

Pre-ordination training | Most found training accessible, both academically and practically, with few people indicating any difficulties. Less than a quarter felt that their training addressed SSM issues.

Work and finance | 37% are in receipt of a pension. Well over half (57%) are in some form of paid work (40% full-time).

The context of ministry | 35% of participants consider their ministry to be parish focused. 16%, although in employment, but do not consider the workplace to be a significant context for their ministry. 13% regard themselves as Ministers in Secular Employment (MSE), and 16% consider their workplaces and their parishes as equal foci. 5% are chaplains in their workplaces.

Feeling valued | Responses suggest that the strongest support comes from parishioners, local incumbent or line manager, and that the weakest support comes from MDR processes and support from colleagues in a secular work context.

If you could change one thing in your diocese, what would it be? | Recurring themes: the strategic deployment of SSMs, increased awareness of what SSMs can offer, specific training and support for SSMs, and addressing the ways SSMs are treated by stipendiary colleagues.

Questions asked in the Focus Groups:
‘As an SSM, what gets you up in the morning?’
‘How have the challenges you face changed in the past 12-15 months?’
The above responses all relate to the online questionnaire. Transcripts of the Focus Groups discussions are currently being analysed. Preliminary findings indicate that discussions demonstrate the diversity of SSM ministry and sense of calling, and provide insights into the experiences, learning and challenges faced by SSMs during pandemic as well as identifying pre-existing challenges and barriers.

**Next steps**
The above summary analyses data obtained from the online questionnaire. The focus groups themselves provide a rich and detailed set of responses from 63 participants. The transcripts will be analysed and our subsequent report, planned for September 2021, will outline the findings of the entire project.

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