

Notes from a Meeting of the National Network of SSM Officers & Advisers

1930-2100 21 Feb 2024

30 participants

Introduction

John Lees opened with a reading from the Lutheran tradition and a prayer.

A welcome to two new Steering Group members: Julian Poppleton (Salisbury) and Jeff Risbridger (Truro) who sends his apologies for this meeting.

New National Officer

John outlined that he has served as National Officer for around three and a half years. It seems longer! Lots of research projects, discussions, national documents, a major cathedral service. It's time to move on to other things.

Co-Convener **Tony Redman** will replace John in this important role, working as the link person between the Network of SSM Officers and Advisers and the National Ministry Team. Taking over as National Officer for Self-Supporting Ordained Ministry from 1st March 2024.

John will support Tony and the Steering Group in an advisory capacity.

Focus on retirement and retirement preparation

Anne Murray (Liverpool)

Anne spoke of her own experience retiring from ministry before reaching the age of 70, and so initially doing this in a way which was very much in her control. 6 months or more discernment period was on offer. Enjoyed the feeling of control, then approached by Suffragan Bishop to take on SSM Officer role. Asked to waive 6 months' discernment period and chose not to do so.

When SSM colleagues reached 70 they were told abruptly that they needed to retire. Local retirement officers were unhappy with this approach. Work began to find ways of making SSM retirement work better.

43 licensed SSMs in Liverpool, half of them over 55. The numbers justify appropriate planning. Stipendiary clergy were offered a week away to prepare. A lot of this was about housing and finance and less relevant to SSMs. But part of the programme was a session run by the Windmill organisation in Liverpool. Currently approaching Windmill about putting together a dedicated programme for SSMs.

Anne has prepared a paper for senior staff asking for one day away for SSMs to explore retirement. Planning a day away in the summer run by Windmill and with retirement officers present. Open to all SSMs, no matter what age they are.

Every year in the cathedral there is a service for retiring clergy. The liturgy now thanks *all* clergy going into PTO as well as those who have moved on from PTO.

Normal retirement age for all clergy is 70. This is sometimes extended for pastoral reasons with the consent of the Bishop and local PCC.

Questions about lack of funding for retirement planning for SSMs.

Considered putting on a regional event for SSMs – an idea for the future, would help with numbers.

We hope to find out more about the work Windmill are doing.

Tony Redman (Eds & Ips)

The diocese's Auxiliary Ordination Pathway is now accredited by Cuddesdon. Significant problem – several graduates of the programme were about to reach their 70th birthday. Bishops perplexed by this and Tony asked what could be done. 1975 legislation set the age for retirement at 70. This was entirely around pension provision and therefore entirely aimed at stipendiary clergy.

Common Tenure suggested that Term Licences would be used – fixed term licenses – enshrined in legislation in 2009.

4 criteria in use for extending licences:

1. Identifiable ministry and mission need in the local area
2. An understanding of personal vision for working to satisfy that need - vocation
3. An occupational health assessment
4. Approval from the local incumbent and PCC

Occupational health assessments cost up to £400. TR explored other options, and diocese suggested a straightforward health questionnaire at a cost of around £20. Road tested by the Diocesan Bishop who discovered that Church House Westminster approved of its use.

Diocesan Bishop now prepared to grant Term Licences for up to 3 years for clergy including SSMs. SSMs can then have a right to be on a PCC and have access to wellbeing support, clergy chapter and other support only available to licensed clergy. DBS and Safeguarding training still required.

Q&A

What is the advantage to the diocese of using Term Licences? The Bishop has stronger control over what you will be doing, therefore greater deployability. You can be enabled to do more if you are happy to do more.

In Eds & Ips and many other dioceses you can't claim fees for occasional offices as an SSM with a Term Licence.

Jill Tucker (former SSM Officer for Coventry)

Notes from Jill:

What do we mean by retirement?

Is it a stepping down from a particular ministry, ceasing to do it altogether, as happens when a stipendiary retires, or you step down from a particular role, or is it the largely unseen change in status that happens when you move from licensed ministry to PTO?

The issues, and challenges, I suspect, are different in each case. My assumption is that for us here now it is the largely unseen change in status that we are thinking about.

So I want to look at three 'C's:

- Change
- Collaboration
- Consistency

With most of the emphasis on the first one.

Change is always unsettling. It is obvious for stipendiary ministers, who find themselves moving house, church, finances and circle of friends: and there are obviously self-supporting incumbents who find themselves in a similar position. But for most SSMs this is hidden: how do you deal with change when, on the face of it, nothing has altered?

Fundamentally this is a change to our pattern of ministry and our identity as ministers.

There are, I would suggest, two considerations: theological and pastoral.

- Theological/spiritual: am I still needed, am I less wanted? Am I the minister God wants me to be?

At the heart of the Christian Gospel is a promise that God's love for us is not dependent on our works or actions: it is pure grace. When we find ourselves asking (as many did during Covid) 'Am I needed or wanted', we perhaps need to return to a deeper question, 'Am I loved by God?' And of course, God says yes, 'You are my child, my beloved'.

It is perhaps a time to be like the little boy with his loaves and fishes, offering ourselves and all that we are anew to God, and allowing him to use us and transform us. It is perhaps a time to remember the words of God spoken to Isaiah: '*See, I am doing a new thing! Now it springs up; do you not perceive it?*' *Isaiah 43:19*

- Pastoral Considerations:

Hand in hand with that comes the pastoral – the walking alongside each other to work this through, and to care for each other’s well-being and flourishing.

Given that the form of ministry undertaken by SSMs varies considerably, there will be no uniform way of reflecting theologically in this way. Each of us has a different identity, so each of us will reflect in their own way about what God is doing in their life. We rest assured in his love and grace, but each of us will have a separate conversation with him. So in terms of pastoral care, what do the rest of us, the church as a whole, do to facilitate and enable that conversation? How should we be seeking to mitigate or minimise these effects?

Allied to that, because it is part of our conversation with God is what happens about a rest/break/sabbatical at this point?

- Some relish the chance for a rest
- Some relish the opportunity for a mini sabbatical
- Others are mortified by the thought of it
- Others again have been hurt by it.

As pastoral care for each other could we encourage our bishops to take a sympathetic, holistic, case by case approach – listening, and enabling flourishing?

What else do we mean by pastoral care? The conversation with the parishes, or workplaces: that the pastoral care given by diocese or chapter does not suddenly drop off.....?

Collaboration

We were not taught this, but we each need to be committed to the flourishing of each other, even if it means stepping back to help another. This is so important where there is any sort of team, even if it is a team of just 2. How do we help the leaders, and how do we help those who feel left out or unheard?

Could we encourage dioceses to develop a theology of collaborative ministry, and to somehow present it to us?

Consistency

Finally, a great many of the issues that arise do so because of the fact that different dioceses (i.e. Bishops) interpret the guidelines differently, often contrary to the law of the land when it comes to ages. Given the rending shortage of clergy, could we fight for a universal and more generous interpretation of those guidelines, to enable SSM clergy to simply carry on what they have been doing, should they wish?

On a more contentious note, is there still a need for this distinction between licence and PTO?

Q&A

Nick Hallam talked about the Carlisle experience. A group of stipendiary and SSM, licensed and PTO, all meeting for Morning Prayer. A small but effective group

Chapters – do they include Curates, SSMs, retired clergy? Who is the Chapter? Some Chapters don't include SSMs.

Needs to be some assessment of competency alongside a health assessment?

Hugh Lee (retired SSM Officer, Oxford)

Hugh serves as an elected trustee of the Church of England Pensions Board, a body of 12 people. One member of this is attached to RACSC – the Remuneration and Conditions of Service Committee of the national church. Advises on a range of issues including work conditions and stipends. RACSC was recently asked to advise on a new House of Bishops policy for PTO. RACS asked to comment on a paper on this issue which turned out to be entirely written from the perspective of stipendiary clergy. HL has offered rewording and the document will be redrafted and will go to the House of Bishops and elsewhere.

Hugh works as a consultant energy economist who has not yet felt an inclination to retire and enjoying applying his expertise and knowledge. Therefore he doesn't feel he has retired as an MSE.

Previous Bishop happy to extend licences for MSEs for 3 year basis, but new Bishop unhappy to license him beyond 70. Fortunately had another conversation enabling Hugh to continue to undertake many parts of his ministry but as a PTO and still be known as an Associate Priest.

Benefits of a licence – ex Officio on PCC. Requirement to undertake MDR. Ex officio member of a Deanery Chapter (but Area Deans can call meetings just of incumbents). However 10% of PTOs can be elected onto Deanery Synod. An important role as members of Deanery Synods are the electorate for General Synod, which currently does not represent the full range of people in the Church.

JL mentioned that some clergy holding diocesan roles, including some Bishop's Officers, have a Licence Under Seal and where that happens they don't need to be attached to a local parish or undertake MDR.

[Note from Tony: Diocesans have the power to grant term licences under The Ecclesiastical (Terms of Service) Regulations 2009, and that guidance currently is enshrined in The House of Bishops Policy to Granting Permission to officiate issued 2017, currently under review.]

Q&A

Hugh mentioned that getting a PTO is a fairly bureaucratic process involving incumbent contribution and a change to a working agreement. Good to plan this 3 months or so before you need it.

TR has introduced a timescale towards Term Licences/ PTO.

What happens if you don't have an incumbent to supervise you or approve the process? Area Dean? Neighbouring stipendiary incumbent?

PTO – can you be effectively in charge of a parish?

JT – Area Dean will often sort out supervision arrangements. Bigger problem where SSMs are Associate Ministers during a vacancy.

We need to remember that House for Duty will undergo a bigger change including loss of housing.

For some MSEs going to PTO can be liberating from constraints of parish ministry.

PTO can be an opportunity to press the 'reset' button. 6 month period can be useful for reflection. Mission Community structures offer wider range of opportunities and variety of ministry. PTO needs thinking through.

Peter Draper – moving to PTO has been a liberating action. Stepping down from a licensed role and moving to PTO has opened up a wide range of tasks and opportunities. Although people in local parishes don't notice a difference, it's been rewarding to undertake new roles.

We sense a sea change – why is it we spend so little on lay leadership and SSM?

Lyndon Bannon (Chester)

Diocesan Bishop is Chair of Ministry Council. Made a decision that age 70 would be a clear cut-off. SSMs told abruptly they would need to move to PTO, not well received.

Need to develop policy. Hard to do so without exceptions and footnotes. Everyone's calling is different and distinctive. HfD presents new issues – you cease to be a 'volunteer'.

We need to hear the voices of SSMs who have gone through the process. How can we do it differently? How can we be more pastoral? More caring? Is a 6 month sabbatical always appropriate?

Q&A

In the world of work people know much more clearly where they stand. It would be useful if better information was given when people start out in ministry. An element that applies to IME2.

Problem that policies can change when the Bishop changes.

We should remember that stipendiary clergy go through a very significant time of loss and grief – loss of house, friendship, role, sometimes they need to live further away from their families. We need to look after all clergy in this turbulent time of change.

Experience of Sodor & Man – difficulty moving away because a full time priest won't be found to replace current SSM. Considerable pressure to remain. Opposite problem - permission needed to step away.

Recommendation of a book for Anglican Clergy reflecting on retirement for both Stipendiary and Non Stipendiary priests. 'A New Lease of Life?' by Tony Neal & Leslie J. Francis ISBN 978-1-78959-085-2 (See overview by Leslie J Francis at: <https://www.sacristy.co.uk/blog/2020/francis-reflecting-retirement>)

Next Steps

Note from John Lees: Ideally we should form a small working party to produce a short paper / design a template for a good SSM retirement policy and an outline for a retirement programme. Volunteers?

Next Meeting

Our next meeting is on **Weds 22 May 2024** (1930-2100, Zoom) – this meeting is open to all SSMs and will look at the advice we might give to our younger SSM selves and to others just beginning the journey.

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