

Nicola Hulks, a curate at St Luke's Church, Maidenhead, Berkshire, writes about how motherhood has been a blessing to her ministry.

When I began thinking about ordination, I was sent in the direction of a female curate in the hope that she might help me with my many questions.

Over coffee, I opened about one of my biggest fears. 'But I want to have children', I said looking down nervously at my coffee. She smiled at me and said 'Nicola, you do realise you are putting yourself forward for ordained not monastic life, right?'

That meeting was the first step along the road of what has been an extraordinary journey of becoming both mother and priest in the same year.

I never considered that God might be able to use motherhood to make me a better priest and priesthood to make me a better Mum. When people see the buggy and the screaming toddler they know that I am walking just the same path as them.

I wondered how aspects of my ministry would be affected by pregnancy and by having a small child. There are challenges, of course, but my ministry has also flourished in ways I never anticipated. Ministry to the bereaved was one such area that blossomed in pregnancy. I found, to my surprise, that arriving to speak with families in the midst of the loss of life bearing new life within me proved to be a real thing of comfort.

And where pregnancy helped me to engage in my work in a new way, maternity leave gave me time to step back from the life of the church and to see things from a different perspective. As I sat in the congregation rather than behind the altar, I saw things in a way I wouldn't have seen them before. But even more than this, maternity leave offered an opportunity for spiritual growth.

My training for ministry, as rich and wonderful as it was, pales in comparison with the training I believe that God really had in mind for me for the ordained life. Life, and for me motherhood, has been the most fertile training ground for priesthood. Parenthood provides the most intense training programme in how to love, how to exercise patience, how to practise kindness, how to travel through pain for the beauty of new life. I have seen sides of myself that I didn't know existed. I have new, hard won, understanding and empathy that I could have gained no other way.

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