

The Revd Fritha Middlemiss, retired assistant priest in the Heart of England parishes.

My Biblical Studies professor was once asked, 'What do your women students do when their male colleagues get ordained?' He replied, 'Sometimes they marry them and write their sermons for them.' Well I married one, but he wasn't ordained. Though he worked for the Church all his life he was passionate about lay vocation and the loss to the Church when it pushes all its talented ministers into ordination. I still agree with him about that and anyway women couldn't then be ordained, so it was a surprise to me and a shock to him when, in my late thirties, I felt called to formal church ministry – to become a deaconess. Halfway through my training the rules changed so I was ordained deacon, wore a dog collar and got the title 'Reverend.' Five years later, in 1994, I became one of the first women priests in the Church of England.

I began work as a part-time, unpaid Curate, later Assistant Priest in Bengeworth, then in Drakes Broughton. I had three young children and we lived at Holland House, the church Retreat Conference and Laity Centre in Crothorne which my husband ran. Both of those things impacted on what I did. I found it easy to relate to young families in and out of church and a number, particularly of mothers, said they could open up to me as a woman. At Holland House I learnt the value of hospitality and I met people from many different parts of the Church and secular life and my ideas and sympathies were broadened. Family life probably attracted me to take an interest in retail chaplaincy. At what is now Morrison's in Evesham I was welcomed into the staff room and to host a weekly open coffee morning in the café.

My next (and paid this time) role was as chaplain to Malvern Girls' College. Like all chaplaincy work, it involves ministering to the immediate community, in this case pupils and staff, their families and friends and to the local community. Like a number of clergy I would describe my job as keeping the rumour of God alive or as my University chaplain would say, asking how to see where God is King in any given situation.



All of this was true of my final job before retirement as a chaplain in Long Lartin prison. You will know that Long Lartin houses some of the country's most dangerous and notorious criminals. It also houses many people who are addicts or mentally ill, but the inmates are people made in God's image and so a prison must be a place of hope and humanity within a culture that can be brutal and dehumanising. . The chaplaincy team is ecumenical and inter faith and works alongside officers, psychologists, healthcare staff, educators and more to enable this to happen. To this day I am passionate about prison reform and public education in penal affairs.

My husband and I retired to Berwick upon Tweed in my home county of Northumberland. After he died, I returned to this part of the world to be near one of my children. You have made me very welcome. Just import the sea and life will be complete.