

Lay Ministry Working Group - Focus Groups with Licensed Lay Ministers.

I have visited five dioceses. In each diocese I have met Readers/LLMs in two groups: those licensed for more than five years and those licensed within the last five years. I asked the participants to tell me what was significant about being lay, about being licensed, what resources of training, formation or personnel had assisted them and what they needed to minister in a changing world. I also asked if there was anything they wanted the Archbishops' Council to know.

A summary of the responses

In the following notes I have used 'few' to refer to one or two people, 'some' to two to four individuals, on separate occasions 'several' to two or three individuals, repeated in two or three groups. 'many' to a substantial number in each group

I deduced that 'church' was universally used by the participants to refer to those activities which happened in the church building or which were organised by the church, e.g. a holiday club or visits to care home. Nobody contrasted church with the Kingdom, but many spoke about God at work outside the church.

I have used 'LLM' as a shorthand for Reader/LLM.

An opening question - Do you know each other?

There were a variety of responses to this question. Those who lived in a large rural diocese often worked in isolation from other lay ministers and, sometimes, from ordained ministers too. Those who been licensed in the last five years often knew each other, but had no commonality of training experience as so much change had occurred during that time.

The experience in local groups varied greatly. Though this was the aspiration in most places there were very few people in functioning, nurturing deanery groups. Those who were deanery reps found it hard to bring people together, while the focus group was the first time that some LLMs found out that there were deanery groups! Diocesan events, such as CMD, conferences and the resources of neighbouring theological colleges and universities was greatly appreciated. There was no difference in the appreciation of CMD on particular topics shared with clergy and/or other authorised ministers or those specifically for LLMs, but appreciation of residential conferences which enabled LLMs to gather together to share common experiences was very high.

What was the most memorable part of pre-licensing training? What do you use now?

***Biblical studies** was most frequently mentioned as the subject which had been new, interesting and was now a resource for preaching and teaching. It was most appreciated when accompanied by work on exegesis and hermeneutics. Those - and they were more frequent amongst the more recently licensed - who said the Biblical studies were too academic rarely brought what they had learned before licensing into their sermons as they could not see how to interpret it for the congregation.*

*Those who had done **placements** greatly valued them. They gave an opportunity to experience the breadth of the Church of England.*

*A couple of people had done some training in an **ecumenical setting**, and had benefitted from the practical, skills based approach of the Methodist Local Preachers.*

Other subjects, such as mission, doctrine and ethics had made an impact to the extent that a contemporary situation called for such discussion. The example of an essay on the 'just war' theory and a Lent course based on a doctrine module was given.

*In two dioceses, participants were able to say that they were confident in ability to **think and reflect theologically**. They also appreciated a model of training which recognised their existing skills. One said, "we were set up to succeed."*

*Many people recalled a **person** who had been an inspiration or particularly supportive. In one diocese the course trainers were particularly praised for their determination and the assistance given to get everyone through the academic training.*

*But discussion of training also prompted **negative comments**. Those licensed more recently used words like 'relentless,' 'battle-weary.' One discussion distinguished between education and skills training and concluded that the recent changes had over-emphasised the first and completely neglected a third element, formation. "in actual fact the important things almost happened regardless of the academic element"*

I heard no-one who had been licensed for more than five years say they wished they were doing their training now.

There was also mixed experience of training with ordinands. In some places this had resulted in a better relationship with the clergy, in others that they felt 'second best' in groups which were often assumed to be all ordinands. One factor seemed to be whether or not there had been intentional discussion about the difference between a lay and an ordained vocation and examination of the complementarity of each.

Several questioned whether it was possible for the church to establish a coherent pattern of training when the role of licensed lay ministry had not been clarified.

There was widespread concern that pattern of training excluded many, including under 50s. There is a need for local packages, with mentoring and coaching.

What has been helpful since licensing?

Some local groups are working well, looking at Bible passages for the months ahead, reviewing pastoral situations - but these are rare.

Training events on particular subjects - messy church, bereavement, funerals, ministry in schools and care homes and so on with other ministers.

Diocesan conferences

On the job coaching and good feedback - a helpful incumbent is so valuable.

Comment: "There has been an increasing fragmentation of mission into different categories of ministry, but church life is rarely so neat." So it is helpful when a wide range of topics for training conferences are open to all regardless of the title one has. Many people had multiple roles, as LLM, Warden and treasurer, for example.

What more would you like?

Training in spiritual direction

facilitating small groups

mentoring and supervising

change management, strategic planning.

learning to manage upwards

use of online resources and social media

new forms of church - some concern amongst newly licensed that they were simply propping up the old form of church.

Refresher on church structures, e.g. clarification of role of PCCs, responsibilities during a vacancy and role of licensed lay ministers in appointments. Many unsure of what, exactly LLMs were allowed to do in liturgy, since it often depended on the Vicar. The examples of praying for children at the communion rail and taking a service of renewal of wedding vows were given.

Team work development, especially with clergy, but also with churchwardens and authorised ministers. More awareness and use of working agreements and trained supervision.

There were also requests for fewer courses and more sharing of best practice. Some LLMs were already involved in training others, some frustrated that their skills, often learned in secular work, were not utilised in the church setting.

Also awareness of possibilities of blogs, podcasts, twitter, learning groups, and other online resources (Yammer, Slack mentioned) and desire for more input on and use of these.

Some would like further consideration of their changing role as, with fewer stipendiary clergy or any clergy at all, they were often left in charge of congregation -and needed to negotiate their role with Churchwardens. Some were now encouraged to relate to other denominations but unsure how to handle their rules about eucharistic presidency, permission to preach etc.

Improved relationships: Many would like more contact with Area Deans, Archdeacons and Bishops. Local mentors. Awareness of lack of parity with clergy, even with non stipendiary clergy in resources offered during training and afterwards.

Desire for invitation to Chapters, ministry team meetings, evening CMD events. In this way could be part of the discussion about the future shape of the church, rather than just propping up the present.

Note: I didn't hear any requests for help in relating faith to work - but the participants were well able to talk about their witness at work. The LLMs to whom I spoke seemed to be negotiating this well. See later comments under 'What is significant about being lay?'

A couple of dioceses were rated as 'outstanding' in their CMD.

In several places LLMs are delivering training. This, they said was the best way of learning that they had found.

What is significant for you in being a lay minister?

For some being lay was not a choice: " I was born lay" and " I have no calling to be ordained." Those in the group of LLMs who had been licensed for more than five years, or who had been involved in other forms of church activity said that it was only in recent years that the idea of vocation and calling was attached to lay ministry. So the concept and vocabulary was not necessarily present, other than thinking of being a volunteer and helping out. But the majority of participants had been asked at some time to consider being ordained, or asked why they were not ordained and some had explored this.

There were two broad categories of response: one related to a comparison with the realities of ordained life as they observed it and one to the opportunities given to them because of their work or voluntary roles. In many ways they acted as a bridge between these two realities and a substantial number of them emphasised the "seamlessness" of their lives.

Comparison with ordained life

The LLMs described themselves and thought others saw them as "ordinary," "approachable," while the clergy were seen as "busy," "other-worldly," "on a pedestal," "far away," "public property," respected as an MP or GP would be. You could have an ordinary conversation with a lay person, about trivialities, but would book an appointment with the Vicar for a more serious talk. One LLM spoke of his experience in a workplace where there was a chaplain who visited regularly - but his colleagues asked him to pass messages onto her. Many agreed that the 'dog-collar' is a significant signal of difference. Some people will more readily talk about personal matters to an ordained person, for others the dog collar is alienating.

LLMs valued their freedom from the pressure on clergy to maintain the institution of the church, its administration, attendance figures and finance. Clergy have to be 'jacks of all trades' whilst the LLMs had a particular and individual calling, such as to preach, to be a local counsellor, to visit care homes. Some LLMs aware of many clergy breakdowns and this deterred them from considering ordination.

LLMs stay when clergy come and go - "the face of the Church in the village."

Not being paid gives a freedom not to toe the party line. A few thought there were fewer restrictions on lay ministers, for example about forms of service to be used, at funerals. This meant they could offer a wider range of options to bereaved families.

LLMs can signify the importance of other lay roles, "validate them" and be an encouragement to other lay people. They can support others' journey.

A few of the participants said that because their calling was to preach and teach, these were not sacramental roles and therefore appropriate for lay people. But more said they did not understand the theological reasons for a distinction between lay and ordained ministry. The differences were expressed largely in functional terms and a few spoke of friends who were 'forced' into ordination in order to have a meaningful ministry. This may be due to the incumbent's attitude, not allowing a lay person to do anything, or because of the needs of the locality for someone to take communion. One LLM, who was a Bishop's selector, said he thought the church was very unclear about distinctions between deacon, OLM and SSM and that ad hoc decisions were made without theological consistency. It was thus not surprising LLMs were unsure of the situation!

A few said that some in the congregation resented their taking a leadership role and didn't accept their new status. Since licensing their relationship with them had become more distant.

Many were happy to be "number two," a support and friend to the clergy, but without the responsibility of being in charge or of having to concentrate on the church at the expense of a wider outlook.

Opportunities outside church

"Being in the place where the Vicar is not" - both geographically and socially was often given as a distinct advantage of being lay. One example was becoming a town councillor when there was a very bad relationship between town and church - an ordained person would not have been accepted. In contrast a few thought that the "outside world" did not really care about the distinction between ordained and lay as much as the church did. They were welcomed as people able to take services, in Care Homes, for example, and as chaplains in various situations where the licence was more significant as a mark of authorisation than the dog collar.

"We are earthed in the community." The LLMs were less likely to distinguish between church and non church people than clergy were, with friends of other denominations and faiths. They could be more accessible to people who live close when clergy live in different village or community.

"I know I am called to be in the secular world." "I enjoy my job and it is the place of my ministry." Can help the church to "stay real." Can be a visible demonstration that God is at work outside of the church.

Taking an upfront, visible role in work and in voluntary sector. One person said others had described him/her as a "faith professional."

Ensuring preaching and leading intercessions is informed by life outside church.

But it is sad when people outside the church can only understand what a lay minister is by what they are not allowed to do.

Bridge - relationships and roles

It was claimed that LLMs can support and mentor clergy because "we see the reality of their lives but are slightly removed." Can encourage the congregation to pray for and support the clergy. So clergy and LLMs can be friends as well as colleagues, but there may be a loss when the friend/pastor becomes a line manager. There is then a need to find spiritual direction elsewhere - but there is a dearth of spiritual directors.

Often act as go-between between congregation and ordained. But need to be chameleon to cope with changing expectations of successive priests and changing attitudes to clergy of the congregation. This can vary within a group of adjacent parishes, as the expectation that the clergy do everything changes. So the LLM may have a different role and identity in different churches on the same Sunday. Being a bridge when both banks are moving! Can be an ear on the ground and quell rumours.

Can be part of congregation and part of sanctuary. LLMs are ordinary people who have been given tools, language and greater awareness of God at work. The pastoral work undergirds the sermon and vice versa - "speaking where people are at."

One can be the "piggy in the middle," the bearer of bad news and blamed for the messages (usually of change) that one carries. Those who take non-eucharistic services when a priest is not available sometimes receive negative comments and pressure to get ordained. Need to be diplomatic and flexible.

Can be bridge between church and wider community, the non church circles.

Some said relationships have changed since licensing and the study has separated them from the way others think. The robes can enable one to step into the role, but can also distance one. A few people find this uncomfortable and feel that they are negotiating expectations of their role as an 'almost vicar,' "kind of a halfway house," with many congregations.

LLMs have blurred the distinction between ordained and lay. Some thought this was a good move, some not. Some saw non-stipendiary clergy, esp. those Ministers in Secular Employment as also adding to the confusion. If LLM is a kind of clericalisation of laity, many clergy are being 'laicised' by becoming managers.

Much was said about how the clergy viewed them

Some clergy treat us as colleagues - we walk with them in procession, join in the ministry team meetings and pray together.

Some clergy think that when we take our robes off at end of service we have finished our ministry. They think we are second best or, if not, wonder why we are not ordained. They think of us as stopgaps, just for the holidays and vacancies, but this is our calling.

and a few about how they saw clergy -

Often out of their depth, with inadequate training and support. Some had experience in other areas of work, but, "most have not really reached the top of their profession, have they?"

if clergy were to carry out their leadership role they needed better preparation. They lack management skill of leading and holding a team together.

I was going to ask - what is the balance in your ministry between what you do in church, for church and in your everyday life? But by this point in the conversation the question had been addressed and many examples given.

So I asked - What is significant for you in holding the Bishop's licence?

This was answered both in terms of status and authorisation in the church and the gifts and self identity which had led to significant roles outside church. But the most significant responses were about the "seamlessness" of their presence and activity in the two worlds. Each resourced and fed the other. "The ministry 'leaks' into all of my life."

Some people hesitated for a long time before replying, some straight away. This may reflect the presence and awareness of non licensed, authorise lay ministry in their dioceses - for

some there was a question in their minds already about what the difference was, others had not considered it at all.

In Church:

It is important for some people, including some LLMs, to know they have legitimacy and authority for what they do. The licence also represents a level of knowledge and training that is essential for preaching and teaching (there were several expressions of disquiet about local preachers, who preach "with little Biblical study" and youth workers, who lead services but who may have qualified in a non Christian institution).

Often leader of other lay groups, e.g. prayer team or house-group. Expected to be able to answer questions when for example, out carol singing or door to door collecting.

Can preach, take funerals and so on on our own, without supervision and presence of vicar.

Visit other C of E churches and other denominations and are accepted.

Chaplaincy work in schools, hospital, at Fire Station - licence is crucial to be welcomed as trustworthy person. Often introduced and addressed as 'the Vicar.' Being licensed has enabled involvement in national mission organisation and events because of being accredited beyond people who know you.

Several of the participants had moved diocese and transferred their licence, so had appreciated the reality of national recognition. One had a thriving ministry, including a Christian community, in E Europe, but had no official recognition from the Diocese of Europe.

In wider society:

"The training and the licence enabled me to see that what I was doing at work was ministry and it also gave me more pastoral skills to use there."

Seen as representative of the church because have this official stamp of approval. Often asked about how to arrange weddings and baptisms by those at work and in neighbourhood - or even those in the congregation.

The licence had given confidence to many of the LLMs to volunteer for an upfront or representative role at work. This included becoming a CAB volunteer, chairing a multi-national aid effort, chairing the neighbourhood partnership, teaching English to adults, being Mayor's Chaplain - all these seen as direct result of licence. "And I don't do this in the capacity of a licensed lay minister but I don't think I would have the gifts the confidence and the ability if I hadn't been a licensed lay minister and I think that's a crucial link."

"The fact I am licensed is welcome at school, where I am a classroom specialist, and they gave me a grant from the CIPD fund to go on the annual retreat, because they said it built resilience."

"It gives you the freedom to come out as a Christian." Many spoke of the reaction at work as they had conversations about their training or what they had done 'at the weekend.' "My relationships with just everybody at work have changed massively." One person acknowledged that the opportunities to talk may have always been there, but now they had the insight to recognise them and skills to respond, but others thought that asking about the training and subsequent activity were much easier questions for their colleagues than to talk about belief in God directly. It was notable that I heard no mention at all of the characteristic

English/Anglican reluctance to talk about one's faith, which is well researched and documented.

It was not until the final diocese that a participant said that clergy near him had a "hissy fit" when it was suggested that lay people could be ministers. So I asked: **What is the significance for you in being a minister?**

parity with clergy and the capacity to act in the church's name,

authority - though some visible symbol or identifying badge would be very much appreciated.

Though I had not asked the question, many **hindrances to effective ministry** were raised.

Communion by Extension

This was raised in every meeting without any prompting from me. It was commented that many churches are already 'cheating' and the guess is that in 10 years time all restrictions will be off, just as in the burial of suicides. In a large diocese it was confusing the "each of the Bishops does their own thing," though another observation was that "the official line is much stricter than the actual practice." Where permission is commonly refused there was a heartfelt plea for Bishops to be reasonable now! Too many LLMs have received training and have since been told they cannot do the service. LLMs have to bear brunt of disappointment of congregations and feel that the Bishops are hiding from the reality of the situation in local churches.

Those who had led this service reported a positive reaction to it.

Attitude of own Incumbent.

Whether the role was satisfying or not nearly always depended on the relationship with and attitude of the incumbent. Some were fully accepted as colleagues, but there were, unsurprisingly, more negative comments.

Incumbents don't appreciate we have a non-church life, much of which is an area of ministry and mission. Meetings are organised when we are working or have responsibilities in community.

Why should the attitude of the incumbent, who is becoming more and more distant from the day to day life of the local church, be so influential in what LLMs can do, given that they have the Bishop's licence? They may be priest-in-charge of a dozen parishes, but still want to be involved in the day-to-day activities of each church and decide what the LLM should or shouldn't do. There should be a closer connection with the Bishop or his/her representative, in terms of deployment.

LLMs often have to change what they do when a new Vicar arrives, even if they have built up relationships and some competence, if the Vicar wants to do that. In some dioceses they are also expected to resign if not getting on with the Vicar, even though may live in that village and/or have worshipped in that church for many years. Sometimes they have no part in appointment process. So there are very great levels of anxiety around the arrival of a new priest as people wonder how the ministry that has been developed will be affected.

There is a desperate need for clergy to understand the complementary role of lay ministers.

New patterns of church within dioceses

LLMs and NSMs not mentioned in some diocesan plans for future. Yet found themselves left to fill gaps left by absence of clergy. LLMs are a resource for the church, but not effectively used.

Pressure to be ordained -

Some often told they would be 'more use' to the church if ordained. At licensings and confirmations often a call to consider ordination. There is little recognition that a young person could have a calling to be lay.

Several of the LLMs struggle to understand why they can take a funeral but not a baptism or a wedding. The liturgical similarities outweigh the historical rational.

Levels of support vary greatly.

There is no agreed pattern of CMD and diocesan commitment to this varies greatly. Many LLMs are left not knowing who to talk to when there is a problem with the clergy.

Constant change in training patterns and sense that present system is not fit for purpose.

Academic rigour is a good thing, but the greatest stress experienced by many was in getting the referencing acceptable! Surely the least of worries and not good for formation.

Desire to be able to cross borders to access training opportunities there.

What is role of LLM? Where is discussion about permanent diaconate going?

Some would value ordination as deacon as this might fit them into the church's hierarchy, but as many fear it would lose them the advantages they have in the secular world of being lay.

I ended by asking 'Is there anything else you would like the Archbishops' Council to hear?'

Change of name to LLM desired by all Readers - though one LLM wanted to change back.

But, "not to pile change upon change upon change" To be consistent with the messages given out, so saying that the church will really need to ministry of lay people and then pressurising them to get ordained is heard as contradictory. Leaving churches to manage on their own and then giving them little say in the next priest - or whether they have a priest - is also dispiriting.

Close some church buildings.

Change the age at which PTO must be sort to 75, at least.

Make it easier to cross diocesan borders to access training and resources. The wide variation in training patterns makes this difficult.

We don't want to just fill gaps. This is not the purpose of LLMs.