



CUMBRIA
CHRISTIAN
LEARNING

Growing disciples for mission

“Self-supporting Ministry (SSM) – some personal reflections”

Firstly a word about terminology. Both “NSM” (Non-stipendiary Ministry) and “SSM” (Self-supporting Ministry) are currently in use in our ecumenical county, NSM is the older term and SSM the newer one. Strictly speaking SSM implies fully self-supporting (no stipend and no church house), NSM may mean that as well but may also be used for House for Duty Priests (no stipend but do have a church house).

My personal experience is that SSM is a wonderful opportunity and privilege – but you need to keep your wits about you. An opportunity to do what exactly? Two quotations, although not specific for SSMs, do apply to them and may be helpful. The first, “Making God Possible”, is the title of a book by Alan Billings, Anglican priest and South Yorkshire Police and Crime Commissioner, written in answer to his own searching question “What are the clergy for?” The second is from William Barclay the Scottish theologian who wrote “A saint (and according to the New Testament all Christians are saints, including SSMs) is a person whose life makes it easier to believe in God.” Nice challenges both.

Do SSMs also have particular contributions to make? Indeed they do, actually a range of contributions reflecting the fact that SSMs are not all the same. Some have a day job, either part or full time, some are retired, some see the focus of their ministry in their day job, some see it in the parish, others (like myself) see it in both settings. My own situation is that I’m an NSM Assistant Priest in both the Hawkshead Benefice (where I live) and the nearby Loughrigg Team. I also work very part-time as a hospital doctor in Carlisle and Preston.

Within a variety of ministries, many SSMs would point to there being important common ground between them in that they see themselves at the interface between the church and the world, having a foot in both camps, being strategically placed. Hearing this you may ask “Are not many lay Christians similarly well placed?” A good point and St Paul would agree with you. Look at the opening words of several of his epistles where the Christians are described as being “in Christ” and (for example) “at Philippi”. They thus had an interesting dual status which we could expand into a contemporary setting. Imagine a lay Christian (who is therefore “in Christ”) who lives at Keswick, worships at St John’s Church and works at a local accountancy firm. Surely such a person is already very well placed for a varied ministry, why might they consider ordination to SSM, what difference would it make?

Reasons to consider SSM

1. A call – most importantly from God but also the call and challenge of the church. Our current Ministry Strategy proposals seek to have many more SSMs as soon as possible.
2. Ordination typically brings an extra and very special dimension to a person's life, a sea change. It provides training, experience, a public role with opportunities, responsibility and often a great sense of fulfilment.
3. As mentioned above, lay Christians often have great potential themselves to live out their faith in a variety of settings. In practice, however, this potential may not be fully realised – one possible reason being a lack of appropriate envisioning and teaching. SSMs, with their own particular vantage point and experience, are well equipped to deliver such teaching and also model it. Jesus himself provides a pertinent example of this: after calling Simon Peter and Andrew to follow him and be made fishers of men, he then teaches by example as he travels about ministering (Matthew 4:19, 23). SSMs can be refreshing in how they preach and lead services, using illustrations from the workplace, and by building bridges with the community (for example by inviting the local Mayor to be interviewed at a service).

Final points (where wits need to be kept about one)

1. The commitment required for SSM training and ministry is substantial and, for people who may already be busy, this needs to be carefully weighed.
2. Linked to this is the very important issue of work/life balance. This applies as much to Christian ministry (including SSM) as to other walks of life and merits careful attention.
3. Candidates for SSM often come with significant life skills and experience and should look for opportunities to share these, both during training and in ministry.

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