

Chris's SSM Story...

Parish:	St Paul's Seacombe	Non-Parochial Commitment(s):	International Christian recording artist, writer and speaker
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You have been recently ordained as a Self-Supporting Ordained Minister. What does this mean?

My situation is maybe different from some, in that I have always been in ministry fulltime; internationally, speaking writing and singing in ministry, living by faith. So, I don't have a secular job that supports me or a fancy pension, but my hubby earns a bit for us to live by and my ministry work beyond the Anglican context is on hold as I train in priestly duties. That is the financial self-supporting bit, or should I say the bit God looks after.

First and foremost, I am trained and formed like all Priests are, and I feel it is a wonderful privilege, that God has called me to walk this journey with Him and to serve with humility those He leads me too. As a minister I pray, study and listen to the Spirit and then try to follow the guidance of the Holy Spirit. This ministry position can be as little or as much as you want to make it, it can fit around a demanding job or, like me, be fulltime. I am working fulltime for the Church of England in parish as a Pioneer Curate and bring my unique gifting to that position of ministry. This ministry leads me to be creative and vibrant and to be the Priest I am called to be. I am not the vicar's helper, the part timer, or the occasional minister who pops in, which often has been the misconceptions of the past, for me this is a fulltime endeavour. Self-supporting ministry can occur in many guises, some SSMs hold demanding fulltime jobs in secular employment and graciously bring their expertise and gifting to the job of an SSM. Others may have retired and want to use and give their time creatively to the mission of God. Others like me chose to work full time in ministry alone. Those in ministry in the Church as an SSM can also change to stipend and visa-versa, depending on how ministry develops, so being SMM can be an interchangeable title and diverse in practice. Ultimately, those who are SSM bring a tonne of blessing and unique gifting to the Church and can offer the joy of a priestly presence to many a church that could not afford to have a Curate. It is just wonderful to serve God in this way and such fullness.

This is but a snapshot of what it means to be a self-supporting minister.

When you say, 'Pioneer Ministry', can you explain that? (I'm guessing you might!!!)

I am passionate in pioneering fresh expressions and church planting and encouraging the mixed economy Church. I have just finished an MA in Church Leadership and my dissertation was "What kind of leadership is needed to make the Mixed Economy Church flourish?" I have been a practitioner of evangelism for over 30 years and am passionate about contextual mission, and that takes pioneering leaders and pioneering ministry of all kinds. A brief explanation would be the community of believers and those who have come from that community as ordained leaders to empower others to be embedded in their communities and contexts. It means to work alongside others in community and to spot where God is already working in community, because He calls us to engage in the 'missio Dei', the mission of God. Pioneer ministry is both visionary and inspirational, with the ability to take the Church forward, valuing the past but eagerly anticipating and venturing into the future. Prayerful listening and faithful following of the Holy Spirit is essential.

This prayer from St Brendan the Navigator, an early pioneer, describes pioneering well:

*Lord I will trust you
help me to journey beyond the familiar
and into the unknown.
Give me the faith to leave old ways
and break fresh ground with You..... .¹*

So, what does ministry 'look like' for you?

Ministry for me looks like a God led adventure, I became a Christian in a free Brethren church, many years ago and an elder used to always say, that our life journey was an exciting journey with the Lord. I have learnt ministry takes you through mountain tops and stormy valleys, but God is always faithful.

At present I am learning my priestly duties with my Training Incumbent and have been bringing ideas to the table for free expressions of church and planning a new community. I am blessed to have a very supportive Incumbent for my myriad of ideas brewing. I am also getting to know my church folk as I am the new girl in town and watching pastorally for the things God wants me to notice and do.

I am learning to lead and to minister at occasional services, such as births, weddings and funerals when they occur and also learning all those jobs behind the scenes that keep a church running correctly.

¹ 'The Prayer of St Brendan the Navigator – Marks in the Sand', accessed 21 August 2020, <https://marksinthesand.com/2016/01/13/prayer-st-brendan/>.

As a pioneer I am connected across dioceses and to national panels for pioneering and think tanks. I am also on different courses related to pioneering. For me as a pioneer I am always looking for ways to make church relevant and engaged, in a very challenging context, which means prayerful listening to the context and the patterns and rhythms in community. Prayer and courage are essential.

Are there any challenges to being SSM?

Challenges can be seen as roadblocks or opportunities, I prefer to see them as opportunities and considerations, but that does not mean I wear rose-tinted glasses.

If you are working in secular employment and therefore a self-supporting Priest, there are considerations that must be made, rather than challenges. I also, prefer the title 'bi-vocational' here, as it acknowledges the call of priesthood to both contexts rather than focusing on monetary provision. This means you are a priest in church and also a pioneer of the Gospel to your fellow workers and in your context, engaging in the mission of God. So, therefore stand tall but humble in your call. In this situation the balance of time applied to each must be respectfully considered, as it is not wise, as a Priest, to burn the candle at both ends. So, time management is very important. You must consciously decide how much time can be given to church, after your duties and responsibilities in secular employment have been considered. This is to be considered after the most important factor for all Priests; the very important issue of time for family, and for self-discipleship, and most importantly for having fun. If failing to do this important step leads to a ministry driven by stress and that can bring its own problems. So, it is helpful to ministry not to see your work and church as separate entities but to see church and work as all part of your ministry, your bi-vocation. So, if you decide to work say in secular work for 70% and church work gets 30%, that does not mean that you are a lesser priest than someone working fulltime in the church context. It is the emphasis of mission that is different, not the call of priesthood. So be encouraged if this is your choice.

If you are a crazy, pioneering type like me working fulltime in church then you still also have the same considerations, relating to the balance of church to family and care of self, and to have opportunity to just chill and do your favourite thing. This is the call of all priests and deacons, to have a walk that is prayerful, empowered by God, for the long haul, this balance will often go out of kilter which is why a prayerful walk is essential and regularly taking stock is important.

Other issues you will have to deal with, is the peril of the mis-informed. They appear in many guises from fellow workers, church folk, leaders or those who don't think before they speak. There are those who have no understanding of self-supporting ministry. It would be easy to rise to the bait injured, hurt and misunderstood, but the most efficient way to deal with this is to have a deep understanding of your Call, in the greater mission of God, as I have already

discussed. Thankfully, the understanding of this great contextual ministry of SSM, as a growing valuable asset, of the Church, is growing. It is good to know that SSM accounts for virtually half of all priests in the Church of England who are engaging in the mission of God, both in church and the greater context. So, remember dinosaurs sometimes raise their ugly heads, but soon realise that they are way behind the times.

Training is another consideration but also a great opportunity. I trained at St Mellitus NW and was kindly offered the opportunity to do an MA. I was trained in priestly formation like everyone else, and I will be ordained like all priests are. Whether funding comes from church or self-generated is not a consideration, and neither should it be. Ministry takes an energy, be it a quiet ministry or audacious ministry, and it is required for those in self-supporting ministry. I would encourage you to embrace self-supporting ministry with a passionate heart, incorporating a desire to train in your ministry speciality as well and far as you can, bringing your own creativity to the role.

Continuing education for all priests is essentially our own responsibility and it will be yours if you follow this pathway. If you want the fullness of this ministry you must engage as fully you as you can with the training and embrace the direction God had led you in. It is a great opportunity to go deeper in faith and ministry.