

by Colin Hart

resource sheet 7

on being not recommended for training

These notes are intended for the guidance of people who may be not recommended for training as a result of diocesan procedures or after attending a Bishops' Advisory Panel (formerly selection conference), and also for those who offer pastoral care to them. They will probably do more good if candidates read them before going through the selection procedure rather than immediately after being told they have not been recommended.

The relationship of the Advisory Panel to the diocesan authorities is explained in CPAS Resource Sheet 6, *What do Bishops' Advisers look for?*

A kind of bereavement

The experience of being 'not recommended for training' following an Advisory Panel is a shattering one for some people. The symptoms closely resemble those of bereavement. People's faith in God is put under a severe strain, and they doubt everything they had previously considered certain.

The sense of being called has been so dominant in some people's minds that to be deprived of it is a very great loss. So to think of this experience in terms of bereavement may give guidance to those who seek to minister to disappointed would-be ordinands, and may also help the candidates themselves to understand why they feel as they do.

Like people who have lost a loved one, by death or some other cause, the not-recommended candidate may experience such symptoms as denial, anger, guilt and grief. One candidate, for example, told me months after his selection conference that every evening as he travelled home from work, he expected to find a message explaining that the bishop's letter had been a mistake and that he really had been recommended. I have known other disappointed candidates react with extreme anger against the selectors, or the vicar, or the church, or anyone else unfortunate enough to step in the way of their grief. Others have described how they continually break down in tears.

The friends and ministers of such candidates have a vital role in helping them through this difficult time. Like bereaved people, they need help in undergoing the necessary processes of separation, transition and reincorporation.

A sense of rejection

One reason why people react so strongly to the experience of being not recommended for training is that they feel they have been rejected by the Church.

Amongst candidates and those who advise them there seems to be a lack of clarity, and perhaps a genuine division of opinion, about the significance of the process of sponsorship and the Advisory Panel. Some people believe that the task of the diocesan director of ordinands (DDO) and Bishops' Advisers is vocational guidance, whereas others think they are testing a vocation, and yet others think they are selecting people for ministry. This ambiguity can lead to all sorts of problems.

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If the model is that of vocational guidance, then candidates offer for Christian service, dioceses send them to an Advisory Panel with very little attempt to weed out unsatisfactory candidates beforehand, and the advisers then advise them how their gifts and commitment can best be put to use for Christian service. I have heard of some dioceses acting on the basis of this model, but it is much rarer than it used to be.

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Many candidates seem to think the model is one of testing a vocation. This puts a great emphasis on the interior processes of the candidate's mind and heart, and an unshakeable inner conviction may seem to be the most essential qualification. If advisers operate on this model, they might suspect that anyone who is very open to the possibility of not being recommended lacks that deep inner certainty which is the mark of a genuine call. Most people seem to think that when candidates are not recommended for training, the advisers are implicitly saying they were mistaken in imagining themselves to have been called by God, and must have misheard God's voice. The theological and pastoral implications of this interpretation are very unfortunate.

At the other extreme, the weakness of thinking of the process in terms of

selection is that it may appear to take no account of the element of interior conviction. On this understanding, the advisers are assessing a candidate's potential in the light of the qualities required for the work of ministry. The process of selecting future ministers is comparable to the system for admission to any other career or profession: a list of requisite qualities is drawn up and candidates are assessed against it. The disadvantage of this model is that it may restrict the sovereignty of God. It gives

poignancy to the humorous article printed in many parish magazines which purports to be a report on 12 candidates for apostleship, compiled by a personnel selection agency: readers will recall that the only one of the 12 candidates to be 'recommended for training' was a man named

Judas! If this is what the selection procedure is all about, then it is hardly surprising that some people feel rejected by it.

When a call becomes an idol

Another reason why being not recommended can be such an overwhelming experience is that a call to ordination can become an idol, although it might be difficult to say so to someone in that position.

Idolatry is a particularly insidious danger for any committed Christian, because it often begins with something good. When something which was intended to be a channel to God becomes a substitute for God, then this is idolatry. For example, Christians may find it of great spiritual value to worship in an ancient building hallowed by the prayers of generations of saints, or to use in their worship

forms of words rich with allusions and echoes of past experience, or to come to a new experience of the love of God by means of the charismatic renewal, which has transformed the impoverished spirituality of so many Christians of this generation. But if any of these good things moves into the foreground of a Christian's consciousness and tends to become an end in itself, instead of strictly a means to an end, then there is a real danger that it may have turned into an idol.

Something similar may happen to some people who believe they have been called by God to professional Christian ministry. On the basis of many conversations with people who believe themselves to have such a vocation, some of whom have been not recommended for training, I have come to the conclusion that a sense of vocation may arise out of a genuine response to God and a sincere desire to serve him, but may then insidiously become the goal in itself. Only an explanation such as this could explain the degree of anger and resentment shown by some people who have found that the door to one particular form of Christian service is closed to them.

No one got it wrong

I think that one of the main reasons why the reactions to being not recommended tend to be so violent is the apparent theological implication of the advisers' decision. There is an urgent need for a theological interpretation of being not recommended which does not imply that either the candidate or the advisers made a mistake. The reason why candidates so often seem to have a strong personal need to explain why the advisers might have been biased against them (e.g. because the candidate was evangelical but all the advisers were Anglo-Catholic, or vice versa) is because, according to the generally accepted model of vocation, if the advisers did not get it wrong,

then the candidates themselves, together with all their friends and supporters, must have made a mistake – in which case much of their other Christian experience is thrown into question.

Nowadays, candidates are unlikely to reach an Advisory Panel to test a vocation without having that vocation affirmed by their Christian and non-Christian friends, and by their clergy, referees and diocesan authorities. All of these people, therefore, may feel threatened when the advisers decline to endorse their opinion. Disappointed candidates tend to use this affirmation as evidence to support their allegation that the advisers have misjudged them. The recommendation of non-Christian colleagues and friends is often considered to be particularly weighty; although why such people should be regarded as authorities on the qualities needed for Christian ministry, I do not know.

It may need to be explained that the recommendation of all these supporters probably says more about their regard for the candidate, or their desire to see one of their own people 'succeed', than about their ability to discern objectively in their friend the gifts and potential required of an ordinand.

The experience of some such disappointed candidates reminds me of the story of Abraham's proposed sacrifice of Isaac as told in Genesis 22. How, I wonder, did Abraham feel when the command to sacrifice his son was rescinded? Of course, he must have been overjoyed that he was not, after all, being commanded to make this supreme sacrifice, but it would not surprise me if his relief was tinged with embarrassment, or even disappointment. Did he wonder whether he had misheard the word of God in the first place, and begin to distrust his experiences of guidance in the future? This story helpfully demonstrates that the call of God is

sometimes for us to be willing to do something, rather than necessarily to do it.

I believe God was dealing in a similar way with one particular would-be ordinand I knew, who attended a selection conference and was devastated at being not recommended for training. He was doing outstanding work as a lay person. Having risen high in his career, he was earning a high salary, which made an important contribution to the well-being of his local community, and he was able to live out his Christian principles at work in an exemplary manner. Furthermore, he put his considerable talents to work in the service of the church, in which he held such a key position that I asked him semi-humorously how the church could possibly manage without him if he were to be recommended for training.

I must admit that my first reaction to this man's candidature for ordination was one of disappointment at the potential loss of such a fine lay Christian, and for this reason I could not be sorry when he told me he had been not recommended for training. My own interpretation of what was happening in his case was that God was challenging him to be willing to give up his income, his lifestyle, his houses and his status for the sake of the kingdom. When he took steps towards making the sacrifice, then God intervened to say it was no longer necessary. He can now pursue his secular work and his lay ministry in the integrity of knowing that he was willing to give them all up if called upon to do so.

If my interpretation is right, then there is no question of either the candidate or the advisers having misheard God's guidance. He was right to offer himself, and they were right not to accept the offer.

Disappointed candidates may need to

be reminded that they, their friends and supporters, and the advisers themselves, have all been praying that God would reveal his will and guide the advisers in making their recommendation. As a matter of principle, they should expect that those prayers have been answered, and that the advisers' advice is therefore God's will for them at this stage. The apparent unwillingness of some candidates to do this has led to the cynical comment that they seem to believe that God is sovereign over all things except the Bishops' Advisers!

As one door closes another opens

It is quite understandable if the advisers' decision not to recommend a candidate for training should at first feel wholly negative, but in due course such candidates should come to see that it has positive implications as well. In prayer and in discussion with friends and supporters they should seek to discern what God is doing through this set-back in their plans, and what opportunities for preparation or for service he is now putting before them.

The advisers themselves quite often make specific suggestions of possible ways forward or of aspects of the candidate's personality or gifts which they believe need to be developed, and such advice should, of course, be taken very seriously indeed.

Some disappointed candidates should forget about ordination – at least for the time being – and throw themselves wholeheartedly back into their present employment and lay ministry, trusting God to raise the vocation again in his own good time if he wishes to do so. Perhaps the sense of being called to a ministry of the Word can be fulfilled as a Reader. Alternatively, it may be right to explore other forms of Christian service.

The advisers' report to the bishop on some other candidates includes a clear

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hint that the diocese should feel free to sponsor them again in a couple of years' time, when they have had an opportunity to extend their experience or to prove their educational and ministerial potential by working in a parish as a lay pastoral assistant, or by undertaking some preliminary theological study. Such advice must not be misinterpreted as any kind of guarantee that the subsequent Advisory Panel will necessarily recommend these people for training.

The advice of the diocesan director of ordinands should always be sought in such cases, and he/she may well be able to suggest openings for ministry or study within diocesan structures. Alternatively, CPAS sometimes know of parishes which are looking for a lay assistant. St John's Extension Studies (www.stjohns-nottm.ac.uk) offers correspondence courses in theology at an appropriate level.

The role of the supporting minister

Some clergy identify themselves so closely with the aspirations of ordinands whose vocations they have nurtured that they render themselves quite incapable of helping those

candidates who are not recommended for training. With perhaps a few rare exceptions, it is not helpful for the clergy to protest against injustice, or to accuse the selectors of bias. On the other hand, ministers should take every opportunity of affirming the disappointed candidate's present ministry, and must not give the impression – as one would-be ordinand described his experience – that the church is now dropping him and moving on to the next likely prospect!

In other cases, the incumbent agrees with the selectors' verdict, and indeed his or her own rather negative report on the candidate may have been a major factor in leading them not to recommend for training. Clergy occasionally say that they cannot tell a candidate of their misgivings, because they have to continue to live in the same church subsequently, but such an approach is pastorally very unhelpful. It is vital that the relationship between minister and church member should be based on trust, openness and truth. If the minister believes the candidate to be unsuitable in any way, then they must steel themselves to say so, whatever the consequences might be.

In the short-term, the local minister should enable the disappointed candidate (together with his or her spouse, if applicable) to talk about the Advisory Panel and their reaction to the advisers' decision. Then they need to be able to explore together any areas for personal growth which might have been exposed in the report and how the candidate might work at them. The minister should also help the candidate explore alternative ways ahead, especially other opportunities for Christian ministry. It is generally not advisable to raise the question of a subsequent Advisory Panel until some considerable time has elapsed.

Further reading

When the Church Says 'No', Helen Thorp, (Grove Booklets, P98). A valuable booklet with further exploration of this subject.

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The Rev Colin Hart was formerly a tutor at St John's College, Nottingham. This paper was originally produced in consultation with other tutors at the college and other members of a working party in the Southwell Diocese on vocation and community. The text is reproduced by kind permission of the Southwell diocesan ministry group.

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