

# Manchester Reader Day

## 11 September 2010

It is good to be here in your 'Setting the Compass' Weekend of Prayer.

This morning I am probably going to bore you by talking a lot. This afternoon we do some work together.

Though I have served under many Readers and Curates in my time, I had no idea that Readers were anything but members of a widely-accepted part of the public ministry of the Church. Since becoming Chair of the Central Readers' Council I have had glimpses into some of the more difficult issues Readers face in certain places. I mean by that both a lack of respect by some for this ministry and also the lack of self-respect among some Readers themselves. Readers are both sinned against and sinning!

I have also had a good look at *Reader Upbeat* and have had a chance to hear how it has been received over the period since July 2008 when it was presented to the General Synod. This is an excellent document but I do have some hesitations about it. I will return to this later.

### Ministry

The topic I have been asked to address in this session is 'ministry'. My understanding of ministry is that it is the willingness of God to serve, demonstrated in the life of Jesus Christ who came among us as Servant and Lord. That ministry committed to the Church is expressed in a willingness to give place to others and, particularly, to all who are in any way weak or powerless. (See *Luke 22. 26, 27; John 13. 14, 15; 2 Corinthians 11. 29, 30; 1 Timothy 6. 17, 18; 1 John 4. 19 21*)

Our understanding of the New Testament word 'diakonia' which we translate as 'service' has shifted in the last 20+ years, principally as a result of the lay Roman Catholic scholar John N. Collins. His work and that of others is the theological driver behind recognising the public ministry of the Church (lay and ordained) as commissioned and reserved service.

#### **DIAKONIA**

##### ***in modern dictionaries***

- An ordinary, everyday word. →
- A religiously-neutral term. →
- Originally, meant 'service at table'. →
- Used of slaves. →
- Used by Christians because it suggests lowly service. →
- Shows that ministry is lowly service. →
- Adapted by Christians to express loving service of one another. →
- Shows that ministry is for all. →

#### **DIAKONIA**

##### ***according to Greek literary sources***

- A word with a literary and poetic quality.
- Commonly used in a religious context.
- Service at table is just one application
- More commonly an honourable designation.
- Used as appropriate language for various functions in Christian life and community.
- Shows that ministry is high office.
- Not so much an expression of loving service, as of a mandate from a superior.
- Shows that ministry is a reserved function.

[See *John N Collins: Journal of Ecumenical Studies, 32:2, Spring 1995, etc.*]

I need to admit that people like me who've been involved in public ministry for four decades have spent lots of energy getting more people ever more deeply involved in aspects of what we have called the 'ministry' of the Church; but it's taken a while for us in our part of the world to notice that, while far more Christians are 'ministering', fewer people wish to belong to the Church (dramatically fewer young people). Encouraging

'all Christians to be ministers', 'every member ministry' and 'the ministry of the baptized' (and so on) ought to be harmless alternatives to speaking of 'discipleship' and 'Christian service'. But they have come to mean much more: these expressions carry the hidden question, 'What are you doing *for the Church?*' That's a very serious problem in a church like ours which is, in its bowels, pastoral rather than missionary, a shy and reticent creature. A far more vital and meaningful concept than 'lay ministry', particularly in our context, is 'discipleship', which is at the very heart of our common calling as Christians and carries no overtones of any distinction between lay and ordained.

The extravagant use of the concept of 'ministry' is disabling discipleship and I conclude from the general disillusionment with the institutional Church that people have noticed this internalising tendency and don't want to belong to such an apparently useless and self-orientated organisation. I'm convinced that the reason so few teenagers and younger adults want anything to do with us is not post-modernism, not secularism, not any other of the alienating -isms, the power of which I do not deny: they don't think the church is any use! To me, it all points towards the same basic problem in the declining church: internalisation; and one of the key symptoms of internalisation is an unhealthy approach to ministry.

Ministry is always the servant of God's mission. Ministry for its own sake is mere entertainment. Now you might think that entertainment does no one any harm but, in fact, it is deeply damaging to the mission of God. Ministry for its own sake is about keeping a diminishing band of the faithful happy or busy until the day when we're all pushing-up daisies and the key of the church door is turned for the last time. On the other hand, ministry, as commissioned and reserved service, such as the public ministry of those who are Readers, serves the fundamental relationship of God to humanity. Good, called, well-trained, accredited and accountable public ministers (lay and ordained) will continue to be vital for the mission of God, and I see Readers as full partners in the public ministry of the Church. Humanity's relationship to God is worship; God's relationship to us, his broken world, is mission.

*"God loved the world so much that **he gave** his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not die but have eternal life."* [John 3. 16]

I would define God's mission as the outgoing love of God the Holy Trinity for his creation expressed in the mission of the Son: namely the incarnation, life, death, resurrection and ascension of our Lord Jesus Christ in whom God has reconciled the world to himself and through whom the Holy Spirit has been given. That mission Christ has committed to his Church as a royal priesthood in making disciples, baptizing and teaching. (*Matthew 28. 19, 20; John 20. 21, 22; Romans 1. 16, 17; Colossians 1. 20; 1 Peter 2. 9*)

So it's ministry as the servant of God's mission to draw people into a relationship with God the Holy Trinity through faith in Jesus Christ so that all may enjoy reconciliation in his love, and that life in our communities, churches and as individuals may be enriched by the gospel and reflect the joy of the Kingdom of God.

I took the opportunity among Diocesan Bishops of sharing just a little of my concern about the over-emphasis on ministry and the under-emphasis on discipleship. Discipleship is the great leveller. I have been encouraged that both archbishops and a good number of my fellow-bishops are anxious to develop this. I was able to trail the news that this Readers' Council has initiated a process that will lead to a colloquium on the subject of discipleship, with particular reference to the relationship between discipleship and ministry, and this was warmly received. It will take place at the end of November 2011; we, as Readers, are taking the initiative.

## What is a Reader?

Within the constraints of my diary, a stretch of water between my diocese and the other islands and the rôle of husband, I enjoy visiting readers in other dioceses. In a number, I have asked the question, “What is a Reader?” It may surprise you to know that I have rarely had a duplicate answer: it is extraordinary what Readers get up to! What is even more extraordinary is how difficult it is for Readers to articulate what they believe they have been called, trained, admitted and commissioned to be and to do.

I know how difficult it is when someone asks you, “Why do you think God is calling you to be ... a reader? ... a deacon? ... a priest?” (Fortunately, you don’t get asked that very much before you become a bishop!) The difficulty lies in defining what we really mean by “reader”, “deacon” and “priest”. The simple definitions rely on the obvious: “A reader is trained, admitted, licensed and wears a blue scarf” or “A reader conducts Evening Prayer and preaches”. But that won’t do: what is the heart of reader ministry, what makes a reader different from a priest other than the authority to absolve, preside at the eucharist and bless in the name of God? In an age of considerable change we must dig deeper.

Let me, therefore, tell you what I think the key elements are. Readers are ...

- people who exercise a ministry of the Word: they have been trained in theology / God-talk; and
- people who are day-by-day working outside the confines of the Church as an institution. [I should explain that I do not subscribe to the foolish view that clergy are not in the real world but they do have to spend some time dealing with the institution; Readers do not.]

Readers bring the Word of the Lord (and the interpretations of that expression are manifold) to the world. *“You have received without paying, so give without being paid. Do not carry any gold, silver or copper money in your pockets; do not carry a beggar’s bag for the journey or an extra shirt or shoes or a stick...”* [Matthew 10. 8b-10] You are, in short – and do not be ashamed of this! – you are lay theologians.

**Lay** because you must remain rooted outside the system, outside holy order, always having the freedom to be “out of order”; and **theologians** because you have been trained in God-talk. Dr William Sangster was interviewing a shy candidate for the Methodist ministry. “I would not set the Thames on fire,” said the young man. “I am not interested in that,” said Sangster, “but if I dropped you in the Thames, would it sizzle?” The communication of God-talk is always “theology coming from someone on fire”.

Central to equipping Christians for God’s mission is theology, which I would define as absorbing the Holy Scriptures, understanding the teaching of the Church and helping people to apply that in practice. Theology “must never ... remain in the hands of a scholarly or priestly élite but must be reclaimed as an essential component of every Christian’s kit-bag.”<sup>1</sup>

Unless we grasp the meaning of what authorised ministry a Reader is called to we shall not be able to establish collaborative working between all those who minister in the public arena and we will always feel under threat. So, if the symbol of Readership is anything, it is not a surplice and blue scarf – as the C.R.C. Executive has decided in thinking of future promotional material – but the Word in the world.

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<sup>1</sup> Bishop Harry Moore

## Reader Upbeat

The excellent report to General Synod entitled '*Reader Upbeat*' (July 2008, précis January 2010) has been on many people's lips for the past two years, though I have been surprised how many people haven't read any of it. It is on the website.

I hinted at the beginning that I have some minor hesitations about it.

- First, if you want to find the way forward for a movement, you pay attention to the rebels and to those who think outside the box. I know that this is not the main drift of the report, but there are parts in which I am reminded that "turkeys don't vote for Christmas"!
- Second, in my view the recommendations are too many and too detailed: it reads to one not involved in its preparation a little like a litany of grievances, and I know that such a spirit is not characteristic of the majority of Readers. What is lacking in certain places is a clearer diagnosis of the presenting symptoms such that the underlying causes can be revealed – and these are matters which the Church as a whole cannot for much longer avoid confronting. The Bishop of Norwich and I point to these issues in the Foreword of the abbreviated edition. If you've ever watched "House", the American hospital drama starring Hugh Laurie, you'll know the basic formula: a patient comes into hospital suffering from something obvious, doesn't respond to treatment and deteriorates. Dr House has a chance encounter with someone else which leads him to think laterally and he attempts a controversial diagnosis and cures the patient. I over-simplify this gripping and amusing series to make the point that treating the symptoms without getting deeper into the diagnosis can make the patient worse. Satisfactory solutions cannot be found to questions such as Readers baptizing and presiding at Holy Communion by Extension unless and until a theological and practical study is made of how we understand local lay leadership in the Church, in particular the rôle of a lay minister to whom a measure of pastoral and liturgical oversight is entrusted within a local community. This may raise awkward questions and strange creatures may emerge but it is our view that the discussion cannot be delayed any longer.
- Third, some of the solutions offered need more critical analysis. If a Reader wants to replace a semi-intelligible title with a description "Licensed Lay Minister (Reader)", then perhaps parish priests should do the same: as in "Beneficed Ordained Minister (Vicar)". I hope not! While recognising that the word "Reader" is not widely understood, it does not seem to me that substituting a description will do. However, the underlying principle of collaborative working for all licensed lay ministers is a vital one; however, this again has been hidden behind a discussion about the presenting symptom of titles.
- Fourth, if Readers feel as marginalized as some certainly do by other licensed ministries, the way to tackle the problem is to engage with those other ministries so that a sense of cohesiveness and collaboration can begin to emerge.

Let's develop that final issue. *Reader Upbeat* recommended that all lay ministers who have been duly, trained, admitted and authorised by a bishop should be identified as licensed lay ministers. This – forgetting its use as a title for the moment – is the valid point.

Having a single body with responsibility to the national Church for licensed lay ministry would enable all lay ministers to be recognised nationally as partners in the public ministry of the Church with those who are ordained. The constituent parts of such a national body could be:

- Chaplains: particularly in health care and the criminal justice system; the considerable variations will require a good deal of consultation at an early stage;

- Evangelists: a public voice for the Church in proclamation of the gospel;
- Pastors: those committed to caring for people in need and at other critical points in life;
- Readers: theologians whose ministry is to help interpret the word in contemporary living;
- Social workers: those who work to bring justice to individuals and society;
- Youth workers: those working to inspire and nurture faith in children and young people; and
- Others.

All licensed lay ministries would accept a common discipline of training, mutually-agreed accreditation and interchangeability at national level. It would remain to be seen whether there should be a common training 'core' – and we can't get into that now - but the view I favour is that it would be sufficient for the essential components of the training of all lay ministries to be agreed nationally.

How different components of training *might* relate (each square represents a component of training):

Chaplains

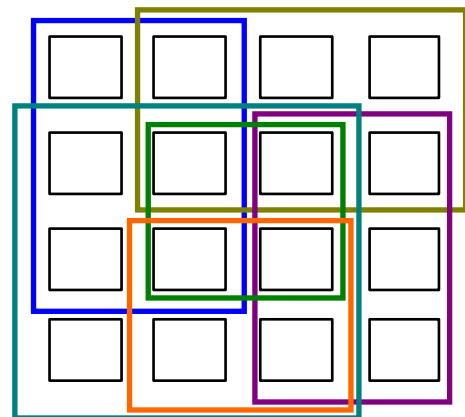
Evangelists

Pastors

Readers

Social Workers

Youth Workers



Some barriers (imaginary or real) between areas of lay ministry need to be broken down and the vulnerability felt by some Readers needs to be addressed in order to achieve flexible and collaborative working. In a few dioceses, virtually all licensed lay ministers have been admitted as Readers, which has led to confusion and people asking why excellent social workers are preaching hopeless sermons in country churches! In most dioceses, other lay ministries have been licensed and some Readers think that these people are treading on their turf – and they get specially touchy about licensed worship leaders!

However, collaboration between lay ministers and between lay and ordained ministers must always be beneficial. Collaboration strengthens what is being achieved through the Central Readers' Council since the appointment of new officers whose work is to assist vocation and selection, moderate training and ensure good continuing ministerial development. By having a national body all licensed lay ministries would be formally committed to collaborative working, particularly at national and diocesan levels. I'm sure there are means of achieving this in a dynamic, rather than bureaucratic, way.

However, if lay ministers (Readers and others) wish to be taken seriously as integral members of the public ministry of the Church they must expect to play by the same rules, such as in matters of ministerial discipline. Further thought needs to be given to this at national level.

You will, I hope be pleased to know that I have already staked a claim in the House of Bishops Standing Committee to initiate discussion of all these issues, together with the idea of some kind of lay ministry body representing commissioned lay ministers as fully part of the public ministry of the Church.

## **SOME DISCUSSION QUESTIONS**

1. What aspects of the description “lay theologian” apply to your Reader ministry?
2. What trained and episcopally-licensed collaborative ministries might operate (with Readers) at a diocesan level and be transferable at a national level?
3. Why should the Church include all trained and episcopally-licensed ministers (ordained and lay) in its strategies for public ministry?
4. This is an individual question to be answered over lunch on a piece of paper:  
What, in fewer than 12 words, should be THE NUMBER ONE PRIORITY FOR READERS IN THE DIOCESE OF MANCHESTER?