

by Brian Field and Raymond Dawson,
updated by CPAS Staff

resource sheet 11

readers in the church of england

Readers have been active in the Church of England and across the world in the Anglican Communion for well over 125 years. They are lay people who are called by God, theologically trained, and licensed by the Church to preach, teach, lead worship, and to assist in pastoral evangelistic and liturgical work.

There are currently more than 10,000 Readers, with men and women represented almost equally. Those in training usually undergo a three-year programme in preparation for admission to their ministry.

Being a Reader is a demanding and creative role which its title does little to enhance. Several other titles have been considered, and several dioceses have changed the name to 'Licensed Lay Minister' or 'Lay Minister', but no one has yet suggested a name which is universally acceptable. Despite 'competition' from other ministries such as OLM, or the pressure on Readers to be ordained, Reader ministry continues to draw

steady numbers of people each year. Those training come from the widest diversity of cultures, occupations and backgrounds. As a result they bring a rich experience of life and the community to the work of a Reader and a freshness to preaching and teaching which is at the heart of their pastoral ministry. Readers work as a team with clergy and other laity, mainly in parishes but sometimes in prison or hospital chaplaincies. They have an important role in parish life both in their liturgical function and in teaching and pastoral activities.

How are they trained?

Training is an exciting time of personal growth and spiritual development. It usually takes three years and is designed to offer study and practical experience in important areas such as biblical studies, Christian belief, theological foundations, pastoral studies, prayer and worship. Individual and group work feature in the training with regular assessment by tutors. Occasional Saturdays or weekends are used for fellowship, sharing and learning.

Until 1990 the Church of England provided a national programme for Reader training. Since then each diocese has had its own training programme which is moderated and appraised by the Ministry Division of the Archbishops' Council through the appointment of diocesan moderators. Successful candidates, on completion of training, are awarded the Church of England Readers' Certificate. This certificate is recognised by all the dioceses enabling easy transfer when the holder moves to a new address.

Currently, changes are being made to the way Reader training is organised, alongside wider changes in ordination training. In order to prevent unnecessary duplication, training is tending to become regionalised and ideally delivered in some dioceses through regional training partnerships. In some dioceses Readers train on courses alongside those preparing for ordination, and many of these courses are ecumenical.

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There are also aspirations for all Reader training to be accredited by a higher education institution; but all sorts of factors affect the way training is done, and there is still great variation between dioceses.

In some dioceses, lay people may be authorised as evangelists or pastoral assistants, as well as Readers, so some training is core, other parts particular to each ministry. Every diocese is different, so you will need to find out how yours sees the ministry of Readers. In some dioceses training is done on a part-time theological and ministry training course so Readers in training are working alongside ordinands preparing for stipendiary and non-stipendiary ministry. In some dioceses training is ecumenical, alongside those training for Methodist Local Preacher ministry.

Within the diocesan organisation there is a Warden of Readers, appointed by the bishop who oversees the local activities and provides spiritual guidance usually on a deanery basis. Some deaneries have their own informal, local gatherings and support for the encouragement of Readers. This allows for specific training suited to local needs as may be required for rural or inner-city parishes.

After admission, Readers, like other ministers, are expected to undertake Continuing Ministerial Education (CME) within the diocese or at other institutions. This may be linked to the renewal of licences which takes place periodically, usually every three years.

With the current shortage of finance and stipendiary clergy, and moves towards collaborative and team ministry, Readers will play an important role; a few Readers have been given pastoral charge of churches, while others will play significant leadership roles. Others again may be involved in launching or leading 'Fresh Expressions' of church.

What do they do?

Their main duties include:

- preaching
- teaching
- leading and participating in the conduct of worship
- assisting with the administration of Holy Communion
- pastoral work.

(See Canons E4, E5, E6).

It is within the ministry of the Word that Readers find their main focus. Many will be seen to be active in young people's work, marriage and confirmation preparation, leading house groups and generally helping people to grow in the expression of their faith. Their pastoral work can include visiting, counselling, comforting the sick and bereavement ministry. They may well be actively involved in the church's healing ministry and generally showing the love and concern of the church for all, whatever the needs. In some dioceses Readers conduct funerals, after special additional training.

Readers will be involved in ecumenical activities and provide help and encouragement for the witness of other lay Christians in the informal ways of exercising ministry by their presence at the place of work, in schools, at home among neighbours and in their local communities. Readers have been described as 'the Church's lay theologians, thinking, well informed, articulate lay women and men.' Readers may be either elected members of PCCs or ex officio members, and thus play a full part in planning and decision making. Readers will also meet regularly with their incumbents, sometimes as part of staff meetings, if their time permits.

All Readers hold a licence granted them at a special service by the bishop of the diocese and they work under the authority of their parish priest. This gives them a close link with deanery activities and many are invited to

participate in the discussion and meetings of clergy chapters – a role appreciated by both Readers and clergy alike.

Although working within a parish structure, many Readers exercise a diocesan ministry and in some cases Readers may have 'permission to officiate' in an adjoining diocese. At the age of seventy Readers change their status from 'licensed' to 'permission to officiate' in line with the ordained ministry and in some cases they may use the title of Reader Emeritus.

In the introduction to *The Training of Readers*, a publication on Reader ministry from the Ministry Division of the Archbishops' Council (ABM Paper no 9), the Bishop of Hereford writes, 'Reader ministry has never been more important in the Church of England than it is today. The development of the Church's ministry has reached a point at which more and more emphasis is being placed on the role of lay people in leadership and witness, and it is particularly important that the value of the largest and best established form of lay ministry, that of Readers, should continue to be held in high regard.'

Questions to be answered

Are you:

- eager to exercise a ministry as a lay Christian
- keen to communicate your faith
- a confirmed and regular communicant of the Church of England?

If the answer to these questions is 'Yes' then Reader ministry may be for you.

You need to do four things:
Pray that God will help you know whether you are called to this ministry.

Consider the demands and the training involved.

Talk to your incumbent or chaplain.

Discuss your plans and feelings with your family and friends and if possible with a Reader.

For more information contact the warden or secretary of Readers in your diocese – your incumbent or chaplain will know the address.

The Readers' website address is www.readers.cofe.anglican.org and has a wealth of information about Reader ministry.

Further reading

Bridging the Gap: Reader Ministry Today, (CHP 2002) edited by G. Kuhrt and P. Nappin. A comprehensive introduction to aspects of Reader ministry.

Celebrating Reader Ministry, Rhoda Hiscox, (Mowbrays). One hundred and twenty-five years of lay ministry in the Church of England.

Readers and Worship in the Church of England, Carolyn Headley, (Grove Worship Series no 115). A look at the liturgical role of Readers in the 1990s.

The Bishops' Regulations for Reader Ministry, (2000) and *The Deployment of Readers*, (1998), are two useful publications on Reader ministry, available from Church House Bookshop.

A Preaching Workbook, David Day, (SPCK, 2004).

I Believe in Preaching, John Stott, (Hodder & Stoughton).

Learning for Ministry: Making the Most of Study and Training. Steven Croft and Roger Walton, (CHP 2005). A user-friendly handbook designed for those beginning training for lay or ordained ministry.

Guidance, (CPAS Resource Sheet 1).

This resource sheet had its origin in a document by Readers Brian Field and Raymond Dawson who have served in Ripon and Canterbury dioceses. We are grateful to them for their input.

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resource sheets

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