

Lisa's SSM Story...

Parish:	St Alban, Broadheath	Non-Parochial Commitment(s):	Consultant Community Paediatrician
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As an SSM (Self-Supporting Ordained Ministry), where do you see the focus of your ministry?

I think this is a trick question! As an SSM, your focus of ministry is constantly changing. In my experience the question of "how am I living out my calling" is one I constantly return to and reshape.

Medicine for me is a vocation that responds to the essential human needs of people. As doctors we serve all people irrespective of their faith or lack of it. Medicine is essentially a diaconal activity – I think of the deacons appointed and commissioned in Acts 6 to carry out practical acts of care for the vulnerable members of their society. It is that desire to serve others that underpinned why I chose medicine as a career and why I continue to practice medicine.

Acts 6 tells us that the deacons in the early church did not confine their activities to meeting practical needs but, at times, they served their church community by teaching and preaching. My ordained ministry is in a parish setting where there is a strong focus on preaching and teaching, and this is the area of ministry is where I feel able to contribute more. I am able to bring a realistic, grounded perspective to preaching due to working outside the church.

Would you say you are living your vocational call, by being SSM?

Yes. When I was a young Christian I joined a very small house church (not part of the Church of England) and although I was new to the faith I was encouraged to lead breaking the bread and sharing the wine, as that was the tradition. That was a very powerful moment for me and it made its mark on my life.

Some 20 years later when I began to explore the idea of ordained ministry, I initially thought that I was being called to give up medicine and move into stipendiary ministry full time. After a lot of thought and

prayer, it became clear to me that the interplay between the vocations – secular employment in medicine, and church ministry – was something that I needed and the congregations that I serve needed too.

I say this because so much of our preaching and teaching focusses on people's lives on Sundays, forgetting about what goes on in the rest of the week outside of the church walls – which might be caring, looking after children, secular work, unpaid work or a whole host of things. All of this can be instrumental in honouring God, but it needs to be preached about and prayed about. Self-supporting ministers can provide that perspective.

Working in medicine can be tough and demanding. But it brings us into contact with all types of people and situations and it certainly provides life experience. It also provides an amazing insight into God's creative work, in the form of the science of the human body and human resilience and diversity.

My insights from the world of medicine have shaped the way I interpret the scriptures, and my understanding of what it means to be a disciple of Jesus Christ today.

Training for ordained ministry has provided a different skill set (meditation and prayer being examples) that has also proved invaluable in sustaining medical life.

How do you achieve a balance between church and other commitments?

I'm a curate in a parish and so am supporting the vicar and ministry team. A working agreement has been set out with the parish whereby I preach and/or lead for one Sunday a month. It would usually take me about 3 – 5 hours to prepare a sermon or prepare to lead worship. In addition to that I aim to offer (on average) one evening a week for church work – that might be meetings, a home group or PCC. Some times of the year are busier than others and I have learnt to guard some phases of "down time" – for example at half term or in the summer, to compensate for times of the year when it is busier. I have specified one evening a week is kept free for family and rest.

It's important to recognise that many active lay Christians find themselves engaged in church activities for one, two or three evenings a week and more despite at the same time being busy with employment or caring activities. Realistically, as a church of God we all need to find a balance and discourage people from becoming over committed and rushed off their feet.

What are the disadvantages?

Self-supporting ministers are sometimes called to serve the church during a vacancy (interregnum in old terminology). I did this. This was great experience for me as a curate, and it did wonders for my confidence in leading and preaching. However, I was unrealistically busy during that time and I was delighted when a new vicar was appointed!

My advice to an SSM facing a parish vacancy is to exercise tough love. Make it clear what you cannot, sadly, offer, and ask for support from other clergy. Identify those who can help you lead and preach and accept that you should sometimes say *"that needs to wait until we get a new vicar."*

A scriptural post-script.

I often find myself returning to the parable of the feeding of the five thousand. Even when Jesus' ministry team had distributed food to five thousand males, plus an unspecified number of females and children, there were 12 baskets of bread left over. The fact that this was collected up into baskets suggests that the bread wasn't allowed to go to waste and I find myself asking, what was it used for? The insight of this for self-supporting ministry is that, even when we feel broken and spent, there is still something left that will be collected up. And it reminds me not to be worried about being divided in my attention or even, scattered about in every direction as sometimes we are. We are all, still, part of the same bread.