

Reader Selection in the Church of England

[4] Encouraging and Promoting the Vocation of Readers

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1. Introduction

I strongly believe that Reader ministry is something unique, which still has a vital part to play in the mission and ministry of the Church of England in the 21st century. Yet in some quarters it is perceived as being under threat, especially where there is now a multiplicity of other episcopally authorised ministries available to lay people. There is no doubt that, in some dioceses, numbers offering for selection for Reader ministry are falling; in others, even where there is a steady stream of potential new recruits coming forward, the overall age profile of Readers is cause for concern. The latest national statistics indicate¹ that 55% of licensed Readers are aged 60 or over, with 2% being under the age of 40. These figures only take account of *licensed* Readers; compared with the 7,170 licensed readers on 31st December 2010, there were 2,710 with permission to officiate or being described as “active emeriti”. All of these were, of course, aged 70 or over. The position is a little more encouraging if we look at those in training; here 9% were aged under 40. Nevertheless, it is clear that numbers can be expected to decline markedly in the next few years, when the large numbers of more elderly Readers come to the end of their ministries. The 2010 figures indicate a 4% fall in licensed Readers since 2009, while numbers of those with PTO or active emeritus status rose by 5%. There was also a drop of 4% in admissions, although a 4% increase in those in training gave more cause for optimism.

It is quite clear, therefore, that if we believe that Reader ministry should continue to be a vital part of the Church’s public ministry, we need to be more proactive in attracting new recruits. In particular, we need to make a special effort to attract younger men and women, and, it should be said, those having the requisite gifts for work outside the more traditional church contexts.

¹ *2010 Reader Statistics*, Research and Statistics Department, Archbishops’ Council, March 2011.

Falling numbers may be caused, partly at least, by the lure of other ministries, especially those which do not entail such rigorous training as Reader ministry. But it appears that, in some cases, they are the result of a lack of energy or real commitment to publicising the work of Readers. There is sometimes a mistaken belief that Reader recruitment will somehow “take care of itself”. I have already argued² that it is not sufficient to rely on “word of mouth” and “the example of other Readers” if we are to reach a wider range of people. Positive strategies are called for. This Paper will detail some of the best practice which we have noted in this area.

However, it is worth repeating my earlier warning³ that we are not “in competition” with other ministries; our aim should always be to help people to discover what God wants of them. For that reason, *it is strongly recommended that*

- *Initial* promotional events or literature should present Reader ministry alongside other forms of authorised ministry, both lay and ordained
- Publicity and recruitment should be closely linked with the process of discernment of gifts and vocation.⁴

As a follow-up, dioceses may also wish to stage events and produce literature specifically concerned with Reader ministry for people who, having considered other possibilities, believe that God is calling them in that direction.

² Paper 1, *Mapping the Contours*, pp 5-6.

³ *Ibid* p 6.

⁴ See Paper 3, *The Selection of Readers in Dioceses; identifying Best Practice in Content and Process*.

2. Publicising Reader Ministry

In their responses to the Questionnaire, dioceses referred to a wide range of methods and approaches used in publicising Reader ministry. Many of these have much to commend them and they are summarised below. However, before turning to a more detailed consideration of them, I would wish to emphasise the power of example. Therefore, I would recommend, as a general principle,

- That promotional events and material should make use of the personal “testimonies” and experiences of practising Readers.

These might consist of a written paragraph or a five minute oral presentation (delivered live at an event or recorded on DVD) in which Readers talk about what they actually do and what it means for them to be a Reader. In promotional literature and at events specifically concerned with Reader ministry, four or five Readers could be used, representing a variety of ministries (e.g. chaplaincy or pastoral work and “fresh expressions” as well as the more conventional “preaching and teaching”). For examples, see the excellent “vignettes” in *Reader Upbeat*.⁵ At general vocations events, time constraints will probably limit the number of speakers (see below).

I now turn to a consideration of some of the publicity methods used to raise the profile of Reader ministry.

- (a) Approaches to Incumbents:** quite clearly the incumbent has a key role to play in encouraging any form of ministry within his or her parish. The problem is that clergy are very busy people and, with the best will in the world, there is an understandable tendency for them to ignore or forget about approaches made to them. It is worth putting regular information about Reader ministry in clergy mailings, diocesan bulletins or newsletters or on the diocesan website in the hope that some of it might make an impression on individual incumbents. However, too much reliance should

⁵ *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.

not be placed on this method. Occasional letters from the Warden of Readers or the Bishop might be more effective, as, too, might the sending of promotional brochures or DVDs.

- (b) **Input into Events within the Diocese:** presentations by the Warden or other members of the Reader team in Diocesan and Deanery Synods, Chapter meetings or at Visitations will have more impact, since we are dealing with more of a "captive audience". A five minute oral presentation, concise and well delivered, will probably be more effective than a page of printed text.
- (c) **Encouragement of the Preaching of Sermons on Reader Ministry, preferably by Readers, across the Diocese on a particular Sunday:** parishes which have several Readers could loan one of them to neighbouring parishes which have none and which are keen to develop Reader ministry. It goes without saying that only Readers who are good preachers should be used in this way!
- (d) **Input into Foundation Courses:** most dioceses provide, under a variety of names, courses for lay people which are, in effect, courses in Christian foundations. Many of our Reader recruits will have come through such courses. Indeed, dioceses often consider the completion of such a course as a prerequisite for selection for Reader training, or as the first year of the Reader training itself. Most of these courses will include some treatment of vocation and ministry, an obvious opportunity to raise the profile of Reader ministry and to help lay people discern how God might be calling them.
- (e) **Production of leaflets, brochures or booklets:** this would appear to be an essential requirement in any attempt to publicise Reader ministry. When possible recruits say to us, "I'm interested in being a Reader; have you any material that I could be looking at?" we must have something which we can give them. There are, however, some important principles which must be borne in mind.

- As recommended above, any *initial* material should cover all forms of authorised ministry, ordained and lay. A simple A4 sheet giving brief details of the different ministries, ordained (stipendiary, NSMs, OLMs etc), religious orders and lay (Church Army, pastoral assistants, evangelists, etc., as well as Readers) should be followed up by more detailed material on the individual ministries.
- Any leaflet designed to be used subsequently by those specifically interested in Reader ministry should be concise and factual. Typically, enquirers will want to know (1) what Readers can and cannot do; (2) how to become a Reader and, especially, what sort of training is involved; (3) what they need to do next; (4) who are the people to contact. This could all be put on one double-sided A4 sheet.
- It is a good idea to produce a booklet which can be given at the same time as this leaflet or subsequently. This will go into more detail and will include the criteria for selection, details of the training course and a detailed timetable of the selection process. It should also include four or five short "vignettes".
- Publicity material need not be expensive to produce and printed on glossy paper, although it is recommended that the A4 leaflet should include some pictures, preferably in colour. Production of such material is well within the capabilities of the average PC.
- Pictures can help to get the message across powerfully. However, care should be exercised in the choice of pictures. It is essential to show Readers at work *in a variety of situations*, which reflect the full range of Reader involvement in the mission of the Church. Pictures of people in surplices and blue scarves should be used sparingly.
- While understanding concerns about "political correctness gone mad", we should, nevertheless, avoid giving the impression that Readers are all middle-aged, middle-class white males!
- The wording of any promotional literature should be concise and snappy. Ecclesiastical jargon should be avoided like the plague. It is a

good idea to enlist the aid of your diocesan communications officer (if you have one).

- (f) **Production of a DVD:** a short DVD will probably have more impact than written text, no matter how attractively that is presented. Readers could be filmed at work in a variety of settings and interviewed about their vocation. The production of such a DVD would not be very expensive and it should be well within the technical capabilities and resources of any diocese, but it would make sense for neighbouring dioceses to co-operate in this area. It is worth exploring the possibility of involving students in some local college to do the production work.

3. Vocations Events

Most dioceses reported that they held some sort of vocational event at which Reader ministry was promoted to possible recruits. The nature of these events varied considerably. Most were concerned with all forms of authorised ministry but some dealt specifically with Reader ministry. In some cases there were general vocational events followed up by ones for would-be Readers. Most events were held annually (occasionally less frequently) in some central location (typically the Cathedral); others were more like "road shows", repeated at various locations around the diocese. This was particularly the case in the further-flung dioceses. Some were evening events, although the preferred option was for a Saturday, either a morning or afternoon, or the whole day. Obviously, the details of when and where these events are held will be much influenced by the geographical situation of the diocese, but there are certain features of best practice which we would recommend.

- Vocational events (whether one large event in a central location or a *series* of road shows around the diocese) should be held at least annually. A less frequent pattern risks allowing potential recruits to slip through the net.
- For reasons stated above, these events should be concerned with *all forms of authorised ministry within the diocese*. Some dioceses would wish to add to these ministries a wide range of other possible callings such as work with

missionary or charitable agencies, work with children or young adults, pioneer ministry etc. It might be that a person's calling lies within the parish, perhaps as a PCC member, Church Warden, Parish Treasurer etc. It needs to be emphasised that serving God faithfully in these ways is just as valid a vocation as ordination or Reader ministry. However, if dioceses wish to adopt this all-embracing approach to vocations events, there will be considerable implications in terms of their organisation.

- Clearly the organisation of such events is not something which Wardens of Readers can do on their own. It will be necessary to work with many other people within the diocese, most notably the Diocesan Director of Ordinands.
- Dioceses may wish to provide subsequent events for those who have opted for Reader ministry. A typical timetable might be general Vocations Event in May – time for reflection – Reader specific event(s) in January/February – closing date for applications in early April – Selection Conference(s) in May and/or early June. Of course, some potential applicants will have made their minds up after the initial event, so they will not need to attend a Reader event in the New Year. It is essential, however, that they are given full details of the selection timetable and relevant contact details at the general event.
- Any events should be well publicised in the diocese beforehand. Those wishing to attend should be asked to book beforehand to give some idea of numbers, although it should be possible to “turn up on the day”.

Most general vocations events conform to one of two models, either the vocations *conference* or the vocations *fair* or *exhibition*. The choice between the two seems to depend largely on the breadth of scope which dioceses envisage. If the event is concerned solely with the relatively narrow range of authorised ministries, the “conference model” is probably preferable, since it allows enquirers to sample all possible options. The “fair or exhibition model” is more suitable for events which tackle the whole range of Christian discipleship, since time restraints would not allow inputs by speakers on every single type of vocation.

(a) **The Vocations Conference:** typically an event of this type will have the following layout.

- Everyone assembles in a suitable central location.
- The event begins with a short act of worship in which the underlying theme is one of asking God's help in discerning his will.
- People are welcomed by a senior member of the diocesan staff, preferably a bishop. This underlines the commitment of the diocese to all forms of ministry and makes it clear that the event is concerned with *episcopally authorised* ministries. The bishop does not need to stay for the rest of the session. In dioceses which opt for a pattern of successive "road shows", pressure on bishops' diaries means that it is not always the same bishop at every event.
- These preliminaries are followed by a plenary session in which representatives of different ministries give a short presentation on their work. Clearly, those giving the presentation must be chosen with care, and a time limit should be strictly enforced. In order to achieve this, it is often better to structure the presentation as an interview, perhaps conducted by the Warden in the case of Readers. The presentation is rehearsed and timed beforehand. It is important that all the enquirers experience all the presentations, even if they may already have fairly firm ideas about their calling; sometimes new possibilities emerge at this stage.
- There is a good supply of leaflets relating to the different ministries. These are prominently displayed and enquirers should be encouraged to take them, if they haven't already done so. Time constraints will probably allow only one speaker for each ministry. Inevitably, the Reader representative will not have experience of all the many settings in which Readers operate, so it is important that the full range is presented in the promotional literature, ideally, as we have suggested, in the form of "vignettes".

- After these presentations a coffee/tea break is recommended. There is usually quite a buzz of conversation at this point, and it is worth having a number of clearly labelled Readers on hand (in addition to the person who gave the presentation) to engage people in conversation and answer any questions.
 - The refreshment break is followed by seminars or workshops when people divide up according to the ministries in which they are most interested. A number of smaller rooms will be required, something which may well affect the choice of venue. It is recommended that there should be two sessions, perhaps of half an hour's duration each. People should be encouraged to opt for two different groups, even if they may think they have already made up their minds. In order to gauge numbers, it is worth asking for preferences when people book in to the event, but it should be possible for individuals to change their minds on the day. Ideally these sessions should be chaired by the Warden in the case of Reader ministry, but the person who gave the presentation and the other Readers should be present. If, as is the case in many dioceses, the Warden is not directly responsible for training, some other appropriate official (Director of Training etc) should also be present. The purpose of these sessions is to answer the questions which possible applicants might have, so it is vital to have on hand people who are able to do this.
 - The event concludes with a brief plenary session, during which it is made clear what possible applicants must do next if they wish to proceed (if this is clearly stated in the promotional literature, it will simply be necessary to draw attention to this). The session ends with a short time of prayer.
- (b) The Vocations Fair or Exhibition:** this is based on a large central space, in which the various ministries have stalls or stands, together with representatives from the many other organisations that have been invited. Most of these organisations will have people who are experienced in events of this type, and they should be left to get on with their work.

From the Readers' point of view, as well as a stall or stand, staffed by Reader representatives and having a copious supply of promotional literature, it is necessary to have a smaller room or quiet space in which to conduct seminars or workshops similar to those in the conference type event. It will be in this setting that Readers will have the opportunity to talk about their work.

The principal distinguishing feature of this model is that people are free to drop in at any time during the day and to wander round the exhibition as they wish. Few people will be present for the whole event, so inputs will need to be repeated throughout the day. This also applies to worship: it is difficult to organise a general act of worship, so it is probably best if there is a space set aside (a chapel if the event is held in the cathedral) for quiet prayer and reflection. An appropriate person should be on hand to talk to and pray with people according to their needs. It might also be appropriate if there was an input, repeated as necessary, on the theology of vocation.

4. Conclusion

I have presented a wide range of possible approaches to publicity. Maybe you are doing all these things, but it is possible that you will have found something which you have not tried before. Dioceses will know what works best in their situation, so it is not necessary to go into further detail at this point. However, I would stress that, if we are to attract more people to Reader ministry, specific strategies should be adopted. *We cannot simply wait for people to come to us.*