Ministry Council 2021 Research Project into Self-Supporting Ordained Ministry

Final Report, February 2022

Introduction
During 2021, a research project was commissioned by the Ordained Vocations Working Group on behalf of the national Ministry Team into SSMs' self-understanding, motivation, and challenges. The research was undertaken by the two Co-convenors of the National Network of SSM Officers and Advisers, Prebendary John Lees (National Officer for Self-Supporting Ordained Ministry, SSM Officer Exeter Diocese) and Revd Dr Jenny Gage (lead researcher, SSM Officer Ely Diocese). It was initiated with an online questionnaire, followed by a series of nine focus groups from a representative cross-section of dioceses across England. This report summarises major findings from this research which are relevant to Ministry Council, and key questions arising from it. This report is presented to both Ministry Council and the National Network of SSM Officers and Advisers.

Summary
Focus group sessions, held on Zoom and lasting about 75 minutes, were led by one of the two researchers. A total of 63 SSMs from nine dioceses participated, with the local SSM Officer/Adviser acting as host and observer at each session. This sample was representative of SSMs in England on the indices of age and gender\(^1\), and there was a good spread across indices such as length of time since ordination and length of time in current role.

Slightly over half were in associate/assistant roles, 10% were in incumbent status roles, and a little over a quarter were curates. The sample also included some rural deans, distinctive deacons, chaplains and people in pioneer roles. Over half were in some form of paid work, 40% in full-time work. Over a third were in receipt of one or more pensions – although they generally felt that ‘retired’ was not an appropriate designation.

A notable finding from the questionnaire was that 43% of those who were in post-curacy ministry had been in their current role for more than five years. For some this represents a stable, committed, local ministry, but it became clear in the focus group discussions that for some it represents a failure of diocesan thinking around the deployability of SSMs.

Key Findings
- SSM is a distinct vocation. Those called to it experience it as a joy and a privilege.
- While SSMs are very diverse – some work full time in church-based ministry, others have full-time secular employment which they see as a major focus of their ministry – they see their vocation as one, integrated across different contexts.
- While many SSMs feel recognised, affirmed and supported by colleagues and their diocese, there remain significant areas for improvement, particularly around communication and opportunities for development.

\(^1\) This was ascertained by comparison with data from the 2020 Ministry Statistics.
Discussion of Findings

Vocation

On the questionnaire, participants were asked if it was their own choice to be SSM as they went through the discernment process. For most it was, with many emphasising that their call was and is to SSM, although some had needed to fight quite hard to convince selectors of this. However, more than a fifth ended up as SSM despite that not being what they initially thought their calling was.

A few had moved between SSM and stipendiary ministry, and for them periods of being SSM were by and large their own choice. A major factor for others, however, was age: ‘Young enough to work. Too old to pay.’. Despite this, it was clear that everyone experienced their ministry as a joy and a privilege. People talked about looking forward to each new day as an opportunity to serve God’s people, making God’s love apparent in a variety of contexts. They talked about the fulfilment they experienced in using their God-given gifts in the ministry to which God has and is calling them.

They emphasised that their vocation is one – to serve God and God’s people through their church-based ministry and through their secular work and other commitments – as a priest and/or deacon. For some, it was about making a difference, contributing to the common life of their communities, while others talked of making faith possible in the public square, of being a public Christian. One summed up what many expressed in different ways, that he saw himself as a ‘walking sacrament’, bridging the gap between sacred and secular spheres.

For many, it was important that they continued in their secular roles. This was not about paying the bills, or even about continuing to use skills and experience built up over time, but as a context in which their priesthood was expressed quite as much as in worship and in church activities. They expressed a clear sense that being a priest in a secular workplace is part of their vocation, part of God’s mission in the world. An SSM in secular employment is seen as someone to go to with difficult or spiritual questions, someone who will provide unobtrusive, unofficial support in difficult times, someone who will baptise your child, marry you, or lead the funeral of a family member, and who will help you in understanding faith and the church.

SSM role

All were clear that although SSMs are identified through the lack of a stipend, being SSM is not about not being paid. Indeed, some questioned what ‘self-supporting’ means in this context, since no one is entirely self-supporting, financially, spiritually or emotionally.

Words used to describe the nature of SSM include ‘embedded’, ‘incarnational’, ‘rich interactions with people on the fringe’, ‘breaking down the disconnect between church and daily life’. There is enormous variety between an SSM at one extreme who is indistinguishable from a full-time stipendiary colleague, and at the other a minister in secular employment who sees their workplace as the main locus of their ministry.

For some SSMs, not being the incumbent frees them from ultimate responsibility, which they appreciated if they were in high stress secular work, with multiple responsibilities there. Others talked of having greater freedom to be more independent of parish and diocesan structures and responsibilities, which allowed them a prophetic role, speaking from the margins, bringing a wider perspective.

Others, however, felt that their gifts and experience were not adequately recognised, resulting in their not being able to take on more responsibility which they could well have handled, including incumbent status roles. There was acknowledgement that an SSM can be seen as more affordable by financially strapped parishes and dioceses, or as someone to fill the gaps on rotas.
Support

All found sources of support from their families, and among colleagues in both the parish and their workplaces. A genuinely collaborative ministry team is a great source of support to all its members, while a difficult relationship, particularly with the incumbent, is a spiritual and emotional drain. Some SSMs in associate roles talked of the support they could offer to their incumbents, particularly during the early phases of the pandemic, as everyone scrambled to work out how to go forward.

On the other hand, some participants talked of feeling too stretched, or inadequate, given the expectations placed on them. Some of the curates talked about the challenge posed by Training Incumbents who do not understand SSM. Managing expectations was seen as vitally important, those of the SSM themselves as much as those of colleagues and the congregation. One participant, however, commented that it was not supportive to be relieved of tasks that they would find life-giving, and which they wanted to do.

It was illuminating how many mentioned with surprise diocesan efforts to thank them during the pandemic (hampers were particularly appreciated!) – surprise that SSMs were included. In some dioceses, however, supportive/keeping in touch phone calls from senior staff apparently did not extend to SSMs, only to stipendiary colleagues.

A specific complaint was the oft-mentioned bugbear, frequently raised yet again, of deanery chapter meetings taking place at times SSMs cannot attend, despite some SSMs being able to attend more often because of Zoom and working from home during lockdown periods.

A second specific complaint is the non-payment of fees for funerals and weddings by some dioceses, especially when these are paid to retired priests. It can feel as if the diocese is taking the SSM for granted, particularly on occasions when they have taken time off from their employment to take a funeral, for instance.

A third is MDR, which is often not well suited to the reality of SSM life.

Challenges

Given that the focus groups took place between February and June 2021, it is no surprise that the challenges of the pandemic restrictions featured highly. These are only considered here in so far as they contribute to the SSM picture presented.

A significant challenge for many SSMs is their work/life balance, and managing their own and others’ expectations. For some, this was expressed as ‘doing too much’, while for others it resulted in tension between the demands of different roles, or of family life. It can also be challenging to do a full day at work, and then go on to evening meetings or providing pastoral support. Some of the curates felt that their Training Incumbents had insufficient understanding of SSM, leading to unrealistic expectations of them.

Periods of lockdown provided some with a much appreciated opportunity to rebalance or to enjoy a sabbatical period, while for others it created additional pressures – the loss of contact with family, colleagues and their parish communities, unfamiliar ways of working, both in church and in the workplace, and for some, financial issues as work and income dried up.

Isolation and exclusion were words which featured, both in relation to pandemic restrictions, but also more generally. While some SSMs were keen to emphasise that they are no different from their stipendiary colleagues (one undertook church-related work for 50-60 hours a week), other than in the locus of some of their ministry, others felt that SSMs are still treated differently, particularly by the diocese. Congregations and local communities see the SSM as simply another vicar, but some diocesan structures continue to make SSMs feel they are second class, there to make up the numbers, rather than people with a clear vocation and distinctive calling.
Systemic issues to which attention was drawn include organisational dysfunction, not least the time spent on internal church matters, and the sustainability of current ministry models. There is a need for the SSM voice to be heard more clearly in diocesan offices and nationally. There was a view that the pandemic has made existing fault lines more obvious, as it has in life generally.

Questions for Ministry Council

- What are the implications of these findings for the future of SSM, aligned to the Church’s Vision and Strategy for the 2020s? What issues need to be addressed urgently?
- How can dioceses and stipendiary colleagues be helped to better understand the nature of the SSM vocation, and the diversity of opportunities this offers for ministry both inside and outside the church?
- How can dioceses be helped in mainstreaming SSM, in particular ensuring that SSMs are treated in the same way as stipendiary colleagues with regard to discernment of vocation, deployment, training opportunities, and support offered?
- How can dioceses and incumbents be helped to recognise, affirm and make use of the experience and skills SSMs bring with them from their secular work?
- How do we build on the things that are going well?
- What steps are likely to measurably ameliorate the negative experiences highlighted by this research?