

# A 'TYPICAL' CHRISTMAS FOR A 'typical-ish' Vicar

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I am the Reverend Juliet Stephenson, the right side of 50, married, two children at university, ordained Priest in the Diocese of Newcastle and serving the parish of Holy Nativity. You might remember me from the *A Day in the Life* feature, in *Funeral Director Monthly*, a couple of years ago.

I am delighted to be making a festive comeback in the magazine and to have been asked what the festive season is like for a parish priest. So, here goes...

As my parish is 'Holy Nativity', my Patronal festival, when we celebrate the church's existence and life, happens at that most wonderful time of the year: Christmas!

Christmas, of course, can be a great time for many, and excruciating for some. Everyone always says to me, "Ooh Vicar, this is your busiest time then?" and I have to admit this comment always, without fail, takes me a little by surprise.

Does this well-meaning parishioner imply that for the rest of the year I twiddle my thumbs? Or struggle to find enough things with which to fill my time? Either way, the fact that Christmas for vicars is a busy time, is true enough.

People expect the usual festive delights: carol services, candlelight processions, cute nativity scenes, little children, dressed in tinsel and tea towels singing *Away in a Manger*. At my church, the Church of The Holy Nativity, these things happen in bucket loads. I guess the one addition to the previous Christmas list that I would

add, is that at MY church, we all wear pyjamas or onesies at the Christmas Eve service!

(Well...it's important to be ready to go straight to bed, so as not to upset Father Christmas - after we have welcomed the amazing, marvellous, fabulous baby Jesus into the world!)

And yes, all these things must happen; they ought to happen and they definitely do happen.....amidst the day-to-day other things that the vicar has to do. And all of it is my utter pleasure to do. Why? Because it's my calling, my vocation, my response to the question of the 'meaning of my life' - to serve others, as Christ has served me.

I love my life. I love spending time with people, and I have great working relationships with my local funeral directors. As a 'lone priest' working in a parish of 8,000 people, I am highly aware that the people who I consider as my colleagues are most definitely the people who I spend my time with. As a busy vicar, who takes lots of funerals each month, I spend a lot of time with funeral staff; drivers, bearers, arrangers, directors, administrators and others, and I have come to respect and relish the time I spend with them all. It's no hardship to drink coffee, go out for meals and staff parties - where I'm treated as 'one of them'.

One of the greatest assets of being a parish priest, is living in the community in which I serve. I walk my dog, and meet families who I've met through baptisms. I fill my car up with petrol, and I catch up with the man whose mother I buried. I call into the shop to pick up the essentials, and am greeted by the children from school...who stare curiously into my trolley, wondering why I only ever seem to have bottles of 'clear' liquid, tonic and a few lemons!

I guess what I'm saying, is that I know my community. They trust me. They come to me for the happy things and they rely on me in times of sadness and grief. I meet them where they are. And they see me as I am. In *their* street, at *their* school, in *their* doctor's surgery. And, when the time comes, I sit with them, my neighbours, in their homes,

as they cry - sharing the life stories of their loved ones.

Sometimes I know of a death as soon as it happens, but often, it's that first call from the funeral director that alerts me to the news. You may not reach me immediately; I might be at school, I might be sitting with a sick person in hospital, I might be taking a church service, but try me again, on my mobile, by email, or messenger.... and I will be there.

I promise all funeral directors I work with that, as soon as they share with me the details of the family who we will serve together, I will be in touch. Because it's important to me that, from every angle, the family are well looked after, before, during and after the event.

The Church of England trains its priests and lay ministers well in the art of taking funerals. We are serious about it, and want to do it well. Sometimes, relationships are hard, but I encourage the clergy I train and work alongside to persevere in building good relationships, and I urge you in the industry to do the same.

Mutual respect, mutual trust will lead to friendships and good service.

So - Christmas, a busy time for me?

Yes - but I love it, so I don't mind one bit, because it's the time of year when the most visitors to church flock across the threshold, to get into that 'spirit', and I get the wonderful privilege of sharing with them the greatest story ever told.

Merry Christmas and every blessing!

