



THE CHURCH  
OF ENGLAND  

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Diocese of Chester

# **Self-Supporting Ordained Ministry: A Brief Vocations Guide**

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**Please note:**

The information provided in this brief guide, is to enable those exploring a call to ordained ministry to better know and understand what 'self-supporting' ordained ministry is.

It is important that the information contained herein is read alongside the information pertaining to Ordained Ministry that can be found on the Diocesan website, as well as more generally on the Church of England website.

More information is available from the Bishop's Adviser for Diocesan Discernment of Ordained Ministry, or the Bishop's Adviser for Self-Supporting Ordained Ministry, both of whom can be contacted via Church House.

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## Introduction

Across the Diocese of Chester, the nature of ordained ministry varies hugely, not least in the extent to which that ministry is stipendiary (paid) or self-supporting (unpaid), full-time or part-time. This diversity brings a great richness to the mission and ministry to which the church is called.

Within that overall picture, the role of Self-Supporting Ministers (SSMs) is very important. SSMs hold the Bishop's Licence but are not in receipt of a stipend. They are more often than not licensed to a parish, but some do operate as sector ministers.

There is some debate as to the precise terminology that best describes their work, but essentially, SSMs fall into one of the following broad categories:

- Some SSMs are in either full or part-time employment, but see the main focus of their ministry in the parish;
- Some SSMs work in either full or part-time employment, and see the main focus of their ministry in the workplace;
- Some SSMs are not in any form of employment at all.

Some SSMs prefer to describe themselves as Non-Stipendiary Ministers (NSMs), but this phrase defines what they do not 'receive' rather than what they 'give'. In addition, some SSMs term themselves Ministers in Secular Employment (MSEs), if they receive payment for work other than parochial ministry. It could be argued that in the strict sense of the term, a 'true' MSE is someone who is employed as an ordained minister in that particular context (e.g., a school chaplain), as opposed to being an ordained minister who happens to work within a particular setting, and whose employment does not depend upon being ordained – however, this is a matter of debate!

In reality, whatever the terminology, this is unimportant when compared to the actual ministry being undertaken by SSMs.

SSM ministry can and does bring particular challenges with it:

- striking an appropriate balance between ministry in the parish and a secular job and/or other responsibilities;

- discerning what it means to be an ordained presence in a secular workplace;
- nurturing good relationships with stipendiary colleagues who might face different challenges.

SOMs should never see themselves or be regarded by any others within the church as the 'vicar's-helper', as the SOM is called by God to diaconal and/or priestly ministry within His Church, regardless of personal circumstances, and regardless of whether they receive a stipend – they have their own unique and distinctive ministry / calling.

The notes that follow are therefore offered in the hope of providing some further information to assist with the discernment process – could God be calling you to Self-Supporting Ordained Ministry?

## 1. Calling

God's call is both simple and complicated. It may start with a strong inner sense of being drawn to something, maybe not clearly defined at first, or by a dissatisfaction with what you are doing at the moment. Perhaps someone who knows you well might have encouraged you to think about 'formal' ministry within the church.

This call needs to be tested by others, including your parish and incumbent, and then by the Bishop's Adviser for Diocesan Discernment of Ordained Ministry and others, who will be able to help you work out precisely what you might be being called to. You may then be asked to attend online and in-person events, as part of the 'Shared Discernment Process'.

## 2. Self-Supporting Ordained Ministry

Ordained Ministers (deacons, priests and bishops) are called to represent the church in the wider world. They lead the church's mission and ministry through worship and prayer, preaching and teaching, community engagement and pastoral work.

Self-Supporting Ordained Ministers (or SSMs) do not receive a stipend for their ministry, that is, they are not remunerated for their work in church and often remain in their own housing.

SSMs may serve in their locality or further afield. They may also work fulltime or part-time in a secular role.

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Some SSMs prefer to describe themselves as Non-Stipendiary Ministers (NSMs), but this phrase defines what they do not 'receive' rather than what they 'give'. In addition, some SSMs term themselves Ministers in Secular Employment (MSEs), if they receive payment for work other than parochial ministry and their workplace, rather than a church-based context, is the main focus of their ministry.

SSMs are therefore called by God to exercise a diaconal and/or priestly ministry within the Church of England. They are trained to the same standard as any other clergy, and their main duties are broadly similar to stipendiary clergy: to reconcile the divided, heal the broken, and restore the lost, but they choose to exercise their ministry without being paid a stipend.

Many SSMs cherish the ability to work out their calling within a secular work environment, or to use the freedom of a reduced parochial commitment to

develop ministries in other ways. All SSMs serve under the terms of a Ministry Agreement, that defines their responsibilities and time commitment. They all work within the accountability structures of parish and diocese.

The Bishop's Adviser for Diocesan Discernment of Ordained Ministry, or the Bishop's Adviser for Self-Supporting Ordained would happily provide further information about what an SSM 'is' and 'does' upon request.



### 3. Discernment

During the discernment process, there is no specific or formal provision for those exploring Self-Supporting Ministry, as all exploring the call to ordained ministry follow the same 'pathway'. This is because all callings to ordained ministry are just as valid as each other, although through discernment some candidates are sponsored as having 'incumbent status' (more often than not those wishing to undertake stipendiary ministry) and others as 'assistant minister' status (those generally looking to be SSMs).

However, it might be helpful and relevant for those expressly exploring SSM to request a meeting with the Bishop's Adviser for Self-Supporting Ordained Ministry, as a further aid in the overall discernment process.

Additionally, a number of current, active and practising SSMs act as 'SSM Champions'. It is their role to meet on a one-to-one basis with those exploring SSM ministry if this is deemed to be of use. These 'encounters' usually number two, and consist of:

1. Observing the SSM / ministering alongside the SSM for a day or part thereof, to see what SSM ministry 'looks like' in practice
2. Discussing what being an SSM 'looks like' for the SSM concerned, and how they have responded in their own context to that vocational call on their life

More detailed guidance is available from the Bishop's Adviser for Diocesan Discernment of Ordained Ministry. SSM Champions can be contacted via the Diocesan Discernment Team at Church House.

## 4. National Discernment

**Please note - deciding what sponsorship, training pathways and deployment remain the prerogative of the Bishop.**

National Discernment takes place through the Shared Discernment Process. This is a process for recommending candidates for training for Ordained Ministry and is the overarching name for the national process of discerning those whom God is calling to start training as ordained ministers in the Church of England. The whole process has three elements:

- Discernment in the sponsoring diocese
- Feedback and Advice from panels in the national Shared Discernment Process
- Decision by the sponsoring bishop to sponsor for training

The second element, Feedback and Advice from panels in the national Shared Discernment Process, falls into two stages: the Stage 1 Carousel Conversations; and the Stage 2 Panel.

### Stage 1

The focus of the Stage 1 Carousel Conversations is a set of six short one-to-one Conversations that Candidates have with Advisers, within an online Carousel process. It's described as a 'carousel' because Candidates move-on quickly from one Conversation to the next. The Conversations will cover aspects of four of the discernment Qualities (Love for God, Call to Ministry, Love for People and Fruitfulness), and will have a particular focus on the Church and World Domains. The outcome of the Stage 1 Carousel Conversations is reported to Dioceses in terms of feedback and advice to help inform the Diocese's decision regarding a Candidate's readiness to proceed to Stage 2 of the Shared Discernment Process. It is for the Diocese to decide when (or whether) to send the Candidate to a Stage 2 Panel. It will not be possible to come to a Stage 2 Panel if a Stage 1 Carousel Day has not been completed.

### Stage 2

At Stage 2 candidates are 'assessed' against both the **order** and **focus** of ministry for which they are sponsored. The order relates to whether the candidate is sponsored as:

- Ordained minister: **Distinctive Deacon**
- Ordained minister: **Priest**

Within the order of ministry, the sponsorship focus may be sponsorship as:

- **Incumbent / incumbent status** (please see below for further information)
- **Assistant minister**

Additional potential focuses of ministry may be flagged by the diocese (such as potential theological educator, chaplaincy or a workplace focus).

It is important to note that the focus category is **not** related to whether a candidate is expected to receive a stipend. It is related to leadership and the degree of responsibility expected of a candidate; a requirement to set and grow a vision; responsibility for others in ministry, and a level of ministerial autonomy. It is possible for a candidate to be sponsored as:

- A Distinctive Deacon **and** a potential incumbent
- A self-supporting ordained minister **and** a potential incumbent

If you are not recommended for training, support is offered by the diocese.

Again, more detailed guidance is available from the Bishop's Adviser for Diocesan Discernment of Ordained Ministry at Church House.

## 5. Training

Training for Ordained Ministry, whether stipendiary or SSM will involve time and study with others from neighbouring dioceses and this requires focus and commitment and a certain amount of study and written work.

There are two main 'options' when it comes to training –

- a. You can be asked by the Bishop to **train residentially** at a Theological College. This is generally training that is fulltime in nature and will require a candidate (or Ordinand as someone who is on the pathway to Ordination is known) to live at the college they attend.
- b. You can be asked by the Bishop to **train non-residentially** on a course which will be part-time. If you chose to train non-residentially, this training is usually delivered one evening a week, and there will also be learning / sessions on some Saturdays and over certain weekends. One 'advantage' of training non-residentially on a course is for those Ordinands who are employed in secular jobs (or who have care commitments), they can remain working and live in their own home. Most people seeking to be a SSOM train non-residentially.

During ordination training, those who intend to be SSM are given the opportunity to meet with the Bishop's Adviser for Self-Supporting Ordained Ministry and discuss the future shape of their ministry, as well as review their training to date, with particular reference to ensuring their training needs are being met.

Upon completion of training, and following Ordination, the SSM will have a nationally recognised ministry which makes them deployable across the country (and Anglican Communion!).

The Bishop's Adviser for Diocesan Discernment of Ordained Ministry, or the Bishop's Adviser for Self-Supporting Ordained Ministry can provide more detail re: training upon request.

## 6. Ordination

Near the start of the final year of training, the Bishop will consult with the Bishop's Adviser for Curate Development and Clergy Transitions, and if applicable, the appropriate Archdeacon and/or the Bishop's Adviser for Self-Supporting Ordained Ministry, over the identification of a title parish for the ordinand following ordination. As SSMs do not require church housing, there is a greater degree of flexibility over where the ordinand can serve their title, and their views will of course be sought. Consideration will also be given to the ordinand's paid employment (where applicable), that of his/her spouse and the education of any children of school age. The ordinand may also wish to raise other factors concerning the identification of a title parish, and should feel entirely free to do so, but the parish in which the title is served, is ultimately at the Bishop's discretion.

However, the standard expectation is that candidates will move to a different training context either for their initial (pre-ordination) training or for a curacy. Ordinands can be licensed to their "sending parish", though this is exceptional, as good practice dictates new experiences and learning opportunities afforded by a different parish can only enhance the curacy experience. This does not preclude a move back to the sending parish upon successful completion of the curacy and Initial Ministerial Education at a later date. In the exceptional cases where an ordinand is licensed to their sending parish, they will normally be expected to move to a different context for their pre-ordination training.

Thus, if the Ordinand has successfully completed training, the Bishop will ordain them first as deacon and all being well, in the following year as a priest (unless the ordinand is to be a permanent deacon).

## Conclusion

It is hoped the information above provides some further clarity around SSMs and the ministry to which they are called. Equally, it is hoped the information re: selection and training further support and inform those exploring this type of ministry.

Although there are a wealth of resources and books that can support with discerning the call the Ordained Ministry, perhaps the best place to start is by having a conversation with your incumbent. Do however feel free to contact either the Bishop's Adviser for Diocesan Discernment of Ordained Ministry, or the Bishop's Adviser for Self-Supporting Ordained Ministry at Church House, if you require any further support or information.

Finally, the books below are especially useful to those exploring a call to Self-Supporting Ordained Ministry:

- John Lees, *Self-Supporting Ministry: A Practical Guide* (SPCK, 2018)
- Jenny Gage, *Priests in Secular Work: Participating in the Missio Dei* (Sacristy Press, 2020)
- James Francis, *Busking the Gospel: Ordained Ministry in Secular Employment* (Sacristy Press 2021)



