

International Women's Day: Interview with a Chaplain

Our Methodist Chaplain *Rev Nicola Morrison* talks about her experience of being a *minister & mum* during the pandemic



What were the best things about ministry and motherhood in a 'normal times'?

Where do I start? For me these are both vocations that have a clear calling. In fact the sense in which I knew that motherhood was part of my identity arrived much earlier in my life than the 'call' to ordained ministry - sometimes when I feel the pressure of work I forget this but remembering always helps to restore balance and reduce guilt.

So, one of the best things is that both ministry and motherhood offer me a deep feeling of fulfilment; both are constantly surprising, life-giving and are about being alongside people in all the different experiences of life. It's a real privilege to be a minister and a mum. I have come to appreciate that whilst the tasks of both are quite different they are vocations centred on love (the hard, enduring kind) and have a deep connection to community. Whilst being far from a walk in the park, they are unpredictable, exciting and joyous parts of my life, which is fortunate as they are also dominant parts.



Pre-pandemic photo

How has the lockdown impacted these things?

The main impact of lockdown initially was that whilst many people experienced having more time, my experience was of less (and I speak on behalf of parents and caregivers everywhere).

My kids are primary school age. In order to make working compatible with parenthood there is an essential infrastructure that needs to be in place, they say 'it takes a village' for a reason! This infrastructure includes school, afterschool clubs, formal childcare, babysitters, support of family and friends, etc..... In lockdown all this suddenly disappeared at the same time as other responsibilities escalated. With the whole family at home, the demands of housework increased; we needed to plan, shop for, and prepare 28 more meals/week; we had to home-school 2 kids, 1 who has a chronic health condition and the other who can't yet read or write independently; not being able to meet with their friends we needed to find time to play more with the kids as well as help them cope emotionally with what was happening; we had to find ways to care for aging parents at a distance; and work necessitated the development of new technological skills as well as thought, imagination and creative attention to delivering chaplaincy and college provision online. I must admit in those first months I got very tired of hearing the phrase *'well, now we have more time....'* This often rang in my ears whilst I was multi-tasking a zoom call with helping my youngest reluctantly read and trying to mentally plan how I could fit in making their lunch whilst uploading their schoolwork to 'Teams' (also, what is 'Teams?!?'). Lockdown didn't just blur, it destroyed the edges between home and work life and I have often felt like I'm living 2 days in 1.



Post pandemic photo

In terms of being alongside people in all the different experiences of life motherhood and ministry took divergent paths. As a mum I was now with my children 24/7. I experienced all their highs and lows and they in turn experienced mine (they are very tolerant and lovely). It was wonderful to have them to ourselves in this way but also emotionally exhausting, it seems children can experience upwards of 25 different emotions a minute, objectively it's remarkable and funny, in reality it's unpredictable and really, really, tiring.

As a Chaplain, I've had the opposite experience, I couldn't be alongside anyone in person. This has been deeply frustrating and just plain sad. Members of our community, students and staff, have experienced so much during this time and the majority of these experiences are difficult and painful. Zoom has been a blessing in that it has enabled us to be in contact but it's no substitute for the natural human instinct to gather in order to share and experience life alongside others. I have deeply missed sharing space, I would go as far as to say it's been a source of grief.

What have been the biggest surprises about your experience of ministry and motherhood in lockdown?

That I don't have the same capacity to just keep going as I once had. I'm in my 40's now and I have had to accept that I can no longer burn the candle at both ends and form a coherent sentence the next day. If you've been on the receiving end of this learning curve, I can only apologise!

What has been the hardest aspect of this time?

Firstly, accepting the limitations. As someone called to motherhood and pastoral ministry it's painful to not be able to sit with someone who is ill, or has been bereaved, or attend a funeral, or make it so that my kids can see their friends on their birthdays. Over the course of my adult life I thought I had accepted the idea of 'being in control' as a false idol, but I realise now that there were so many aspects of my life where I took having some control for granted. Once we've come through this crisis I hope I will always remember to fully appreciate the freedoms we have but I suspect I shall prove to be a bad student.

Secondly, looking after my own wellbeing has been hard, as I suspect it has been for many working parents. More often than not I have felt like I'm failing on both the work and home front as when I'm doing work I'm conscious of the kids' needs, and when I'm with my kids I'm conscious of the work that needs my attention.

There have been occasions when the demands have felt so great that I've gone to bed dressed for the next morning. I've thought about if I should share this as I feel a little ashamed of it, but at the end of the day it's the truth and it was done out of necessity. I also imagine if I've done it then chances are others have too and if that's the case it's helpful to know you're not alone.



Home-school: inside & out

What have been the blessings of this time with regards to ministry and motherhood?

Well, I've not done it alone (those that have are beyond legendary!). My hubby, also working from home, has taken an equal role with the children, so a shout out to him is essential

There are loads of other ways I've felt blessed:

- When we first went into lockdown I realised that being able to spend time in this way with our children was a blessing. I tried to resolve not to give into stress, to exercise my ministry as well as I could whilst loving and supporting my kids and having as much fun as we could muster. Of course, life is a mixed bag of nuts but there were times when we met these goals and I treasure them.
- The mutuality of ministry has been a blessing. Ministry/Chaplaincy is not about service provision, it's relational and centred on community. I have been blessed by the mutual care and support of people within the community and the teams I work within.
- I must also mention that school staff have just been amazing (hats off to academic staff everywhere!). They've had such a mixed and demanding year and all the time they've remained upbeat for our kids. I'm in awe that any of them are still standing (I'm convinced they must all be under 40!). Over the most recent lockdown our children were offered a place at school, everyone who's juggled worked and home-school will appreciate what an utter Godsend this has been.

How has this experience informed how you will parent and work once restrictions have been lifted?

I'm not sure any of us really know how this experience will inform us yet, we've still a lot of processing to do. I'm concerned that our British 'stiff upper lip' approach will stifle feelings around what has been a universally traumatic time. In terms of ministry there will be a lot from the experience I will reflect on, learn and carry forward, we certainly need time to process and heal. We put recovery plans in place for businesses and I would like to see us think in the same way about our personal need for recovery. In practical terms I suspect I will be less likely to turn up to work with a cold or sore throat than in the past, and I will continue to wash my hands more frequently!

In terms of motherhood I will be fiercely rejecting language and ideology around the need for our children to 'catch up' with their studies. I can't put into words how objectionable I find this. I'm so tremendously inspired by how well our young people have coped. We can learn a lot from them.

What do you wish you'd known at the beginning of this pandemic?



On the one hand I wish I'd known how long it would last and the scale of loss we were about to face. On the other hand I'm not sure that we could have coped with this knowledge, it may have proved just too much to process.

As someone whose faith fuels a passion for social justice I definitely wish we'd better known who within our communities would be disproportionately affected by the impact of the pandemic (including mothers). The generosity that places like Foodbanks have experienced during this time indicate that there is a genuine desire within our society to support others. For me, this has been a welcome sign amidst the divisive and toxic rhetoric around Brexit. I'd like to see that spirit of concern and generosity translated to government policy that better tackles poverty and marginalisation within the UK. Not least because one result of lockdown is that yet again the rich have gone richer and the poor poorer, we really have to find substantive ways to address this injustice. I say this because where motherhood and ministry combine for me is in the words I once heard Shami Chakrabarti speak to a local church group: *'the key to human rights is loving other people's children as your own'*. Whilst Shami doesn't share my faith she managed to capture from a parent's perspective what Christians call 'the greatest commandment' which is to love God with your whole being and to love your neighbour as yourself.

If you were to sum up your experience of this period in three words what words would you choose?

Oh this is so hard!! There's so much to capture, impossible in 3 words but I'll go with:

heart-breaking, enduring, and zoomhaustion (which I've made up, but we all know what it means!)