

Selecting Ministers in Secular Employment

This document is designed to assist DDOs, Bishops' Advisers and others who have a role in selecting MSEs for the Church of England.

1. MSE and NSM/ SSM – what's the difference?

A considerable proportion of those entering ordained Anglican ministry do so on an unpaid basis. Some of them will offer a few hours a week to the Church, others will run parishes as unpaid incumbents (possibly on a House for Duty basis) or undertake roles normally performed by stipendiary clergy including some sectoral positions. They are all, technically, Non Stipendiary Ministers (NSM) or Self-Supporting Ministers (SSM). There are however some important distinctions:

- Many NSMs are not working, or partially or fully retired from work. These Ministers give a great deal of unpaid time performing an important role as associate clergy within a team, parish or other church context.
- Some receive an income from paid work which effectively funds the time they can give to church activity. These are often described using the category SSM. Their focus is still mainly within a church context.
- Ministers in Secular Employment are in some form of employment outside church life. Although they will usually have some parish responsibilities their primary focus of ministry and Christian witness is the *workplace*. Sometimes this is explicitly authorised, for example on an industrial chaplaincy basis. Far more often it is organised and recognised informally.

2. What defines a Minister in Secular Employment?

The primary focus of MSEs is their paid employment in particular, and the world of work more generally. MSEs are frequently employed on a full-time basis, but sometimes in part-time, self-employed, or freelance work.

These ministers are always licensed to a parish or deanery, and sometimes also licensed to an employing organisation where their role is both authorised and clearly defined. In many other cases the relationship with the employer is negotiated and acknowledged more informally. Their training is largely identical to NSM Curates except that they are usually less available for weekday training events.

The idea of clergy maintaining secular occupations is not a modern phenomenon. It can be argued that in the early church those who ministered maintained their livelihoods; Paul allegedly insisted on doing so and was clearly a self-supporting minister. Michael Ramsey, in the first edition of 'The Christian Priest Today', 1972, wrote:

I regard the contemporary development of a priesthood which combines a ministry of word and sacrament with employment in a secular profession not as a modern fad but as a recovery of something indubitably apostolic and primitive ...What we call our 'auxiliaries' today belong most truly to the apostolic foundation, and we may learn from them of that inner meaning of priesthood which we share with them.

3. Where are MSEs found?

All Christians are called to live out their discipleship in daily life, which for many includes the workplace. The workplace is an important arena for ministry. It can be a powerful source of stimulation, a community, a place for friendship and support, a place of learning, and a prompt to meaning and self-esteem. It can equally be a place of stress, uncertainty, drudgery, or somewhere individuals want to escape from.

Within the Church of England a vocation is largely interpreted as a call to stipendiary ministry, however some ordained clergy have a vocation to be where people work. MSEs are found in a huge range of occupations. Examples from recent years include teachers and lecturers, scientists, police officers, local government officers, HR managers, GPs, vets, nurses, engineers, surveyors, fire-fighters, bus drivers, independent consultants. MSEs are found in private, public and third sector organisations.

As the church makes increasing demands on non-stipendiary ministers MSEs are likely to be further involved in sectoral and diocesan roles on a voluntary basis.

4. What do MSEs do?

Ministers in Secular Employment have a particular ministry in that they are visibly outside the traditional 'Vicar' role, yet are still rooted in Word and Sacrament. In their work they choose to live out the Gospel among those who often appear to seek it the least, and to stand up for principles in contexts not normally engaged in conversation with the life of faith. MSEs speak of workplace encounters which bring Christ alive as effectively as any other form of outreach. MSEs provide one of the strongest links between church and the world of work, affirming that work itself can be a form of discipleship. MSEs keep the church better informed about the world of work and are better able to minister to those in congregations who are in work. Their work is distinctive and visible by being authorised, even if MSEs have little or no authority.

Priests serving as MSEs talk of "meeting God at work" - the privilege of seeking Christ in the workplace. Their work pushes down the barriers that may arise between 'church' and 'life'. When preaching or leading worship their experience of faith at work becomes an invaluable resource. By choosing to share the daily experience of work colleagues and helping them integrate faith and life, they celebrate the presence of God in all human activity, point to the values which underlie work, and tell the Christian story in a very particular language and context. By doing so, MSEs undertake an important if often invisible aspect of mission by affirming God's concern for every part of creation.

5. The ordained minister as MSE

Many serving MSEs describe the sacramental aspects of their role. This can range from providing baptisms, funerals or weddings for work colleagues and their families, to dealing with stress, shock and grief in the workplace, or helping an organisation work through times of change. A website created by the Diocese of Coventry states, “MSEs can provide the safe space in which people seek guidance and explore the issues that are concerning them in their lives. They often enable less conspicuous Christians to declare themselves. The pastoral interactions within the school, hospital or workplace community can be every bit as intense as those in the parish.”

Many MSEs describe the powerful connections that are made between prayer and sacrament and the work they do. They will talk about the way their work roles and contexts lead naturally to moments requiring confession, absolution, healing and blessing – even though these terms or any kind of religious language may never be used. They speak about how their celebration of the Eucharist reaches out to, informs, and incorporates the world of work. Sometimes this is through worship or prayer in, or connected with the workplace. At other times MSEs are acutely aware of the dangers of ‘churchifying’ the workplace.

A traditional four-fold picture of ministry will provide some insights into the work of MSEs:

- 1 Their work usually has a **pastoral** element, but one which is defined by ‘working alongside’ rather than a more formally defined chaplaincy role. MSEs’ familiarity with the pressures and joys of work will often give them important pastoral perspectives.
- 2 Their work sometimes has a **prophetic** or “wisdom” dimension to it - supporting, questioning and sometimes challenging the values of individuals and organisations, and the decisions they make.
- 3 They will very often be **evangelists** in the sense of using everyday work contexts as opportunities to be or point to the Gospel. MSEs are often gifted at bringing the language of faith into the workplace and the language of the workplace into worship.
- 4 They sometimes find themselves **teachers**, often in the way they unpack Church thinking, doctrine, the Bible in everyday conversations.

6. MSEs’ involvement in parish life

MSEs function, as do parochial clergy, within a community base, but also minister to a working community which may not be local to the parish.

Previous experiments in the ‘Worker Priest’ movement in France and elsewhere often dissolved any connections between the priest and a worshipping community. MSEs in the Church of England today are however rooted in parish ministry, and will usually engage in most if not all aspects of parish life. It is relatively common for MSEs to serve as Associate clergy in a parish setting, often undertaking a wide range of duties beyond Sunday services. Many describe this as a vital part of their work – having a parish base provides a place of worship, and an establishment which allows important connections through occasional offices. It also allows for important links between church and workplace.

7. Misunderstandings about MSEs

MSEs are not 'part-time' priests. All of their activity is ministry, not just the work they undertake within church contexts. They are not working simply to subsidise the time they give to the Church. They are not undertaking a background ministerial training in preparation for early retirement when they can take up full-time parish ministry.

Employers understandably have some difficulties understanding the role and purpose of MSEs, sometimes confusing what they do with chaplaincy, and often making the assumption that there will be a loss of focus on the main job, or that being an MSE is simply a preliminary stage to becoming a stipendiary minister.

MSEs are not (generally) Chaplains, although they may share many aspects of chaplaincy in their commitment to in the workplace. Chaplains are authorised minister who are licensed (whether on a paid or voluntary basis) to exercise a public ministry within a workplace setting. MSEs are in the workplace to use the appropriate skills and abilities that their employment requires. They recognise a calling to their everyday work, and acknowledge that it is at the centre of their discipleship and their ministry.

8. Pressures upon MSEs

This is also a demanding ministry, for a variety of reasons. Firstly, it is infrequent, in some contexts rare. This means that those responsible for selecting, training, deploying and supporting clergy are not always familiar with the needs of MSEs; it is still relatively rare to find teaching about MSEs within ordination training or continuing professional development programmes.

Well-informed and sensitive training officers and training incumbents will support MSEs in developing the whole of their ministry, both at work and in church. However in many cases MSEs have to define their own ministerial practice, and negotiate the training and support they need on an individual basis. MSEs frequently have to explain the rationale for their ministry to those within and outside the church. This is not a calling for those who are reluctant to ask for help, or individuals who expect every step of the path to be clearly defined. MSEs often need to be flexible, creative, pro-active and robust in their ability to define their role and calling.

MSEs often feel invisible within the church – their working commitments can mean that they are unable to participate in parish life during working hours and are in general less available for deanery and diocesan events. They may feel isolated in the work they do, potentially unrecognised by both church and workplace. Some report that the church can seem to be frustrated about their lack of availability for parish activities and slow in supporting workplace ministry. When offered the opportunity of a review or appraisal of their ministry, it is felt that only the most enlightened reviewer is able to ask appropriate questions about the full range of a MSE's work, or appreciate that all of an MSE's life is ministry, not just those exercised within worship or in the parish.

Many MSEs experience the pressures of what is effectively a demanding 'portfolio' life, constantly attempting to balance family, work and church commitments.

9. Selecting MSEs

MSEs are selected according to the Criteria for the Selection for Ministry in the Church of England applied to all candidates offering themselves for ordained ministry.

The following represents distinctive points DDOs and Bishops' Advisors might like to consider in the selection of potential MSEs to complement the published criteria:

A *Vocation*

- A calling that is realistic and informed in relation to workplace ministry *and* ministry within the church (bearing in mind the difficulties which surround any attempt to define the role and function of MSEs).
- Evidence that the candidate has thought about being called to be a minister in a workplace context and has a calling both to priesthood and to his/her existing, secular work.
- Signs that the vocation is informed by the candidate's working life.
- Indications that the candidate finds ways in which the church's understanding of ordained ministry (as a public representative office of the church) can nurture and encourage the life of the whole people of God in the world and in the service of the church's mission generally.

B *Ministry within the Church of England*

- Understanding of how the work of a MSE accords with the Church of England's statement of the office and work of a deacon/priest.
- A sensitivity to other forms of workplace ministry, particularly Chaplains.
- Insights into how ordained ministry will be shaped by and exercised in a workplace context.

C *Spirituality*

- A realistic commitment to a regular devotional life, which draws upon and contributes to the spiritual significance of work and daily life.
- Ability to take appropriate time for reflection, retreat and refreshment outside both work and church
- Ability to bring working experience into liturgy and preaching

D *Personality and Character*

- Ability to be pastorally sensitive and responsive within boundaries set by secular organisations.
- Evidence of ability to define and redefine his or her own ministry in changing contexts and to seek appropriate support.
- Capacity to cope with stress arising from the inevitably conflicting demands of family, work and church.

E *Relationships*

- Sensitivity and maturity to negotiate and exercise their ministry with workplace colleagues and to communicate effectively with staff at all levels in an organisation.
- Ability to build relationships across a wide range of communities.

F Leadership and Collaboration

- Ability to lead from within a team rather than as the team leader.
- The maturity to work within structures whilst at the same time where required challenging their values.

G Faith

- Understanding of the way Christian faith is expressed in work.
- Ability to make connections between faith and the needs and nature of contemporary society.

H Mission and Evangelism

- Awareness of the issues and problems faced by working communities, as well as organisations and their leaders.
- Ability to be an authentic and effective workplace minister capable of making connections between faith and working life.

I Quality of Mind

- Capacity to reflect theologically on the demands, needs and privileges of workplace ministry.
- Ability to respond to the challenges and questions frequently faced by workplace ministers as visible representatives of the Church of England.
- Capacity to become a theological resource (for the church and others) in the workplace.

References

- J M M Francis & L J Francis (ed), *Tentmaking: Perspectives on Self-Supporting Ministry*, Gracewing, 1998.
- John Fuller and Patrick Vaughan, *Working for the Kingdom: Story of Ministers in Secular Employment*, SPCK, 1986.
- Armand E. Larive, *After Sunday: A Theology of Work*, Continuum, 2004.
- K Mason, *Priesthood and Society*, Canterbury Press 2002.

CHRISM (<http://www.chrism.org.uk>) CHRISM is an association for all Christians who see their secular employment as a primary field of Christian discipleship and ministry. Much of its work and thinking is relevant to MSEs. CHRISM's stated aim is to "help ourselves and others to celebrate the presence of God and the holiness of life in our work, and to see and tell the Christian story there". The organisation adds that "an essential part of our ministry must be to support and nurture those around us who also recognise and apply these truths in their working lives or are seeking to do so".