

Reader Selection in the Church of England

[2] What is Reader Ministry and how can it be discerned?

including

Criteria for Reader Selection

Nicholas Daunt, National Consultant for Reader Selection

I have already noted the confused state of Reader ministry in today's Church of England.¹ Much of this confusion was voiced in the General Synod debate in February 2006, which led to the setting up of the Working Group and the eventual publication of *Reader Upbeat*.² It is not necessary here to rehearse the many woes expressed by Readers at the time. Most of them could be described as *presenting symptoms* of an underlying malaise. The real problem was that no one seemed to have a very clear idea of what Readers should be doing or, indeed, what Readers really were.

Looked at in terms of Reader selection, which is, of course, our principal concern here, this was not a very helpful situation. Quite clearly, we cannot be effective in selecting people to a ministry if we do not know what that ministry really is. But the problem goes beyond selection. Readers have an understandable desire that their ministry should be seen as an essential part of the public ministry of the Church of England, on a par with, but yet different from, the ordained ministry. But how can it be afforded such stature if there remains such confusion about its true nature?

What do Readers do? A functional approach.

In earlier times, it was quite clear what Readers were meant to do. They *read* the services of Morning and Evening Prayer in mission halls and churches where no ordained minister was available. Gradually they acquired other functions, most

¹ See Paper 1: *Mapping the Contours: the Current State of Reader Selection*.

² *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.

obviously preaching and leading study groups, to which was added a range of pastoral duties. This led to the formulation of the stock description of Reader ministry as “preaching and teaching in a pastoral context”, to which many people, including many diocesan bishops, still subscribe today. This description is perfectly adequate, as far as it goes. Unfortunately it does not go far enough, since, although it may still apply to the situation in many parishes up and down the country, it cannot possibly encompass the totality of Reader ministry as it is practised today.

A number of factors have conspired to produce today’s changed landscape. These can be broadly summarised as:

- Changing patterns of worship
- The emergence of other forms of ministry, both ordained and lay
- A widening of the roles undertaken by Readers themselves.

In terms of *changing patterns of worship*, the most obvious development has been the way in which, since the 1950s or 1960s, the Eucharist has come to be the principal service in most parishes. Morning and Evening Prayer, which have been the default form of church attendance on a Sunday for most Anglicans ever since the 16th century, have all but disappeared in many churches. Evensong has been particularly hard hit, partly because people are unwilling to go to church again on a Sunday evening. As I have already noted, it was precisely these forms of non-Eucharistic worship which were the principal preserve of the Reader. It is true that Readers can still play an important role in services of Holy Communion, especially in terms of reading, preaching and leading intercessions, but it is essentially a *subordinate* role. Furthermore, there are some churches whose tradition does not allow lay people to read or preach at the Eucharist.

It is true that, as if to compensate for the loss of Matins and Evensong, we have seen the rise in many parishes of informal non-Eucharistic “services of the word” or “family services”. These services are often led, in many cases very effectively, by Readers.

The *emergence of other forms of ministry* is seen by many Readers as a very real threat to their own role and status.³ In some cases, they see these “new” ministers doing precisely the sort of work that they are accustomed to do, sometimes after considerably less training. Relatively recent forms of ordained ministry, Non-Stipendiary Ministers and, in those dioceses where they exist, Ordained Local Ministers, are often seen as “diverting” would be applicants from Reader ministry. Certainly, there is some overlap between them and Readers in terms of function. But it is perhaps in the area of *lay* ministry that we have seen the greatest growth of alternatives in recent years. In addition to the “traditional” forms of authorised lay ministry such as Readers and Church Army⁴, there are now, amongst others, worship leaders, pastoral assistants, evangelists, youth workers, social workers and pioneer ministers who are employed in the new worshipping communities which have sprung up as a result of the Church’s welcome development of “Fresh Expressions”. It should be emphasised that we are not talking here of a vicar giving a particular lay person a role within the parish, but about *episcopally licensed* ministries which are recognised throughout a diocese and, in some cases, beyond. In other words, they have the same status as Readers.

When we consider the *widening roles undertaken by Readers*, it must be said that the majority of Readers still have a fairly traditional, church-based role; the activities undertaken by these Readers include:

- Saying (or singing) the Morning and Evening Offices
- Leading other non-Eucharistic services
- Preaching
- Reading lessons
- Leading intercessions
- Assisting with the administration of Holy Communion
- Teaching (e.g. house groups, preparation for baptism and confirmation etc)
- Being alongside the bereaved or other people experiencing difficulties in their lives

³ Questions of status ought not to concern a Christian minister, but Readers are, of course, human!

⁴ To which should also be added religious orders, although this is a very different type of vocation.

- Conducting funerals
- Visiting and taking Holy Communion to the sick and housebound.

Increasingly, however, there are Readers who are exercising almost their entire ministry outside the confines of the church building. Some of these fulfil the kinds of functions we have already noted above (e.g. pastoral assistants, evangelists, youth workers, social workers, pioneer ministers etc). Whereas in some dioceses there are, as we have seen, specific forms of authorised lay ministry to work in these areas, in others bishops insist that all this work should be carried out by Readers. This raises the question of how we distinguish between two people doing exactly the same job, but in different dioceses, one of whom is a Reader and the other is not.

We also find that many Readers are working as chaplains, not just in the more traditional settings of hospitals, educational institutions and prisons, but also in a variety of other places, such as shopping centres, airports and with the emergency services. Here there is more of an overlap with the ordained ministry. Indeed, many Readers are part of chaplaincy teams in which they work alongside ordained colleagues.

Finally, it should be noted that in some dioceses there are now stipendiary Readers who are in charge of parishes or churches. Legally a neighbouring cleric is Priest in Charge, and this person is able to supply the degree of supervision which is required. The parishes concerned are usually ones in which the tradition of Sunday services is generally non-Eucharistic. A priest is brought in whenever there is a Eucharist. Such instances are usually seen as fairly short-term solutions to a particular problem, but they do call into question what has always been a fundamental assumption about Reader ministry, namely that it is a *voluntary* ministry.

What are Readers? An ontological approach.

It is easy enough to list the various functions which Readers fulfil, but producing a definition appropriate to today's circumstances becomes difficult. But the problems

really increase when we attempt to draw out of all these multifarious activities the *essence* of Reader ministry. This is not some exercise in Platonic speculation but rather it is of vital importance because the answer we give will have major implications on our selection procedures and on the way in which we train new recruits. It is worth repeating my earlier assertion that *we cannot be effective in selecting people to a ministry if we do not know what that ministry really is.*

The problem can be highlighted if we consider a hypothetical situation; in one diocese a bereaved person receives support and friendship from a licensed pastoral worker; in another a similar person is ministered to by a Reader. In what way, if any, does the Reader carry out this ministry *differently*? Indeed, is there any real difference between the two cases? Situations such as this could be repeated in other areas where Reader ministry overlaps and, dare one say it, is in competition with alternative forms of licensed ministry, both lay and ordained.

In this context it is worth quoting some recent words from the Bishop of Sodor and Man.

What I am concerned about is that we need to shift the perception of Reader ministry from "Vicar's Little Helper", "Amateur Preacher" and "Vacancy Supply Minister" to someone with a specialism in (basic) theology who is deeply rooted in lay involvement outside the Church. Of course, if we don't clarify the relationship of Readers to other authorised lay ministries - and that means beginning to define those other ministries - then the office of Reader will inevitably be the default lay ministry.⁵

Of course, in many cases Readers *are* "Vicar's Little Helpers" (vicars need help!) and "Vacancy Supply Ministers" (they often keep the local church going in these situations). If they are "Amateur Preachers" I would hope that they would be so in the best sense of "amateur" (doing it for love) and not "amateurish". But obviously the Bishop's remarks have an aspirational quality, and they seem to define the two key elements of what Reader ministry *should* be. In his concern that Readers should be "someone with a specialism in (basic) theology who is deeply rooted in lay involvement outside the Church", he points us towards the essence of Reader

⁵ Rt Rev'd Robert Paterson, Bishop of Sodor and Man and Chair of the Central Readers Council, personal communication.

ministry. Readers are, in short, *lay theologians*. These two words require further examination.

That Readers are “lay” people is axiomatic.⁶ Indeed, many people still call them by their old title of “Lay Reader”. In the past there have been calls from people with tidy minds for Readers to be ordained to the permanent Diaconate. Such a move would have been, in my view, an unwelcome clericalisation which would have sent out the message that really important work in the Church can only be performed by those in Holy Orders. Happily, we hear less of these calls at present. Instead Readers should glory in their lay status, not because there is anything “wrong” with ordination, but because their involvement in work of such importance while remaining unordained is a token that the Church of England is still part of “a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation”.⁷

Typically Readers emerge from a particular congregation, unlike clergy who are almost invariably brought in from elsewhere. Incumbents come and incumbents go, but Readers who have lived in a parish all or much of their lives provide a welcome degree of stability. For that reason, they are sometimes preferred for conducting funerals; they may have known and been known to the family over many decades. Because Readers operate for a significant proportion of their lives outside the formal structures of the Church, they are able to bring to their work as ministers different insights. Furthermore, through their secular employment they are able to establish points of contact with those who are completely unchurched. Some people will always find it easier to talk about the things that matter to someone who does not wear a clerical collar. This is not in any way to diminish the importance or value of the ordained ministry; it is nonsense to suggest that, because they are lay people, Readers have a better understanding of “the real world”, whatever that might be. Most hard-pressed and committed parish clergy probably see more of “real life” in one week that most other people see in a lifetime. We are not saying that the experience of Readers as lay people is “better” but rather that it is “different”. As such, it is surely complementary to that of clergy.

⁶ All Christians are lay people in the sense that they are part of the *laos*, the people of God, but I use the term “lay” in its more conventional sense of “not ordained”.

⁷ 1 Peter 2, 9.

The description of Readers as lay *theologians* might well provoke a wry smile among some reading this, especially clergy. There is no doubt that in the past some Readers “got in by the back door” and that to describe them as theologians is stretching language to breaking point. Having done enough study to satisfy the then requirements for licensing, such people have hardly opened a theological book since. But happily, I believe, they are now in the minority. The standard of recruits coming forward is very encouraging, and the training courses which we now have in place are producing Readers who are informed and committed. One of the most encouraging developments I noted during my time as Warden in Liverpool is the way in which recently licensed Readers, who initially may have approached the training course with some trepidation, have acquired a habit and *enthusiasm* for further study which will continue long after licensing. Again, what we are saying here is aspirational; this is what Readers *ought* to be, but, thank God, it is increasingly what they *are*.

But a word of clarification is needed here. We are not talking about *academic* theologians.⁸ There are Readers who could be so described. Some of these have the gift of expressing profound insights in ways which ordinary people can understand; others do not. But by theology I mean, quite literally “God talk”. I use the term “theologian” to refer to a person who has acquired the habit of theological reflection, who at the end of each day is able to ask “where has God been in all this?” and, at least sometimes, to find an answer. In our selection processes we should be looking for people who show evidence of having that sort of inclination, but in our training that natural aptitude can be honed and refined. Having talked to many Readers about this issue, I have been pleasantly surprised to find that, while they insist that they are “not at all academic”, they recognise that what they have learnt about the Bible, and about church history and doctrine, has helped them to talk about the faith to “ordinary people”. It is the theological training that Readers undergo which enables them to talk, with confidence and authority, about the things of God. Together with their continuing “layness”, this is, I submit, the essential quality of Reader ministry.

⁸ I would like to ban the use of the term “academic” in the discussion of Reader selection and training, because, so often, it frightens people and obscures the real issues.

If, as frequently happens, other people are doing the same work as Readers, sometimes without the benefit of their in-depth training, we should not worry, any more than we should because some Readers, after a few years, come to believe that God is calling them to the ordained ministry. St Paul, after asserting that

there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit; and there are variety of services, but the same Lord; and there are varieties of activities, but it is the same God who activates all of them in everyone⁹

goes on to compare the members of the Church to the parts of the human body, each with its specific function. He concludes that

as it is, God arranged the members in the body, each one of them, as he chose. If all were a single member, where would the body be? As it is, there are many members, yet one body.¹⁰

As long as we are clear that Readers are essentially lay theologians, with a valuable and continuing role to play in the building the Kingdom, we should not worry about a certain amount of untidiness in ministerial structures. It is precisely in such situations of “creative messiness” that the Holy Spirit is most able to work.

With that in mind, what sort of qualities do we look for in our potential “lay theologians”? To answer that question we must turn to the Criteria which we use for Reader selection.

⁹ I Corinthians 12, 4-6.

¹⁰ Ibid. 18-20.

Criteria for Reader Selection

Why do we need new Criteria?

In their responses to the Questionnaire, the majority of Dioceses said that they were happy with the existing Selection Criteria for Readers and confirmed that they used these Criteria, perhaps with slight modification, in their own selection process. Nevertheless, I would argue that the time has come for a radical rethink about the Criteria we use to select candidates for training as Readers.

Hitherto the Criteria for the selection of Readers have been identical with those for ordained ministry, despite the fact that the two ministries are essentially different. In 2010 the Criteria for the selection for ordained ministry were revised. The revision was more focused on the core elements required for the exercise of ordained ministry (gifts and competences) and provision was made for additional core elements for those with the potential to exercise ministry with incumbent responsibilities. In the light of this revision, the Criteria for the selection of ordained ministry were less transferrable to Reader ministry.

This situation has provided the Church with an opportunity to reflect upon the ministry of Readers and the shape and form of the Criteria for their selection. I have argued above for a clear vision of Readers as lay theologians, rooted in the world outside the Church and able to reflect theologically upon their experience. Any fresh thinking about the Criteria for selection needs to be distilled through the prism of this vision.

There is always a discussion to be had about how we *measure potential* in any selection process. This is particularly important in assessing younger candidates where there is less evidence of a track record of achievement. However, given that currently Readers are almost without exception over 30 at the point of selection this gives the selection process more scope to engage with clear evidence of a candidate's gifts and skills, which will be further developed during training.

The Revised Criteria for Selection

Criterion A: Vocation (How does the candidate understand his/her calling? Is it obedient, realistic and informed?)

Candidates should:

- Be able to articulate a clear sense of call to Reader ministry
- Demonstrate that their vocation has been recognised and affirmed by others
- Be prepared to be obedient to the authority of the Bishop or those to whom his authority is delegated
- Understand and be informed about the role, duties and responsibilities of a Reader
- Fulfil realistically all the Criteria for the selection of Readers

Criterion B: Integrity of Faith and Life (How does the candidate understand his/her faith and spirituality? How are the candidate's faith and spirituality played out in his/her life? Is the candidate a person of faith and prayer?)

Candidates should:

- Display an integrity in the relationship between their life and faith, including the ability to demonstrate why they envisage that their potential ministry would best be expressed by remaining lay, and how it might grow and develop
- Have an understanding of, and a commitment to, the key beliefs of the Church as expressed in the scriptures and the creeds
- Show an understanding of the loving and saving purposes of God in Christ for the whole world
- Be able to give an account of what excites and enthuses them in their faith, which they would wish to share with others
- Have a disciplined approach to personal prayer and public worship
- Be open to exploring different expressions of faith and spirituality

Criterion C: Theological Learning (Has the candidate the potential for engaging in depth with theology? Will the candidate cope with and benefit from theological education?)

Candidates should:

- Display an aptitude for coping with the intellectual demands of Reader ministry
- Display an aptitude for learning and be able to respond to ideas
- Respond appropriately to criticism
- Read broadly

Criterion D: Reflective Skills (How does the candidate assimilate and analyse his/her experience? Has the candidate the potential to reflect theologically?)

Candidates should:

- Be able to make connections between different kinds of experience (church; community; intellectual; spiritual)
- Be self-aware and able to recognise their strengths and weaknesses
- Display awareness of the global context and be able to relate it to the local
- Show creativity in analysing and interpreting experiences
- Be able to encourage others in the reflective process

Criterion E: Communication Skills (How effectively does the candidate communicate in terms of style and content? Can the candidate be an effective apologist for Christian faith within and beyond the Church?)

Candidates should:

- Be able to talk about Jesus Christ and the good news of the Kingdom of God in a way that is exciting, accessible and attractive
- Show the potential for expressing themselves well in preaching, conversation and writing

- Communicate well in language that people understand
- Articulate their faith naturally and effectively in ways that are balanced, appropriate, accessible and sensitive to the situation

Criterion F: Relationships (How well does the candidate relate to and engage with other people?)

Candidates should:

- Form, develop and maintain healthy personal, professional and pastoral relationships
- Generate trust and display honesty
- Work well and collaboratively in a team setting
- Be able to assume a leadership role when required
- Be able to receive feedback in constructive ways
- Demonstrate listening and empathetic skills
- Maintain boundaries and confidentiality

Criterion G: Coping with Change (How does the candidate respond to change and help others to handle it?)

Candidates should:

- Be able to demonstrate the potential to cope with change in a balanced and flexible way
- Be able to collaborate well in engaging with change

Criterion H: Involvement in the Church of England (How well does the candidate understand the Church of England and its ecclesiology? How committed to the Church of England is s/he?)

Candidates should:

- Show knowledge and understanding of the life and structures of the Church of England, including its place in the life of the nation
- Display an awareness of the opportunities and challenges that the Church faces in engaging with contemporary society, especially in terms of mission and evangelism
- Be able to reflect on the role played by scripture, tradition and reason within the heritage and contemporary life of the Church of England
- Demonstrate that they have been baptised and episcopally confirmed, and that they are regular communicants within the Church of England