

Mark's 'SSM Story'...

Parish: St Stephen's Moulton	Non-Parochial Commitment(s): Full time job: Digital Transformation Manager Scripture Union
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You're an SSM (Self-Supporting Minister), but you are also a Priest-in-Charge. How did that come about?

I guess there are 2 sides to this.

I can remember the first thoughts of a calling into ministry. I had recently started as a Church Warden and the vicar had confided in me that he would be retiring in 18 months. I was walking in the village wondering why every 4-5 years we needed to go through this process. Bringing someone in from outside, get them up to speed in the community, and then they move on or retire. Why is this fellowship of Christ not able to bring people forward to minister to them and the wider community? This though was a call to ministry, NOT a call to stipendiary / incumbent ministry.

At the same time, I loved doing my job. I had been in a publishing / online space for 25+ years and had a vast amount of experience. It always felt important to be able to carry on doing my job, whilst being a "person of God" in the workplace, dealing with the issues, the pressures of work, that many people feel. That way, I had common ground to have conversations with others.

I had always thought that there's something about wearing the collar, being ordained in the Church of England, which gives you permission to have conversations that just wouldn't happen. It's about the level of trust that people have in priests.

I couldn't see myself in full-time ministry, I had always thought that Parish Ministry would get in the way of my workplace ministry. But my first two weeks after ordination I found myself thrown in the deep end at my Curacy Church due to illness. In those two weeks I had a confirmation service with Bishop Keith; a Baptism; a Burial of Ashes; and the Town Council's annual Civic Service. I went on holiday straight afterwards reflecting on the fact that doing the regular work of the Parish Priest had been a real blessing and had only enhanced my ministry in the workplace.

Fast forward 10 months, and sitting down with Bishop Keith before Priesting, chatting about how I ended up there and my connection with the community in which I live, he mentioned that it would be entering vacancy soon. It's a small Parish, one that has financially struggled to afford Parish Share.

Over the next few months, working with Archdeacon Mike we discussed whether this could be a model for ministry that may work. I would stay living in my home and do the Priest-in-Charge role outside of the responsibilities of the full-time job.

It kept the ministry local, rather than sharing it with a neighbouring Parish, whilst making it VERY affordable for the Parish.

After an interview and discussion with the Reps, the Patron, Rural Dean and Archdeacon, we all felt comfortable that it was worth going ahead, and I was appointed Priest in Charge in February 2019.

So far it seems to be OK, it is difficult to manage time, and I need to honour my employers, Scripture Union. They pay for and expect me to work full-time, and that's what I do, and I'm committed to that job and our vision to reach children and young people outside of the church with the Good News.

If there is one thing that has made it work, it's the fact that I was already rooted in the community. I had lived there for 17 years prior to becoming licensed, and so I knew the church, the fellowship and how the community worked. If I had to invest time and energy to bring myself up to speed, I'm not sure it would have worked.

So, how would you describe your calling – as an MSE or as a Parish Priest?

I suspect that this will be seen as a 'cop-out', but both. Equally.

I have now worked for Scripture Union for a few years, and so some of the roles that I had expected to do, being a person of God in a workforce, are not as critical as I'm blessed to spend my working day with Christians. However, the voice of the local Anglican Church in a parachurch organisation is a useful voice, particularly as we consider the impact of Covid-19 on the church.

Where I feel it does make an impact are the conversations and relationships I have with people, particularly outside of the church family. I feel that I'm not in a Christian Bubble, I need to think about the day job, how does that work, keeping the mortgage paid during lockdown to find ways to do the job from home. I share many of the same pressures as the people I meet in our community.

Similarly, being the priest in charge enables me to serve the community, in church and outside of church. Those experiences of Parish Ministry, leading a fellowship in worship, sharing those important life events with people, Baptism, Weddings and Funerals have been a real joy and blessing.

I realise that there are many things in Parish Ministry that I'm just not able to do, but if there's one thing I try to do is to be present in the community, wearing the collar. I want people to see the local minister / vicar about, to know the church is active, and over lockdown, that has meant being even more present online.

What is the focus of your ministry?

Obviously with my employed work, we're all about building the Kingdom, so I see my ministry to be a voice of the local church into that, what would work in the many smaller parishes.

In the Parish, there is so much that I cannot do because of time restrictions. In many ways it makes things easier. There is no ministry in schools because I'm working when they're open. I get very little time to visit people. We have reduced the frequency of evening services to once a month rather than every week.

What I do focus on is

- *Worship:* What works for the community, to give people entry points to church: New family service; All Souls, changes to Christmas services.
- *Partnership:* Our Methodist brothers and sisters really suffered through lockdown and are being forced to close. How can we support them and give them somewhere to come and worship respecting their traditions
- *Community:* Being seen and being present at events. Being accessible. Opening up the church and using the church to reflect some of the heritage of the community.

So, would you say you are fulfilling your vocational call?

Yes. Recently my wife and I were at a wedding and someone was asking about how I manage my time, and I was trying to explain it. They then asked me if I enjoy it, and while I was thinking about it, Katherine replied for me, "Of course he does!". And she's right. Although I don't know how sustainable it is; at times the pressure to keep it going seems almost unmanageable; and I'm often very tired, this does feel what I'm called to do. For the first time in years I'm settled in work and in ministry and it feels as if this is what I could be doing for years to come.

I have a job that I mostly enjoy doing each day, for a great organisation and a level of trust and responsibility; and a Parish Ministry serving a community that I have love and has been important in our families like for nearly 20 years.