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# resource sheet 17

## fostering vocation

Helping people respond to God's call to ministry

Some people seem to be able to smell a vocation! In the most unlikely and sometimes unpromising people they see the potential and possibility that this person is called to be an ordained leader in God's church. Unfortunately not everyone has the gift. This resource sheet reflects theologically and practically on how local church leaders can encourage others into ministry. It is not about raising the general idea of vocation, and it does not focus on encouraging people towards non-ordained ministries. Both are crucial but they are not our focus here.

The practice of 'preaching for vocations' has largely fallen out of favour. But although the language seems dated, the idea contains an important truth: the primary place where people find their vocation is the local church, through all its forms and activities. All Christians are called to ministry. It might be as a priest or as a plasterer, inside or outside paid Christian work, but the local Christian community should energise people's service of Christ in the world. This

means that local church leaders are the primary vocations officers in the church.

Peter Louis of St Francis, Welwyn Garden City, has a church-wide strategy for encouraging vocations. He enthuses, 'We want to get the clergy off the pedestal, to present theirs as one vocation among many, to show them that they have gifts and skills to offer so that they don't discard it as something they can't do.' Experience from around the country confirms that this kind of approach is fundamental to both growing healthy churches, and for encouraging people into ministry, whatever background or style of church.

Very few (if any) ministers are in the job because of an advert or random mail-shot. They are there because a person encouraged them through words and example that this calling might be theirs. As you read this you might already have in mind those who encouraged you; take a moment to thank God for them.

### 1. Why is this an issue? Neglected art

When I started as a curate, the diocese had a list of 60 competencies which I had to achieve during my four years. I honestly cannot remember if encouraging ministry in others was one of them! But what it illustrates is that a myriad of different roles, skills and disciplines demand the attention of contemporary clergy. However, the example of Jesus and the practice of the early church points towards the growing of ministry not as another programme, but a long-term relationship with God and others. It is an art which ministers neglect at both their personal peril and the detriment of the kingdom of God. 'Pastors who take upon themselves everything that appears worthy of ministry are either insufferably arrogant, thinking they are the only ones in church capable of hearing commands and of obeying in faith, or else extraordinarily faithless (*oligopistoi*) who do not give the Holy Spirit credit for being able to lead or direct anyone else.'<sup>1</sup>

# fostering vocation

## Changing world and church

One thing the Church shares with the wider world is that change is here to stay. In our post-Christendom society it has been suggested that we are entering a 'post-vocational age'. This means that encouraging people to consider any sort of vocational service will become increasingly difficult as the idea of a God who calls recedes. Similarly the Church of England faces change with an aging clergy base (the average age is now over 50<sup>2</sup>) and a large number of retirements imminent. Whatever the situation in the local area there will be a continuing need for church leaders of all varieties, types and ages.

## Continued need

As the Church embraces new forms of church and mission it is clear that the type of people the ordained ministry needs will also have to change. Commenting on the report *Mission-shaped Church*, Archbishop Rowan Williams observes: 'We may find ourselves in five or ten years looking for candidates of slightly different timbre from what we've been used to. And that means looking at people who have certain co-ordinating skills, whose leadership is exercised in certain ways, and I think that would be good for all of us.'<sup>3</sup> A missionary Church will need leaders driven by missionary purpose, able to lead others in all that entails. This does not mean that all the ordained must have this as their primary characteristic, but as our culture continues to change we must have some for whom this is central. Ordained pioneer ministers use the same selection system but have additional criteria and significant differences in training and deployment.

## 2. Some basic principles

**God calls** Considering the state of Church and world, it is tempting to believe that encouraging ministry is an impossible task. However, we must remember that God continues to call people for his work (Matthew 9:38). It's not all down to how persuasive you or I can be.

**Leadership is always shared** This activity is not an optional extra for large churches or gregarious ministers. The New Testament always envisages leadership as being shared, even if that is with just one other person.

**A core responsibility** Developing gifts and leadership in others is part of the central tasks of church leadership (2 Timothy 1). As Peter Louis reflects: 'God can and does use all sorts of different people so ministry must not be limited by my activity. My role is enabling the ministry of others.'

**Vocation for all** Within different traditions of the church, the word 'vocation' has been reserved as a technical term, for the clerical professional. But the sweep of Scripture's story persists with a different, wider understanding rooted, not in an office, but in the calling and election of a people witnessing to God's grace. In Genesis the call is to Israel, God's distinctive kingdom partner. In Jesus the kingdom-call comes to all nations to follow the one in whom rests all authority in heaven and earth. As Paul reflects on Israel's narratives of creation and election, he sees the themes converge in the death and resurrection of Jesus. So, raised with Christ, Christian vocation can be in anything and is for everyone (Colossians 3). So the unfolding story of grace reveals that the following of vocation, and the helping of others towards it, is to live life as God intended – not for a select few, but for the invited many.

**The priesthood of the whole people of God** This core principle, flowing from the sole priesthood of Christ energises the Church in every-member ministry, together! If a local congregation embraces its practical implication, individuals can believe that God might call them, and has a ministry for them.

**The Church tests and confirms** The act of encouraging ministry should never become introspective to one person or community; it is one of partnership

between members of the local church team, local vocations officers, DDOs, bishops and others. As the early church grew it was not held captive by the conviction of an individual; rather it initiated and weighed such calls, sometimes a surprise to the individual concerned (Acts 13). Remember this does not mean that the Church always gets both process and decision right!

**Leadership for the church that is coming** Vocational discernment is not a matter of considering those who are 'like us', but looking for the marks of grace and *charism* in all people. Missiology informs us that those who will lead the Church beyond its existing boundaries will probably not come from within the existing establishment, so 'mavericks' and 'unlikely' candidates have the right to be called!

**God's timing** People develop at different rates and their response to God is set within their psychological, social, developmental context. But, learning the art of grasping the *kairos* moment, that moment of opportunity, is essential in this process.

## 3. Understanding the process

Over the years the process for selection and training of ministers has changed. It is important to make sure you know what the procedures are within your diocese and at a national level, as there will be elements of discernment and selection at local, regional and national levels. In all these things the Church is not looking for perfection, but potential.

## 4. But what should we look for?

Reflection on some key biblical texts is crucial (among others: Mark 10:32-45; John 21:15-23; 2 Corinthians 4:1-12; Ephesians 4:1-16; 1 Timothy 3:1-16; 1 Peter 5:1-11) as well as an awareness of the ordinal services. When considering ordained ministry the Church has developed nine criteria that are helpful to bear in mind when discerning the character, qualities and potential skills required:

<sup>1</sup> Peterson E, *Five Smooth Stones for Pastoral Work*, Eerdmans, p.220

<sup>2</sup> See the informative discussion in Jackson B, *Hope for the Church*, CHP, 2002, pp.152-3, 175-177

<sup>3</sup> Williams R, Response in Synod to *Mission-shaped Church* report, 10 February, 2004, see [www.archbishopofcanterbury.org/](http://www.archbishopofcanterbury.org/)

- **Ministry within the Church of England** – familiar and ready to work within the tradition and practice of the Church
- **Vocation** – an obedient, realistic and informed sense of vocation rooted in both personal conviction and the confirmation of others
- **Faith** – a demonstrated personal faith and capacity to communicate the gospel with a desire to deepen their understanding of the faith
- **Spirituality** – a commitment to spiritual discipline, corporate and individual
- **Personality and character** – maturity to face change and pressure with integrity and balance
- **Relationships** – a self-awareness and acceptance of healthy relationships whilst respecting the will of the Church on matters of sexual morality
- **Leadership and collaboration** – including offering an example in church and society, and collaborating with others in ministry and mission
- **Quality of mind** – sufficient to undertake study and cope with the intellectual demands of ministry
- **Mission and evangelism** – a wide and inclusive understanding of God’s mission to the world, able to speak of Jesus Christ in a way that is attractive and appropriate. They should show an awareness of how changes in culture and society have an impact on the life of the Church and show potential as leaders of mission and a commitment to enable others in mission and evangelism.

For candidates who show calling and promise for a ministry in missionary church planting or fresh expression of church these criteria will be applied with a view to this specific ministry.

## 5. Some practical wisdom

Across the country many clergy work hard to challenge people with God’s call.

We have asked ordained church leaders to share their experience of encouraging others into ministry. This work is an art and very diverse. Rather like jazz, the ‘improvisation’ at a local level reveals some core themes and principles which can be applied anywhere. At the end of each section there is a question for your own reflection and action. The insights which follow are gleaned from the experiences of Canon Nick Bell at St Mary’s, Luton, Canon Stuart Bell in Aberystwyth, the Rev Tony Harle from St Albans, the Rev Peter Louis of St Francis of Assisi, Welwyn Garden City, and the Rev Susie Sanders of Christ Church, Guildford.

### Modelling

‘We have had some really good people sent to us as curates,’ says Nick Bell. ‘They have modelled ministry for people, which is crucial. I have great enthusiasm which I hope will rub off. It seems to me that constantly hearing clergy complain of tiredness and overwork is not that helpful.’ We need to model not just the life of ministry but also the journey of vocation. Peter Louis tries to do this: ‘Seeing people in the local congregation who are further on than they are, means they can see where things might go.’ Peter goes on to point out that in such a context God’s call becomes more plausible as they see that they are ‘no different from others who offer themselves.’ Of course, modelling requires an open attitude to ministry. Susie Sanders says: ‘It can be hard to let people do things because we feel it’s specifically our role, or because we don’t want to lose them from our congregation... but I think God’s economy works differently – it’s one of overflowing generosity: we reap as we sow.’

- What message does your life model? How does your church offer models of ministry from young people, minority ethnic communities, or women and men ministering together?

### Different entry levels

No matter what the stated message of

a church is, e.g. ‘We need volunteers and leaders, come and get involved’, our underlying values often tell another story. It might be impossible for many people to try up-front ministry because we have an implicit value that failure is unacceptable, shown in our striving for perfection in our public meetings. Likewise church structures can sometimes militate against offering opportunities to those exploring a call. A church with a large number of Readers and clergy can find itself hard-pressed when seeking Sunday slots for aspiring preachers, if there are few other opportunities. ‘What we need,’ says Tony Harle, ‘are ladders that get down to where people actually are, to make things accessible. We try and have lots of different entry points so that everyone has a picture of what’s needed.’

- How easy is it to get into ministry in your church?

### Leadership development as a normal part of church life

Nick Bell comments: ‘We have done a lot of work on leadership recently, especially looking at material from the Old Testament. People need to be able to see that there are people who follow you.’ This will include the ongoing identification and training, or mentoring of potential leaders. Such an approach encourages people that God might well be calling them. What helps women grow in vocation? Susie Sanders comments: ‘Being encouraged to see that God might have more for them in the future than they can imagine at the moment. It helps to know that God does call women to ordained ministry.’ Tony Harle of St Paul’s, St Albans, comments: ‘I think that mentoring is key here. Jesus did not seem to have a fixed script, he approached different people as individuals with a prophetic word for each’. For Tony, this emphasis on developing gifts and call through mentoring is rooted in scriptural examples, and offers a firm foundation for whatever ministry God has in mind.

'If you know you are called, I won't say it's not difficult, but it is different.' Using external resources can be a great help, e.g. training courses like Cornhill, Careforce or Time for God. Alternatively you can use a course to help explore ministry and leadership such as the Willow Creek Network Course or the CPAS *Growing Leaders* course.

- What are you doing at the moment to develop leaders within your church?

### Risk-taking

'We take risks here,' says Nick Bell, 'which means people discover things for themselves, and that includes allowing them to not succeed and realise that ministry is not the right way forward. By taking this route we have kept good relationships rather than rejecting people just because I say so.' Susie Sanders agrees: 'I have to let people do things in a more rough and ready way than I might prefer, make mistakes, and sometimes bomb out... but not feel that they have failed for ever, but know that God can still use them, and help them grow through their mistakes.'

- How do you feel about taking risks, and why?

### Praying for leaders

Praying for the vocation of all people in practical, regular ways is an important way to make issues of ministry and vocation part of the lifeblood of a local church. 'We try to pray every Sunday for all sorts of different vocations, not just for priests', says Peter Louis. Many churches have adopted the idea of a slot at 11.00am during Sunday

worship, where someone talks briefly about what they will do at 11.00am on Monday; the church then prays for that person and others who share that vocation. Likewise, regular prayer for, and affirmation of, different ministries and leaders is part of our obedience to Jesus' command, and a good way of developing leadership in others.

- What priorities are reflected in the prayers and liturgy of your church?

### Getting enquirers together

Stuart Bell of St Michael's, Aberystwyth, has run a potential ordinands' group for the last ten years. Over that time many people have discovered their call to ministry in informal conversation, often centred on reading a book together. It has the advantage of keeping the issue at the front of people's minds, giving people the chance to learn from each other as well as a place to ask difficult questions in confidence. Getting together can help people think and pray through common questions. Sometimes we can assume we know what issues people are facing. Susie Sanders points out that, like other groups, women have a whole range of issues and questions to face in ministry: 'Questions like "Can God really use me?", "Is it okay for a woman to be in a teaching ministry or leadership role in the Church?", "What if I don't want to be like any of the vicars I know?", "Will anyone want to marry me if I do this?", "Will this be okay with my family?" Not everyone asks them all, but being with others can help.'

- Is there a sense of community among those exploring ministry in your church?

## 6. A final thought

It's important to remember that this work is, of course, God's alone. We have a responsibility to play our part, but it is his call, his mission and his ministry. In the final analysis we must be sure that all that we are and do is for God's glory alone and nothing else. For that is the exciting, safe and fruitful journey of vocation that we are on and into which it is our privilege to encourage others.

### Resources

CPAS's course *Growing Leaders* helps local churches identify and grow gifts of leadership. For more information call 01926 458458 or visit [www.cpas.org.uk](http://www.cpas.org.uk).

CPAS *You and Ministry* events provide residential conferences to consider a call to ordained and authorised ministry. Call 01926 458480 for more details or visit the CPAS website.

Vocations Sunday is a Church of England opportunity for encouraging everyone to reflect and discover what God might be calling them to. The website offers resources to help churches explore Christian vocation, both in the world and in the church. There are materials for those leading worship on Vocations Sunday as well as resources and activities which can be used by different groups and for workshops at any time. Individuals considering their own vocation may find some of the ideas and suggestions here helpful.

Ministry Division of the Archbishops' Council of the Church of England  
T 020 7898 1000  
W [www.cofe-ministry.org.uk](http://www.cofe-ministry.org.uk)

## resource sheets

Download sheets free of charge from [www.cpas.org.uk/vocationresources](http://www.cpas.org.uk/vocationresources) or buy a complete set of printed sheets at [www.cpas.org.uk/shop](http://www.cpas.org.uk/shop). For bulk copies of individual sheets, phone 01926 458461 or email [mnorris@cpas.org.uk](mailto:mnorris@cpas.org.uk).

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