

by Rosie Ward

resource sheet 3

women and ministry

Rosie Ward brings together some thoughts for women considering authorised ministry

Back in 1972, when I first felt called to ordination at the age of 17, I was fortunate enough to be in a parish where the priest had previously worked alongside deaconesses. So when I nervously approached him saying I believed God was calling me to be a priest I wasn't given the brush-off as many women at that time were, but rather encouraged. In fact I would go as far as to say that my approach was greeted with enthusiasm! ... At the age of 20 I was recommended to go forward for training.' (Jane Hedges, in *Apostolic Women, Apostolic Authority*.)

30 years on, God continues to call women to Christian ministry. And as Jane's story shows, God calls young women as well as those with more life experience. Jane was told, of course, that women could not be priests yet, but she went ahead anyway, was licensed as a deaconess, and treated during her curacy as any other previous curate.

Now, women and men are selected,

trained and ordained together. Since the decision of General Synod in 1992, and the first ordinations of women to the priesthood in 1994, women may be curates and vicars, or deans and archdeacons, just as men can. Many younger women in the church have grown up with ordained women as role models, and for those who feel called to authorised ministry, ordination will seem as natural – and as challenging – as it has always seemed to men.

Why focus on women?

So why a special resource sheet on women's ministry? In her foreword to *The Gender Agenda*, Anne Dyer writes: 'Recently I had a conversation with a woman who was beginning to sense a vocation to ordained ministry in the Church of England. Her home church was conservatively evangelical. It was a place where she had received a good grounding in the Christian faith, but it was not supportive of women in ordained ministry that involved leadership. This woman described how in this church for her to begin to think through the issues

involved, and to look again at what the Bible might be saying, she had to separate emotionally and spiritually from her closest women friends. She spoke eloquently of the cost of this spiritual journey...'

Stories such as Anne recounts seem increasingly common. Faced with a sense of call, the opportunity to exercise it in the church, yet confronted by biblical teaching which appears to say that women should not 'lead' (or exercise 'headship'), who and what does one believe? Other women, convinced it's right to move forward, are discouraged rather than encouraged by their vicars. Others again are not able to test their call to lead or preach as a man would be, or are actively dissuaded from pursuing a sense of calling. What is going on?

The history of women's ordination is still relatively recent. And the controversy around it is still there. In fact, for some women, the path to considering ordination currently seems more difficult. Why is this?

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- Some Anglican churches support and promote the idea that women should not be leaders in the church, arguing that this is the only 'biblical' view to take.
- Some influential church leaders (in the US as well as the UK), also teach that women and men are intended to have 'complementary' roles in marriage and in church life. When these are argued as the only 'biblical' stance, it can be hard to know which view is right.
- Recent debate on women's ordination to the episcopate has made different 'parties' within the Church of England more fixed and vocal in their views.
- Students may belong to student groups which bar women speakers, (rightly) emphasise sound doctrine but see women in leadership as a 'liberalising' tendency, and are influenced by new churches which seek to emulate NT patterns of ministry in quite a literal way, for example allowing women to preach but not be elders. The whole debate has become quite complex, so can seem very confusing!

So does God call women to lead churches?

Does God call women?

Back in the 1980s it took me ten years or so to become convinced that God did say in the Bible that women could and should lead. Looking back, those were ten years when I could have been getting on with what I increasingly felt called to do.

Now there are far better resources than were available then. We each have to make up our minds about what the Bible says, following our sense of calling, and examining it in the light of biblical teaching.

Why does it matter if women take years to work things out, as I did, or follow the path to ordination as a second rather than first career? The average age of clergy in the Church of England

has been going up for some years. For vicars it's now the early 50s, and for curates, the early 40s. If we are to reach the younger generation, if we are to pioneer when we have most energy, and if we are to move from curate to vicar and perhaps to a more senior post, then we need to start young. Hence the 'Call Waiting' initiative launched by the Church of England. There are few curates and vicars under the age of 40 (so few young role models) and most worryingly, recent statistics suggest that far fewer young women than young men are currently coming forward to have their vocations discerned by the national Church.

Reading the Bible afresh

I want to honour those who have properly worked out theological reservations about women and leadership. But sometimes those arguments are merely repeated by clergy who have not thought them through for themselves but have the power to impose their own ideas on congregations. Or they are made by a powerful 'charismatic' male leader whose ideas seem to hold sway. If we come from an evangelical perspective, with a high view of scripture, then we must start with the Bible, examine it with an open mind, and see what conclusions we reach.

Arguing from experience, justice, 'rights' or women's progress in society won't do – though sometimes experience prompts people to re-examine what they have been taught, and men's strong sense of calling to ordination or preaching is often accepted, while women using the same criteria are told that their navigational system must be broken! But the key place to start must be with what God says through his written word. Space in this resource paper is limited, but you can find more detailed papers on the CPAS women in leadership website, and other material in books and online: see the end of this paper.

As you begin your research, some principles of interpretation:

- God's word is consistent: one part must agree with another. So if parts appear to contradict each other, which one might be a guide to the other?
- Seek to understand more obscure passages in the light of those which are clearer, not vice versa.
- Look at the Bible's big picture, starting with Genesis: what do you conclude from looking at the whole first?
- Ask: WDWD (What Did Women Do)? Read about what women were doing in the Old Testament, the Gospels and Acts, as well as at the teaching in NT letters. How did Jesus treat women? What difference did Pentecost make? How does Paul speak of the women who had ministry roles in the 'house' churches?
- When reading the Epistles, what are the principles applicable to today, and what was addressed to an issue in that culture, at that point in the life of the new church? And remember that the 'threefold order of ministry' was part of a development in the emerging church; we can't read straight from scriptures about deacons and presbyters of the 1st century into the culture of the church in England in the 21st century.

One pitfall can be the Bible translation we use. Make sure you use a Bible which keeps close to the original Greek or Hebrew, which has incorporated the most up-to-date scholarship, and which is not clouded by particular interpretations of disputed texts. The 2011 version of the NIV is more reliable than the 1984 one; but the NRSV is regarded as being closer than either to the original languages.

Women's ministry: the options The priesthood/presbyterate

Since 1994 the priesthood has been open to women as well as men, and all posts in the Church of England except that of bishop are open to women. (You can read the story: 'The road to women's priesthood' in an

article on CPAS' website.) There are some churches which are not open to women's ministry, but in most places women's ministry has been well received and already seems very 'normal'. Priestly ministry can be exercised in a parish context, or on the 'edge' in a Fresh Expression, through training as an 'ordained pioneer minister'. These new 'OPMs' are part of the wider initiatives in mission growing out of the 2004 report, *Mission Shaped Church*.

Lay ministry and the Diaconate

For some women with a call to evangelism, Church Army is an option (see Resource Sheet 10). Besides this there are still a few women who opt for accredited lay ministry, though there are increasingly limited opportunities, given the number of ordained women and the recent explosion of other kinds of authorised lay ministry within dioceses, such as Reader, pastoral assistant and evangelist.

Some women who were ordained deacon prior to 1994 did not want to be considered for priesthood, and a few ordained since then have (usually for theological reasons) opted to remain deacons rather than being priested after their first year. Permanent deacons usually work in some kind of pastoral capacity in larger churches.

Issues and challenges for women

Women in ordained ministry still face a number of unique challenges. The Church is still coming to terms with priests who go on maternity leave. There's an uneven spread in the number of women of incumbent status in each diocese, a relative lack of women in more senior posts, and a lack of women's voices being heard in places of decision making such as bishop's staff meetings and bishop's councils. But in all these areas, progress is slowly being made.

There are some issues about *stipends*. Many women are stipendiary. Some

continue in their secular job and are happy to be Self-Supporting Ministers (ie unpaid). Others find that the options for a woman needing time for childcare, to work alongside her vicar husband, or who are tied to an area where a paid post is not readily available, are limited. Women who want to be stipendiary may have to be prepared to challenge the system, which in some places can assume that if a husband is in paid secular work, his ordained wife can live on his earnings and does not need a stipend. The assumption is seldom made the other way round, despite the fact that many clergy wives in secular employment earn far more than their husbands!

Two-clergy couples now make up a significant number of clergy in the C of E (over 300 couples). Many couples have only one stipend, and in most cases it is the man, with his wife as SSM. This is a cause for concern. Up to now there has been little job-sharing – though with imagination this could be used creatively. As the secular world introduces more flexible working patterns, the church has slowly become more flexible, and many dioceses have, for example, made part-time posts available.

Another issue is *personal safety*. This is an issue for both men and women, and some women clergy, particularly those on their own, feel vulnerable. There is usually a policy in dioceses to fit alarm systems, which may include panic buttons; good practice in dioceses should involve women (and men) making their own proper risk assessment. Another area is harassment; little is known about this sensitive area, but complaints of harassment by other clergy or parishioners are taken increasingly seriously.

Are you up for it?

It's a good time for women to enter the priesthood. Many women

have gone before and led the way, pioneering the acceptance of women. Others have been the first woman incumbent in a parish, the first area dean, the first canon at the cathedral, the first archdeacon. In a few years' time the church will welcome its first women bishops.

Many people, both men and women, are excited by the changing shape of the church, and increasing teamwork. Women do not necessarily bring a distinctive set of gifts to ministry, but there is no doubt that we bring different experience, and often different ways of seeing situations because of it.

Change comes slowly in the Church of England, and for many who lived through it, the struggle for women's ordination to the priesthood took far too long. But the changes in the years since 1994 have been quite dramatic. Women now take their place alongside men in bringing the good news of Christ through the occasional offices, we minister to people in the mundane as well as times of tragedy and festivity. Women are at the forefront of initiatives such as 'Fresh Expressions', and attempts to reach people who are 'spiritual' but not religious.

If you feel God is calling you to step out into an unknown future, trusting God as you seek to serve his people, then ask yourself the following questions (some of which are also appropriate for men).

- Are you a pioneer? There is plenty of pioneering to be done. This may be in developing fresh expressions of church to suit our fast-changing context. Or it may be in blazing a new trail for women, going where ordained women have not been before.
- Can you cope with opposition? This will come to those in ministry, in both the reality of spiritual warfare and the more human tendency to sin within relationships. It can be most hurtful when coming from within the church –

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for many women in the form of those who don't agree with the ordination of women.

- What about your family? If you have children your care of them will come under close scrutiny, as you will be expected to be an excellent mum as well as a brilliant vicar! Do your family understand the pressures of ministry? And will they ensure that you take your day off and other time for them? If you are not married, have you got good support structures? Ministry can be lonely at times, especially if good friends are far away. On the other hand, you will have more flexibility than those who have to work around the demands of family, and you can jump in your car without a care on your day off!

- Are you glad to be a woman? The church needs ministers who can rejoice in all that God has made them – including their gender – and want to serve as they are, rather than how they have seen others go about the task.

Contemporary biblical scholars point increasingly to the fact that the criterion for ministry in the church is not gender, but Spirit gifting. So the question for a woman considering authorised ministry is the same as it is for a man: has God gifted me? Is God calling me? The church needs those who can serve and lead God's people, and reach out to the world in creative

ways. If you find yourself encouraged by others and impelled by your own growing sense of call, then perhaps authorised ministry is for you.

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This resource sheet incorporates some material from the previous version of this title by The Rev Di Lammas.

Further reading

Growing Women Leaders, Rosie Ward (BRF/CPAS, 2008). An exploration of theological issues surrounding women's leadership, and practical advice for women in leadership roles in the Church.

The Gender Agenda: discovering God's plan for Church Leadership, Lis Goddard and Clare Hendry (IVP, 2010). An excellent introduction to the debates around scripture, written in the form of emails between two women who represent 'egalitarian' and 'complementarian' viewpoints.

Women and Priesthood in the Church of England: Ten Years On, Ian Jones (CHP, 2004). A study exploring the Church's experience of the first decade of women's priestly ministry and some of the issues women have faced.

The Voices of this Calling, ed Christina Rees (Canterbury Press, 2002). Stories by women: the joys and challenges of being a woman in ordained ministry in the Church of England in the first few years.

Web resources

www.cpas.org.uk/womenleaders
Downloadable papers on 'The Bible and women's ministry', 'The road to women's priesthood' and more.

www.callwaiting.org.uk

www.womenandthechurch.org
Information on women's priestly ministry and campaigning for women bishops.

www.reform.org.uk
Anglican network promoting biblical and evangelical reform, but many members disagree with women's priestly/episcopal role on the grounds of 'headship' or leadership.

www.sophianetwork.org.uk
Resources for women in youth work, plus articles of wider interest.

www.cbeinternational.org
Downloadable papers by evangelical scholars.

resource sheets

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