

## Reader Selection in the Church of England

### [1] Mapping the Contours: the Current State of Reader Selection

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#### 1. Introduction and Rationale

In April 2010 a Questionnaire on Reader Selection was sent to the Wardens of Readers in every diocese of the Church of England (see Appendix). The purpose of this exercise was to obtain an overview of Reader selection throughout the country, and, particularly, to identify examples of “best practice” which could be shared with others.

Responses were received from 38 of the 44 dioceses which make up the Provinces of Canterbury and York. In addition many dioceses sent examples of documentation used in the Reader selection process. As well as analysing these responses, I have visited a number of dioceses, meeting Wardens and others involved in Reader selection and, in some cases, witnessing parts of the selection process in action, with the result that I have been made aware of the excellent work which is going on in this area.

It may be asked, therefore, why such an exercise is necessary. One answer to that question would be to point to the patchy situation regarding Reader ministry as revealed by the General Synod debate in February 2006 and the Working Group which produced *Reader Upbeat* in 2008.<sup>1</sup> In some dioceses Reader ministry is in vibrant good health, but in others it really struggles, with very small numbers of recruits coming forward each year. There are other reasons why people might not be attracted to Reader ministry as they once were, but in some cases it is clearly the selection procedure which is at fault. Where the attitudes are conditioned by the

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<sup>1</sup> *Reader Upbeat: Quickening the tempo of Reader Ministry in the Church today*, Report from the Reader Review Group of the Ministry Division of the Archbishops' Council, 2008.

Seven Last Words of the Church of England, "we have always done it this way", an injection of fresh thinking is desperately needed.

I was for five years Warden of Readers in the Diocese of Liverpool, where Reader ministry is thriving, with a steady stream of new recruits coming forward each year. I thought that the methods of selection in use there were about right, requiring little more than some detailed tinkering from time to time, but now, having seen what is going on in other dioceses, I recognise many things that I would do differently if I were still Warden. There are always things which we can learn from others, no matter how well we think we are doing the job. This report is an attempt to share all that is good in Reader selection in England. It is in no way prescriptive; dioceses know what works for them and no one would dream of imposing a uniform system on them. Nevertheless, it should always be remembered that Readers are transferable from one diocese to another, so that some uniformity in terms of standards is desirable. The ultimate aim of the selection and training process must always be to produce people who are best equipped to meet the challenges of mission and ministry in today's Church. What we are offering is a range of methods and procedures which have been shown to work. They may not necessarily work in your situation, but they are worthy of your consideration. Please feel free to take or reject whatever you like.

This Introductory Paper will be followed by three others. These are:

- [2] What is Reader Ministry and how can it be discerned? Criteria for Reader selection.**
- [3] The Selection of Readers in Dioceses; Identifying Best Practice in Content and Process**
- [4] Encouraging and promoting the Vocation of Readers.**

The scope of these papers is discussed below.

## **2. What is Reader Ministry and how can it be discerned? Criteria for Reader selection.**

One question which is fundamental to our thinking on Reader selection is “What is a Reader?” At one time the answer to that question would have been simple: Readers were people who were licensed to “read” Morning and Evening Prayer and occasionally preach in churches or mission halls when an ordained person was not available. Now the situation is much more complex as well as more confused; Readers are doing many more things in a great variety of settings. At the same time there has been a growth in other lay ministries, whose functions (leading worship, pastoral work etc) have traditionally been those of Readers. For many of these ministries the training is far less arduous and prolonged than that for Readers, something which may have led to falling numbers offering for Reader ministry in some dioceses. Potential recruits understandably do not opt for the demanding training necessary to become a Reader if they can be doing what is seen as essentially “the same job” after nothing more than a year’s course.

These Papers are predicated on the firm belief that Reader ministry has a vital role to play in the Church of England in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century. Indeed, we consider that, if we are to address today’s enormous challenges in terms of mission, there is a greater need than ever before for theologically literate lay men and women as part of the authorised public ministry of the Church. Reader ministry today is much more than “preaching and teaching in a pastoral context”, but attempts to define its essential character can prove elusory. One solution is to take a functional approach, asking quite simply what Readers do. But because of the way in which the work of other authorised lay ministries now overlaps that of Readers, we are forced to consider what the *essential qualities* of Reader ministry are. For instance, what, if anything, does a Reader involved in pastoral work bring to that ministry which is not brought by an episcopally authorised lay Pastoral Assistant? In practice each diocese will have its own views about what Reader ministry is and, particularly, about what Readers are expected to do – as, indeed, will each parish. But whether we are content with a descriptively functional approach to defining Reader ministry or undertake some more ontological analysis, some serious thought must be given to

this topic. We cannot select people effectively if we do not know what we are selecting them for.

A closely related topic, treated in the same Paper, will be the Criteria applied for selecting people to be trained as Readers. The current Criteria are now fourteen years old.<sup>2</sup> Do they need updating or making more "Reader specific" or are they still acceptable? How should we apply the Criteria in practice? We will be offering a revised set of Selection Criteria for Readers.

### **3. The Selection of Readers in Dioceses; Identifying Best Practice in Content and Process**

The other two Papers are more concerned with the mechanics of how we actually select people for Reader ministry. This Paper is concerned with the *process* of selection itself. Here we should remember that the essential aim is to identify people who can, after appropriate training, effectively fulfil the role of Reader, however we may have defined that. When, after licensing, a particular Reader disappoints our expectations in this respect, our selection process will have failed. Not only will this result in frustration and a sense of unfulfilled vocation in the Reader, but also we will be failing the very people to whom we are called to minister. But if we discover that Reader ministry is not appropriate for a particular individual, who is quite convinced of a strong calling to *some* sort of ministry within the Church, we have a duty to ask in what direction that calling really lies. It is vital, therefore, that our processes of discernment consider Reader ministry alongside the other authorised ministries to which the Holy Spirit might be calling a person.

In the Questionnaire, Wardens were asked "Approximately what percentage of those interviewed is finally selected for training?" Of those who gave an actual figure (i.e. most), the average was 95%. Others said "almost all", "a very high percentage", or commented that candidates attending the Selection Conference were "very rarely rejected". To the outside observer this might appear to be a dangerously high

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<sup>2</sup> *Selection for Reader Ministry*, ABM Policy Paper 7, January 1998

figure, indicating that standards were very low and that “almost anyone” could be accepted for Reader training.

This belief, however, would be a mistake. In one diocese, with a figure of 99% being selected, the Warden<sup>3</sup> writes:

Really inappropriate people have been weeded out before they get to Reader Selection. We concentrate on Reader Ministry, establishing what the potential person knows, believes and what they feel God is calling them to actually do. We do of course recognise the academic needs and always offer some concession for appropriate learning and qualification. We listen to what the encouraging parish has to say, they can best answer the question “would you like this person ministering to you?”

These words are echoed by many other Wardens in their replies. Quite clearly, the Selection Conference is seen as *the final stage* in the selection process. This is a view with which we would whole-heartedly concur. However much we might try to make our Selection Conferences “user-friendly”, they will be perceived by most applicants as interviews similar to those which they might have experienced in their secular employment. Such experiences are potentially stressful, and it would be wrong to subject people to them unnecessarily. Therefore, it is strongly recommended that dioceses should not call candidates before a selection panel *unless it is almost certain that they will be accepted*. The purpose of this final stage in the process should be to *confirm* an already formed sense of the candidate's suitability and to highlight any problems which might not have been apparent earlier. *The process of discernment should start long before the candidate reaches this stage*. If that is right, the Selection Conference should be little more than a formality. Therefore, Paper 3 will consider the process of discernment which might lead to attendance at a Selection Conference, as well as the organisation of the Conference itself.

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<sup>3</sup> Canon Ann Hemsworth, Warden of Readers for the Diocese of Ripon and Leeds.

#### **4. Encouraging and promoting the Vocation of Readers.**

Here we will be concerned with publicity and recruitment. If it is agreed that Readers have an important role to play in the ministry of the Church, dioceses will wish to encourage lay men and women to come forward for possible selection. When they were asked how they publicised Reader ministry, some Wardens replied that the principal method of Reader recruitment was "by word of mouth and by the example of serving Readers". Although it cannot be denied that, as in most matters related to the faith, the example of others can be extraordinarily powerful, it will only be effective in those parishes where there are already active Readers in place. Parishes in which Reader ministry is embedded as an essential part of their witness are constantly producing new recruits. But there are many parishes which have no Readers. In some of these, many members of the congregation will have had little or no experience of Reader ministry in their lives. Therefore, it is quite clear that we need to be more proactive in seeking potential recruits.

However, we should avoid giving the impression that Reader ministry is in some way "in competition" with other vocations, especially ordained ministry. Our approach should be rooted in the belief that God is calling all believers to some sort of "ministry" (in the original sense of "service"); it is our job to present to people in our churches some of the possibilities and to help them discern what it is that God might be calling them to.

#### **5. Postscript: Terminology**

*Reader Upbeat* recommended that the term "Reader" should be replaced by "Licensed Lay Minister (Reader)". Some dioceses have adopted that title or some other of their own devising. I will use the name "Reader", not because I have any strong views on the matter, but simply because it is concise and, at least amongst those who will read these Papers, it is universally understood. I will also use the title "Warden of Readers" or, more simply, "Warden", although I am aware that diocesan structures vary considerably and the person having oversight for Readers is not always called the Warden. Furthermore, in some dioceses the Warden is not

involved in the selection process at all. So, if that is true of your diocese, for "Warden" read "the person(s) with responsibility for Reader selection". There are also considerable variations in terminology for other officers and bodies operating in particular dioceses. I have endeavoured to use the most common titles, but if I have not used the correct one for your diocese, I crave your indulgence, and trust that my meaning will be clear.

### **Acknowledgments**

I would wish to thank the Wardens, Directors of Training, Vocations Advisors, Selection Secretaries and other diocesan officers who, by their thoughtful completion of the Questionnaire and in discussions since, have contributed to the formulation of the ideas presented in this report. To those dioceses which I have visited, and especially to those in which I was able to witness parts of the Reader selection process in action, I offer my special thanks for your kindness and hospitality. I would also wish to thank the many rank and file Readers who have shared their experiences with me.

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**APPENDIX****Reader Selection: Some Questions to Wardens and Others Responsible for Reader Selection****Section A: Publicity**

- [1] How is Reader Ministry publicised in your Diocese?
- [2] Are there any events specifically designed to encourage people to explore Reader Ministry? If so, please give details.

**Section B: Discernment**

- [3] How do people who feel called to Reader Ministry test that calling?
- [4] Are parishes encouraged to allow lay people to test their gifts before offering themselves for selection (e.g. in preaching - see *Reader Upbeat* Recommendation 11)?
- [5] Is there any provision for those exploring Reader Ministry to meet with or "shadow" an experienced Reader? If so, please give details.

**Section C: Procedures**

- [6] How is the Reader selection process conducted in your Diocese?
- [7] Who is involved in the process?
- [8] What training is in place for helping selectors develop their skills in discernment and assessment?
- [9] Who makes the final decision about who is, or is not, selected?
- [10] Approximately what percentage of those interviewed is finally selected for training?
- [11] What happens to those not selected?

**Section D: Criteria for Selection**

- [12] What are the key functions of a Reader in your Diocese?
- [13] In the selection of candidates for Reader training, what tools of assessment (e.g. interview, group work, written work) do you use?
- [14] Do you have your own criteria for selection or do you use the National Criteria?
- [15] Do you think the National Criteria need to be modified? If so, in what way?