

Young Vocations: Journeys towards Ordination



Liz Graveling¹, July 2015

Introduction

This paper outlines the purpose and method of the young vocations study and presents the key findings. The findings are discussed in two sections: key factors in the discernment of vocation to priesthood, and key barriers to pursuing a vocation to priesthood. Implications of the research for practice within the Church of England are then listed.

Purpose of research

Aim:

To gain a better understanding of how younger people already in training have experienced the process of discerning their vocation, identifying encouraging and discouraging factors and any gendered or other patterns.

Objectives:

- To identify key factors in young ordinands' journeys towards priesthood, including encouragements and barriers.
- To identify patterns across and between the journeys of female and male candidates.

Method

The research drew on participatory research approaches (PRA), using a group exercise to explore participants' experiences of the process leading up to selection. Each group of participants was asked to create on a large sheet of paper a joint representation of their journeys towards ordained ministry, from the point of not having considered ordination to the point of selection. Group discussions were audio-recorded and transcribed.

Participants were recruited from those currently in training for ordination, through their training institution. Four institutions were approached, with one group of women and one group of men held

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at each institution. One institution had no women in the required age bracket, making a total of seven groups, each consisting of four to six participants. A total of 30 ordinands participated, comprising 12 women (three married) and 18 men (13 married).

The research has received ethical approval from the National Church Institutions.

Findings

1. Key factors in the discernment of vocation to priesthood

Certain factors were mentioned frequently during discussions as assisting both women and men in discerning their vocation to priesthood. These fell into four broad categories: practical experience, vocations conferences, 'internal' prompts and other people.

Practical experience

All the participants had some kind of practical experience of ministry either before or during their official discernment process. For some, this was a deliberate strategy to test an initial sense of calling:

I had a parish assistant, apprenticeship type, intern type job at a church immediately after graduation. Because it's a chance to test the water. It's a chance to think about full time ministry longer term. (Male)

For others, such experience was a contributing factor to considering ordination for the first time:

At uni, I was asked to be the leader of the CU, which was quite a big CU. ... That said to me maybe you are called to Christian leadership, maybe within the church as well. (Male)

My time in the [university] chaplaincy was as a student outreach worker. I went in for it as a job, and it was a job because it was fully salaried and so on. It was actually in that space that I discerned the call. (Male)

The examples above demonstrate the two main contexts for experiences of ministry: church (the most common) and university. Of the latter, participants reported more helpful involvement with chaplaincies than with Christian Unions (CUs). The examples also reveal some of the different ways through which such experiences are accessed. The ordinand working in a church immediately after graduation found his internship through 9:38, a network that specifically aims to 'run conferences to help Christians consider full-time gospel ministry and help churches set up church-based ministry training schemes' (9:38 website²). Other schemes mentioned by (male and female) participants include the Jellicoe Internship, the Stepney Intern Scheme and the North London Pastoral Assistants Scheme. Many posts, however, are simply advertised as jobs, such as the chaplaincy student outreach worker above. Young people often access these through informal networks or, if they are already in the official discernment process, through diocesan offices:

² <http://ninethirtyeight.org/home>, accessed 05/06/15.

I asked my brother-in-law, who was training as an ordinand at the time, if he knew a vicar in the country that would be a good role model to go learn from. (Male)

I ... said to someone in my house group, "I've been thinking about just quitting my job at Christmas and spending a year doing something" And he said, "Oh, that's interesting. The vicar said that she wanted to hire a pastoral assistant." (Female)

[S]omeone ... walked across the room and invited me to apply as a gap year intern there the next year. (Female)

My DDO [Diocesan Director of Ordinands], and my chaplain, and the vocations advisor were sending me various this church scheme, this church scheme, all over the country. (Female)

For many ordinands, initial practical experience does not come neatly packaged, but is simply part of their Christian life:

I just helped out. I helped out with youth work, and I helped out with the 20s work, and I helped out with the young mums group. I ended up running some of them. (Female)

This appears particularly true for those whose parents are in ministry, as is the case with the ordinand who had led his CU:

I've been involved in church my whole life and been part of shaping it and either set things up or just been a Christian in a school atmosphere, and building a network of schools to meet together. (Male)

And a female ordinand:

I've always been in some form of ministry since I was a week old. ... I preached for the first time when I was 17, a week before my 18th birthday. It was Palm Sunday and Dad was ill and Mum said, "Oh, I don't know what I'm going to preach on." And I said, "Well, why don't you preach on this, this and this." And she said, "Why don't you preach?" They let me get up and preach.

However, childhood involvement in church can also be significant for those whose parents are not ordained, and was mentioned by several ordinands, particularly those from churches that maintain formal roles for children. As the extracts below demonstrate, childhood involvement can serve to plant seeds in the subconscious, to nurture familiarity with ministerial structures and practices, and to make space for direct calling.

I started singing in the school choir. I learnt the organ, so then I was always involved with services. I actually got quite a good liturgical training as I grew up without really realizing it. That side of church life was always familiar, it was never alien to me. (Male)

[A]s a kid, I got really excited about bits of liturgy that were dramatic and interesting. I can remember that the way our church did Maundy Thursday, normally we'd be serving in cassock albs and all that, but for Maundy Thursday, we would all come out in our black cassocks, and the lights in the church at the end would all be turned off, and we'd have to literally run out of the doors ... Obviously, I wasn't making it about anything bigger at the

time, but it was just so much fun. I would always look forward to those bits in the liturgical year where you would get to be engaged emotionally. Looking back when I was a bit older, it was like, “Oh yeah, that was me wanting to really be involved.” But as a kid, having the opportunity to do that was really formative. (Female)

I first felt a call toward ordination when I was 14 and I was administering the chalice in my parish church. I’d been involved in preparing some of the children for communion, receiving the communion before confirmation. The priest said, “Well, it doesn’t make much sense if you’ve been teaching the children for you not to then administer the sacrament.” And I said, “That would be lovely, thank you very much.” As I was giving somebody communion, I felt God say, “This is what I want you to do.” I felt a very strong call to preside. (Female)

Vocations conferences

As mentioned above, some organisations such as 9:38 run conferences for potential ordinands to explore vocation. Four participants (three women and one man) reported attending such events, either encouraged by vicars or DDOs, or on their own initiative. Conferences mentioned were Hinaeni, run by York Diocese, a Lent vocations event run by Birmingham Diocese, a Call Waiting conference at Whirlow Grange, a CPAS weekend and a Step Forward conference in Durham. All the ordinands found these events helpful:

Just having a chance to explore that and hear other people’s stories as to what that calling looks like can... that it doesn’t involve a dog collar at the end of the day. (Female)

That was reassuring that people had the same call as me, that same age, that same level of experience and understanding. (Male)

Additionally, one participant mentioned a childhood experience which first made him aware of the idea of vocation:

I always think of the seed of my vocation being when the youth group went on the youth pilgrimage to Walsingham. ... The word vocation was used, which was sort of novel enough for me. At the time, I remember thinking, “That’s interesting. That’s a thing that people do. That’s a thing that young people do.” At the time, I didn’t think it would apply to me. That was the first time I was aware of the idea. (Male)

Internal prompts

Most of the ordinands reported, at some point, direct prompts towards ordination from God. The sense of a compelling call to perform Church rituals, mentioned above, is repeated by two other ordinands, one as she attended an Easter Vigil service (‘the deacon ... got the candle, and I thought, “I want to do that.” ... That just kick-started everything else.’), and the other after he was asked to assist with Holy Communion at short notice due to an absence:

As I was administering communion, I had a clear sense of God saying, “This is what I’ve called you to do in my Church.” That sort of linked it very much to the Church of England and the sacraments and all the rest of it, the priesthood.

For other ordinands, the sense of being called directly by God had more to do with personal conviction:

I hope that my calling, conviction, and training in this process is all fuelled by God's love for me in the gospel, and His way of serving me by Jesus dying, and an outlet of that is that I want to serve the church because of how much Jesus has served me. (Male)

Some described a feeling of inevitability about their journey towards ordination. In the words of one ordinand, 'there are things that put people off or can be found helpful or unhelpful, but it slightly feels like this is just where I was going to end up' (female). Others referred to the work of the Holy Spirit in bringing them to 'the right place, at the right time, with the right people' (female), and discovering priesthood as an intrinsic part of their identity: 'I realised soon that it was that I felt I was missing something in that vocation to social work. That was essentially priesthood' (female). This was sometimes explicitly related to the development of their faith, for example as confirmation was explored, and sometimes met with resistance, which will be discussed later.

Other people

A wide range of people were reported as instrumental in the process of discerning vocation, including clergy in various offices, family, friends and church members. Four different, interrelated roles can be identified: role models, seed-planters, mentors, and supporters. These are not mutually exclusive and the same or similar actors often play more than one role, or different roles for different participants.

Role models

For the purposes of this paper, we are interested in role models who have, through their ministry, sparked a consideration of vocation to priesthood by a participant, rather than those on whom ordinands model themselves on an ongoing basis. Many ordinands sense a calling to ordination having experienced the ministry of a particular clergyperson, usually a church leader although university chaplains were also mentioned. This might be someone they admire and wish to emulate, as in the following description of the curate at a respondent's university church:

Someone who was an older and wiser and godlier Christian, and an example – you saw the way he lived his life and thought that's what I want to strive toward, to be that kind of Christian person who witnesses to their friends and who tells people about Jesus and who loves people and has time for people. (Male)

Or it might simply be someone who, through certain aspects of their identity or behaviour, facilitates the removal of perceived barriers to priesthood. This is particularly significant for women (although a few in this age group commented that growing up with a female vicar was entirely normal for them): 'actually having a female priest at that time was quite useful as well, in terms of being able to imagine myself in that role' and, '[t]hat was really important for me, just seeing women leading and doing it really well. Just getting comfortable with the face, I think, and the boobs'. However, the ability to identify with a clergyperson was also instrumental to the emergence of men's vocations:

I got to know my vicar quite well during the process of confirmation. He was just a really real, genuine person who made inappropriate jokes and accidentally farted and did all of those things

... I'd just thought that vicars were a separate breed, almost alien. When I realised that they were human beings as well, I began to think that because I had really met God there, and that was my only experience of being involved with God, in that way, that's what I want to do.

Seed-planters

While role models encourage vocation by exemplifying ministry, seed-planters initiate or encourage consideration of vocation by actively suggesting it. For some participants, a suggestion by another person is the first time they have thought about ordination. For a few (particularly clergy children) this can happen in early childhood: 'People started telling me that when I was seven. A youth worker turned to me at seven and said, "You're going to be a vicar"' (male). More often it acts as a catalyst that makes sense of earlier or existing inclinations, as expressed by one ordinand:

The vicar of the church I was in, out of the blue, said, "Have you thought about ordination?" And that was really the first seed of thought of it, but looking back earlier in my life, I've always had a very strong conviction that living out my faith would involve somehow working for God in some sort of way. That's always been there. (Male)

Although, as with role models, church leaders and chaplains are key here, the role of seed-planter is played by a wide range of people including DDOs, Vocations Advisers, bishops, family members, friends and church members:

My friend was now in her final year of training. ... She had a picture of me being ordained in the Church of England. ... At that point, I think I suddenly went, "Okay, God. You're calling me, but the question is when?" It was at that point when this churchwarden said to me – we had the bishop coming to do interviews. I was practising being a good vicar's wife, because I presumed that was what I was going to do. And they said, "Oh, you're going to be the vicar." And that took me aback. (Female)

The example above demonstrates the particular importance for women of other people in helping discern vocation, which will be discussed below.

While these examples are of explicit verbal suggestions, some participants reported less direct approaches, either in the sense of intentional investment by clergy in identifying and nurturing specific potential vocations ('I realize now, looking back, that I got more of my vicar's time than most other people in my social group would have done' (male)), or a culture of encouraging discernment of vocations in general, as well as specifically priestly:

He was constantly getting the congregation to discern whatever their vocation was. Vocation was something which didn't have the specific tag of priestly ministry, as it tends to do. ...it was made very clear that every Christian should be doing this discernment process. (Male)

Several participants described significant encounters with people who affirmed rather than initiated their sense of vocation. These were extremely varied, including a precentor who summoned a participant to his office and 'had the chat to say, "You really need to think about this now"' (female); an ordained mother-in-law who 'challenged me ... recognised it in me and helped me to vocalise it' (female); an Archbishop, who, over lunch at a conference, turned to one participant, identified his

fear of being rejected by the Church and instructed him to stop running from ordination; a cleaner of a church who informed an intern that she thought God was calling him to be ordained; and a lawyer who recognised that an intern was in the wrong place and advised her to consider ordination after discovering that several people had suggested it to her. DDOs were also reported as key actors in this sense by some female participants, one describing her Assistant DDO (with whom she was also involved in ministry) as

the one with the butterfly net, chasing me around everywhere I went, saying, “You’ve got a vocation, get on with it.” So having an ADDO who was actively recruiting vocations was quite important.

Mentors

A third category of people instrumental in the discernment of vocation consists of mentors and those involved in discipling the participants, both before they began to consider ordination and as they went through the discernment process. They may or may not be formally recognised as mentors. Unlike role models (although they may be the same people), this role is less about exemplifying ministry and more about discussing issues relevant to the (potential) candidate. Unlike seed-planters, the role of mentor is not solely to prompt consideration of vocation to priesthood, but to facilitate the development of faith more widely, feeding into the vocational journey, which may include specific discussion of vocation.

Several participants referred to people, often church leaders, who had been key to the development of their faith before ordination was a consideration. These are often the people who enable the practical experience discussed above to take place: one (male) group highlighted the significance of people who ‘released’ them to ‘have a go’. University emerged as an important place for this: ‘If my faith hadn’t been nurtured and grown [at church during university], I’d have chosen a career choice that let me get Sky Sports’ (male). As well as churches, some university chaplaincies provide a context for discipleship:

The chaplaincy was good for learning. Because actually, I hadn’t been a Christian that long. ... I don’t imagine that I would be here if I hadn’t happened to bump into [the chaplain] that day and they are still a massive part of our lives, which is really nice. (Female)

Participants also talked of mentoring that took place once they had started to consider a vocation to ordained ministry. Church leaders continue to be important here, but the range of people widens as the potential candidates seek to explore their vocation. Some move to different churches on placements and internships (‘[the vicar] was really important as I was going through the process. I was spending time with him and talking with him’ (male)) and others enter the formal discernment process and begin communication with DDOs and Vocations Advisers. DDOs appear to be more important to female than male participants: several of the latter tended to talk of them as part of the formalities of the process:

It was very much meeting with the DDO a few times and then see a Vocations Advisor. Meeting with the Vocations Advisor every few months, and she would then write a report, if you were suitable, to the DDO, and then you would continue the process. (Male)

For several female participants, DDOs in a mentoring role were central to the discernment process, providing stability, challenge and encouragement:

I was finding working with my vocations advisor and now DDO to be great, and horrible and so difficult, but also fantastic. I just so wanted to keep working with her and I felt it was so important. (Female)

He kind of helped me to just find confidence in myself more than anything else. (Female)

Other people within the category of 'mentors' include bishops and other diocesan staff (often through informal contact such as a bishop's chaplain who has 'been there if I needed her, which has been really helpful' (female)), spiritual directors, Church Army officers, youth workers, ministers of other denominations, members of religious orders and other clergy, sometimes including relatives as in the following case:

my mother-in-law was a real influence on me. She's an ordained priest and she was an example of a woman that was doing a really great job. But she also challenged me ... She also asked me difficult questions and she recognised it in me and then helped me to vocalise it. She was key. (Female)

Supporters

The final group of people mentioned by participants is those who provide emotional and sometimes financial support during the process of discerning vocation. This can include some of the mentors mentioned above: DDOs, as well as some dioceses (often represented by the DDO) and colleges (including peers), are sometimes described as 'supportive', for example in the case of one participant who was experiencing difficulties with her incumbent because of her sex:

the DDO was brilliant, so he knew what was going on, he was really encouraging, he was very actively supportive and actually he both helped me to discern my vocation and was very pastorally caring for me.

Sending churches (both leaders and members) have also provided support for participants:

My church was really, really helpful. I think if they'd not been so supportive and helpful. I knew the bishop and then I went to the DDO and I think had I not felt like I could go back to my church, or go and talk to him, I think I would have found this really hard. (Female)

The most commonly mentioned people with regards to support were family and, to some extent, friends. Many talked in broad terms about their parents being supportive of their vocation (if that was the case). For some ordinands, parental support was extremely important, as in the case of one woman:

My family go to a church where women were not in leadership and were very much of that position, and because I really felt it was important to honour my father and mother, because I was quite young and I was working out what to do, I said to God that I would only be ordained if they gave their blessing and if they moved on it, which I thought was an utterly impossible mountain. ... And my dad called me up out of the blue and said, "I just want you to know that you have my blessing if you want to be ordained. I don't really believe in

ordination anyway, but if you want to be ordained, you have my blessing.” And that for me was the moment I moved forward.

While parental support was important, the support of spouses was crucial for all married participants. Only one of the 16 married participants reported that his wife was not entirely happy with the decision to be ordained into the Church of England (relating largely to concerns about the role of vicars’ wives), although two of the (male) participants indicated that they had already entered the discernment process before meeting their wives and, in the words of one, ‘[T]hat was the deal she signed up for.’

2. Key barriers to pursuing a vocation to priesthood

Social difference

The participants in this research were all necessarily under the age of 30 at the point of selection. Within that category they include ordinands from a range of different social groupings, including gender, marital and family status, sexuality and diocese. The sample also includes some ordinands with long-term health issues. In line with the wider population of young vocations, all the participants were White and all but one from the UK. Some participants were raised in non-Anglican backgrounds and several have members of the clergy in their family, mostly parents but also a grandparent, a husband, a mother-in-law, a father-in-law and a brother-in-law.

Although the focus here is on gender, all these axes of difference affected the participants’ journeys in some way, some of them interacting with each other and with structures to produce different implications. Barriers to pursuing vocation fall into five main categories: perceptions of self and ministry, opportunity, discouragement from others, issues relating to the official process, and rejection and hostility. As all the participants in this study eventually reached selection and training, it is not possible to distinguish definitively between barriers which could cause somebody to withdraw from the discernment process and those which just make it more difficult.

Perceptions

A fundamental barrier to ordained ministry is not being aware of it as an option. As we have seen above, some churches constantly encourage congregations to discern vocation, but this is not always the case:

in the parish where my parents ... still live now, there wasn’t really ever much talk about vocations. I realised when I started to think about it that I had actually no idea how anyone got from being a lay person to being a priest. (Male)

Some participants, particularly those from a more Evangelical tradition, first felt called to church leadership and only later connected this with ordination. This was the case with one of the participants who heard God speak when he was asked to assist with Communion (see above): several years before he had ‘felt a call to church leadership’, but only at that point ‘linked it very much to the Church of England and the sacraments and all the rest of it, the priesthood’. Or, for a female ordinand working for a church during a gap year,

I ended up spending a year there working for [the vicar], who pushed me and challenged me in leadership, and actually again, I still left with no expectation of being ordained. But of a sense that God might use me. The only word I had for it at that point was in leadership, possibly in the church in some way.

Lack of awareness of priestly ministry as a viable possibility is particularly pertinent for women, some of whom had been raised in an environment where they had never seen examples of female priests. One, originally from the Catholic Church,

always just assumed that I'd be a vicar's wife because women couldn't be ordained, that was obvious. Well, in the Catholic Church, but also my CU that I was involved in were very conservative, so a lot of my friends didn't believe that women could be ordained, and because I'd come from a Catholic background I wasn't sure either. So I went along with what was put in front of me and I just wasn't that sure that women could be ordained, actually, until I met an ordained woman who was doing a good job.

This participant was married with a child when she first began to explore her vocation. She therefore had to work through the practical implications of having a family as well as the theology of the ordination of women:

I ... went to see the DDO, and I was like, "I've never seen children in a vicarage." That sounds like a really weird thing, but when you grow up around Catholics, that's what happens. I was like, "I've never seen children in a vicarage, let alone the mum as a vicar. I've heard rumours of vicar dads but I've never seen, or even heard rumours of vicar mums".

This sense of uncertainty about whether women could be in ordained leadership is not limited to participants from Catholic churches. One woman from an Evangelical tradition commented that, had she been male, she may have discerned her calling earlier:

I didn't feel called to ordination in my gap year. I probably felt more called to evangelism. But ... everyone who is a woman doesn't feel that is a possibility.

This may have as much to do with women's perceptions of themselves as female leaders as with their theology of priesthood, as a participant implied when describing a conversation with a vicar with whom she worked during a gap year:

He used to say to me, "God has called you to be a leader." And I used to say, "No, I'm a woman."

To remedy this, the vicar sent her to talk to female leaders, all of whom turned out to be wives of church leaders. This may have been the kind of leadership he was imagining for her, or it may have been because he could not find an available Evangelical female priest. Several of the women commented on the lack of female role models, explaining for example that they had grown up in churches 'where there were lots of women leaders, but they were mostly lay leaders'. The effect of this, even for those who do discern a vocation to priesthood, can be to limit perceptions of what one can do as a priest: 'I came into training with an attitude that there are certain roles I might not do because I've never seen that played out' (female). One woman expressed the benefit of practical experience during her discernment process:

to be working in a church in a Christian community that was so different from what I'd experienced before, kind of confirmed for me that this was something that could look like me and not that I'd have to look like it.

Women negotiate their own perceptions of themselves and ministry along with the perceptions of other people. The same ordinand who had her horizons limited by not seeing women playing certain roles

found different people talking about how great it is to have women priests because we need ... more mother figures in the church. And for me, I'm not a particularly motherly person and I was 21 for a start. ... So to use language like mothering was actually really unhelpful and made me think perhaps one of the main reasons I felt called but didn't go for ages is that I expected to get better at pastoral. I kept expecting to suddenly want to mother people, ... for my personality to change.

Debilitating perceptions of self and ministry are not restricted to women. Both male and female participants talked of being held back by a lack of confidence: 'I wasn't convinced that I was one of the people who was gifted' (male); 'one of the obstacles was actually me and how I felt about myself, and my doubts' (male); 'I didn't have the confidence ... For me, this whole journey has been a confidence thing' (female). Factors important in overcoming this barrier include the encouragement of a sending church ('I wouldn't have done it if the church ... hadn't said, "We're sure you should go to training"' (male)); permission to take time to think it through and people to think it through with ('I was told I could take more time if I wanted ... I ended up seeing the vocations adviser six times' (male)); and being able to make the journey in small steps ('I don't think I can do this, but I can do the next little tiny baby step and talk to that person' (female)); 'I never would have thought, "Yes, I could do that" ... whereas I did think I could do an apprenticeship' (male)).

Several ordinands experienced a sense of internal struggle during the discernment process: in the words of one woman, 'the whole denial period'. As illustrated above, this may be related to a lack of confidence, specific perceptions of ministry, or simply never having considered such a vocation before. It is largely felt by participants who first had the possibility of ordination suggested to them by somebody else: 'a lot of the time people say, "So what about this?" and you go, "No, obviously not." And it doesn't go away, and it keeps coming back' (male). One of the women described how

so many people had told me, so many people. And I had been ignoring it and saying it's a silly... I had been quite pejorative about it. I knew people going into the priesthood and they were like [X], they were like this, and it wasn't me. ... I was ignoring it and stamping down things. I was at Easter Vigil service, and the deacon ... got the candle, and I thought, "I want to do that." My first response was to then swear internally. I was so like, "No, I don't want to do this."

All but two of the female participants were unmarried during the journey of discernment. We have already seen how one of the married women had difficulty connecting her vocation with her image of single male priests. The question of family emerged as a barrier for most of the women in the study, both married and unmarried. For single women, this is less about whether ordained ministry is possible for someone with a partner and children, and more about whether marriage and children are possible for female clergy. There are deep misgivings over how family life can be managed,

based on existing role models, experiences of peers and advice from others, as well as on rumour. The general concern is summarised by a participant:

If you were the young male curate who maybe will find a nice wife amongst the congregation, and they'll bear your children while you get on with the parish stuff, that's a model that people can make sense of. But it seems like the people I know who have been younger women in the process who have wanted to start families or have started families have not had an easy time of it. And you worry when you see other people having to struggle through it.

We can identify here concerns over the expectations of other people ('a model people can make sense of') as well as over the wellbeing of one's own family. Another woman described observing her priest who

couldn't do bedtimes because there was evening prayer. ... [I]f I weren't there for my children's bedtimes and ... particularly older members of my congregation found out, I think I would be judged for that, because I'm a woman, I should be home doing bedtime.

Women are also aware of ordained ministry as an obstacle to marriage. While both male and female participants already considering ordination felt it important to make that clear to potential partners, women tended to view it with more apprehension. One ordinand, for example, felt she

had to make it clear that if things were to progress and we were to go on and get married and have a family, ... I can't be the stay-at-home wife that I think a lot of people still expect the woman in a relationship to be.

Unlike the men, many women had heard stories from peers or received advice which caused them anxiety about potential relationships, for example, 'you hear awful stories of people being told by DDOs, "You can't have a baby"'; 'I was told [while already in training, by the wife of a clergy person], "Don't get in a relationship for at least another year and a half"; or

I heard of someone who had been dating someone for two months and they were told that they needed to sort it out. That they couldn't progress with the process unless they knew where they were in their relationship.

The women were aware that such stories may be more based on rumour than truth, but had no way of distinguishing between the two, especially when they were receiving similar, trusted, advice from their own mentors ('pretty much the first thing my vicar said to me was, "Being ordained makes it really hard to date."'). In the words of one participant,

It's really off-putting as a young woman, if you're asking questions about will this stop me from getting married? Will this stop me from having children? And no one's proactively saying to you, "Do you know that's still possible? That's still an option. The Church will work with you."

Age and gender clearly interact here, with younger women in the general population less likely to be married than older women. Although this may be equally true for men in wider society, it is much less true for male ordinands, as is clear from the number of married male participants (13/18)

compared with married female participants (3/12). The two women with children were both advised to delay pursuing their vocation until their children were older, which caused them frustration (and obviously increased their age at the point of selection). However, some participants deliberately slowed the discernment process because they felt unready, which was probably related more to age than to gender:

Because I had come to the DDO at fourteen and then went away to university and really tried doing the opposite, I then made contact again [later]. But it was all a bit kind of, “Yeah, great, brilliant. We’ll sign it! Great! We’ll get you on!” And I wanted very much a process of discernment, which is why it’s called a process of discernment. I really wanted to go with somebody else and walk through all of these things that I thought, and have them affirmed or prayed for. (Male)

Another participant who had also considered ordination from a very early age described

wondering about whether it’s something that I ought to be doing now or whether I ought to sort of get a lot of stuff sorted before I then went and did it. Because the way that ordained ministry was often modelled to me was that it was always with so very devoted priests who gave so much of their life and attention to it. I had that alongside these other questions of how am I going to work out who I am as an adult at all, work out my relationships and different things I wanted to study and think about and experiences I wanted to have. ... And maybe as a late teenager, although I’d been thinking about it a long time, I had a period where I ... just want to do my own thing for a bit, and I don’t want to talk to anybody about vocations for a couple of years while I get this sorted. And then I realised that there wasn’t going to be a getting it sorted point. (Female)

Opportunity

A second barrier to pursuing a sense of calling is lack of opportunity. This may be manifested in a number of ways, largely relating to similar factors to those discussed earlier which provide opportunity to discern vocation, such as networks and organisations, mentoring and seed-planting. Certain groups of people may find themselves unable to take advantage of such opportunities because of particular aspects of their identity or circumstances. Both gender and family status emerge as factors influencing opportunity.

Organisational networks

As mentioned above, some participants gained practical experience of ministry through a network or organisation providing internships in churches. While this was reported by both men and women, experiences and perceptions of some of the schemes may vary according to gender. The 9:38 network, which tends towards the Conservative Evangelical tradition, acted as the medium for three male (and no female) participants to find internships, while one man who had been part of the North London Pastoral Assistants scheme commented that,

although they have been very clear that, although they are Anglo-Catholic parishes, they will take female pastoral assistants and have done pretty much every year since it’s been running, you’d have to be a fairly strong character, I think. ... I don’t think that’s any ill will on

the part of either the parishioners or priests because outwardly they are very affirming. But I think that sort of environment is intimidating as a woman discerning a vocation.

The two programmes engaged with by women were a pre-cursor to the Stepney Intern Scheme, and Jellicoe, run by The Centre for Theology & Community, which is mainly focused on community organising.

People

As described above, other people can help discern vocation by suggesting or encouraging it (they can also hinder discernment by actively discouraging it, as we will see in the sections below). However, such encouragement is not necessarily equally available to all.

Twelve of the male participants and six of the female participants reported another person suggesting to them that they may be called to ordination. The numbers are not large enough to be statistically significant, but this may suggest that people are less likely either to identify women as potential priests or to mention it to them. The latter was indicated by two women, with two different reactions:

when I mustered up the courage, anybody I mentioned it to, much to my dismay, they weren't very surprised. ... I felt a bit disheartened that they'd never spoken to me about it. They hadn't been very surprised and they had seen God at work but they didn't come to have a conversation.

The priest I had as a teenager ... she didn't mention it to me first. I guess maybe you don't when you have a seventeen year old girl there who is going off to university. You wouldn't necessarily assume. But as soon as I was like, "This is the thing I've been thinking of," she was so excited and really keen to help me think about what that meant.

As suggested by the second participant, there may be factors other than gender involved here, such as the age of the potential ordinand.

Something explicitly raised by one group of women as a gender-specific barrier is accessibility to mentoring. This extends beyond the discernment process into training, and is partly linked to the relatively low numbers of female priests, particularly in the Evangelical tradition:

There's not as often strong female leaders that are mentoring. I mean, definitely for me that wasn't the case, I feel that I'm the first one almost doing it in my context. There's not people that have spotted me and said, "I'm going to spend some time with you and try to help you develop your gifting." ... [B]ut I have seen [that] happening for the guys.

This is a question of both quality and quantity. There are fewer women than men in senior positions, and particularly leading larger churches. Because (potential) ordinands are generally monitored by clergy of the same sex (participants spoke of frustration with a perceived 'anxiety that if a middle aged man mentors me, the only inevitable consequence is that we'll have an affair'), women have less access to mentoring from experienced senior church leaders. One of the female participants related that she was asked by a male fellow ordinand,

“Who have you spent time with as a leader? Who would you like to mentor [sic] next?” And I’m like, I just don’t have those opportunities available to me that you do. He’d had several people that were kind of key, almost celebrity Christians, invest in him, and kind of expected that everyone else had that. It was like, no. I don’t have that available.

Gendered peer networks can have similarly isolating effects:

It’s very easy to not get involved in conversations or in leadership, mentoring, kind of hubs and stuff. In my tradition there are leadership hubs and guys will meet together, to pray together, and maybe in triplets and stuff. But you don’t get invited because they would say, “Well, women should pray with women.”

This can lead to tension for women who are drawn to train with other young women in order to avoid isolation, and end up reinforcing the gender segregation that they find so difficult. Alternatively (or simultaneously), they may rebel against actors and structures which attempt to group them with other women, but they do not necessarily succeed in penetrating male networks. Thus, the same ordinand who explained that

one of the reasons I came to [this college] was I really, really wanted to study somewhere where there were other young women

later commented,

People say, “Great, come and meet this other young woman.” It’s good in a way, but all I want to do is say hello and then carry on. Because ... they might be greatly gifted in evangelism or greatly gifted at something else and we have nothing in common at all.

A further barrier that affects women in particular, in terms of both opportunity and isolation, is family. Only two women in this study had children, and both mentioned having to delay their discernment process until the children were slightly older. One explained that she became pregnant and was told by her DDO that ‘he didn’t think the selectors would be very happy if he sent them a woman who was six months pregnant’. She faced further delays ‘because you can’t take a baby on BAP’, and eventually reached selection when the baby was nearly 13 months old. However, she described one of her biggest barriers as

the practical stuff of being a young, married woman and trying to organise schooling and stuff. ... [C]ertainly I found the practicalities of moving and the sense of responsibility for uprooting my children repeatedly has been really, really difficult to handle. There have definitely been times when I have wondered whether this has been the right thing and whether I should drop out and come back in ten years when my kids are grown up. That’s been a really genuine thing that has recurred throughout. The disruption to my family has been so intense.

Although two of the male participants also had children, they were not mentioned in the discussions, suggesting that they had little impact on their discernment journey or their training. Certainly, the overall numbers of male ordinands with families are higher, which can lead to mothers feeling isolated during training. The same female ordinand reflected,

I think there's a lot of assumptions that it's just the same as it is for men who are going through the process, but it doesn't feel the same. I don't know why that is, but it was really noticeable that when we did a Marriage and Ministry day here that the session on family life, I was the only woman who was training in that session. All the other people in the room were men with young families. I was the only woman with a young family. I felt really isolated.

Active discouragement

Both female and male candidates can face active discouragement of their vocation from people outside the Church, usually family and sometimes also friends. With the exception of a specific example of a woman married to a priest, this appears to be more related to family background than to gender. However, the two may interact if the candidate comes from a family not sympathetic to the ordination of women, as we saw in the section on 'supporters' above, with the case of the female participant who decided not to pursue her vocation without her parents' blessing.

By far the biggest group of people mentioned as discouraging to or questioning of a vocation is parents and extended family. Some are concerned about ordained ministry as a career (possibly more so for men, but also specifically mentioned by one woman):

I think probably my mum would always have been against me giving up a job that has lots of opportunities and money and security to be a vicar. (Male)

Did you get any of the disappointment that you're not making more of yourself? Because I got that, not from my parents but from the rest of my family. It's like, "Oh, you went to university and you did this and you're quite bright and you're going to waste it all by going and being a vicar." (Male)

A few participants experienced hostility from family towards the Church ('There's very much a sense within the whole family of, "Why are you doing this? The church is out of date. The church doesn't speak into any of this. The church is useless."' (female)). Others, from non-Anglican denominations, experienced hostility towards the Church of England itself, with parents 'sceptical and cautious' (male) about the Anglican context. One ordinand described how

the pastor or the leader of my church sat me down and basically told me that I'd been deceived, going to the Church of England, thinking that I needed to get it out of my head. He worried about me. (Male)

Some of those who initially received a negative or cautious response from their parents came from clergy families with difficult experiences of ministry.

Certainly the fact that my dad is a vicar in the Church of England ... When I see the number of clergy who take time off work for stress-related illness ... it made my parents wary initially. ... [T]hey were really wanting to make sure I knew what I was doing. (Male)

My dad was very, very angry about the whole thing and I just felt God gently saying it wasn't about me, it was about God and we'd been really hurt by ministry. (Female)

The participant who received possibly the most discouragement was married to a vicar. She was initially met with a dismissive response:

I felt the call from my early 20s but I spoke to someone and they basically kind of put me off because they said because I was young and female there was no way, go away. It shattered my confidence, because I was quite under-confident at that stage anyway. I just buried it all.

When she later voiced her vocation again, after a friend suggested several years later that she might be called, she again experienced unsupportive reactions, revealing an assumption that becoming a priest herself would add little to and perhaps be less valuable than her role as a vicar's wife:

The answers that I got when I told people what I was going through were, "Well, why would you want to do that?" Because of my children, because my husband is already doing it. People were like, "Well, he's already doing it. Why would you want to do that?" It's surprising. Even other women or my friends, even my family couldn't understand. I watched [my husband] going through it, and the reaction they had to him was, "Oh, that's amazing!" and they kicked in support. And all the way through when it was difficult, they were there all the way. I was a bit upset by that. I just thought, "Well, I'm being called. I'm following what God's asking of me." I've got over that now and it has changed but I was just surprised at that reaction.

Rejection and hostility

A lack of acceptance from within the Church on the grounds of gender was mentioned by all three groups of women and discussed at length by two of them. It has also been experienced by some of the men. The participants came from a range of backgrounds, some raised in churches not sympathetic to the ordination of women and some having experienced only female leadership. For women, the former often had to work through their own views towards their calling ('I wasn't entirely sure that I believed in women being ordained'), while the latter had to face the realisation that their vocation was not fully accepted in all parts of the Church ('I didn't realise for a very long time how much people had struggled to really be women in the church, because I came from a point where it just felt quite natural'). For some participants, the question of gender is compounded with the issue of sexuality, increasing feelings of rejection.

A few women described specific incidents of opposition during both the discernment process and training, such as experiencing people walking out of meetings when they preached, communicants refusing to receive the Eucharist from them, 'men who were silly about [a church identifying itself as pro-women]', or one participant whose 'Rector told me that he would refer me [to the DDO] but he wasn't actually pro women in leadership, so he didn't'. Some Christian Unions were identified as places where women often felt unaccepted and alienated. However, the predominant way in which rejection or hostility is experienced is through the felt context in which (potential) ordinands find themselves. This may manifest itself in incidents such as those above, or through national Church events, particularly the 2012 Synod vote against the admittance of women to the episcopate and the opposition to the first female bishop during her consecration. It is also embodied in the existence of groups such as Reform, Forward in Faith, WATCH and AWESOME (although not necessarily in individual members of these groups).

The outcome is a context of perceived hostility, of which female ordinands are constantly aware:

I'd always felt this tension between me and my sending church, and to feel this tension between me and the greater church was just kind of a magnification of that.

For some, this has resulted in insecurity regarding how far they are considered acceptable to people (particularly clergy) they meet within the Church, inhibiting action:

[During the discernment process] I was always very anxious dealing with anyone in the Church of England as a whole, about not knowing someone was pro-women.

I wasn't 100% sure if my church was pro-women in ordination, because I'd just never seen it. ... I basically said to God, "Look, I love this church and I feel like You want me here, but I can't. I feel a sense of calling but unless this is something my church is going to support, it's not something I'm going to look at."

Female participants also expressed a sense of distress at the thought of being a cause of fraction within the Church:

It was something that was actually really painful for me, thinking about ordination, that I'd be a cause of disunity in God's Church. That's really tough. ... [A]ctually having one of the most defining factors of your personhood being your gender, and saying that that's the problem with you, and with your ministry, and what you're doing in your calling, is something a little bit different than just disagreeing with one thing a person says.

A few of the male participants also described experiencing hostility during the process of discernment. Unlike the women, these were much more specific, including rumours of positive discrimination in favour of women, and rejection by DDOs of certain dioceses. One ordinand, for example, was directed to a different diocese on grounds of his age, although he interpreted this as an issue of churchmanship:

Young people coming through potentially from that background might get a bit of a hard time because they're heard through a particular lens that they hold the same particular views.

Official process

Finally, some ordinands experienced aspects of the discernment process itself as a barrier. This encompasses a variety of issues, mainly related to structures, processes and institutional identity.

Financial issues were raised by most of the groups. These were largely to do with ordinands feeling inadequately provided for during training or between selection and training, and varied according to location and circumstance. One married ordinand, for example, explained that he had difficulty finding appropriate accommodation in a relatively expensive city, while another had been required to complete a year of parish placements before entering training, for which he was not paid. Several participants mentioned the financial insecurity of awaiting their BAP result: 'It did feel a little bit like walking off one of those very high diving boards and wondering whether there was going to be anything to catch me' (male). Other concerns included the expense of future childcare (female

participants) and the complexity of the financial system, which appeared to be explained to different extents by different DDOs. A particular potential financial barrier mentioned by one ordinand was the suggestion that if he delayed the process his diocese might not fund residential training:

That was the reason we decided not to delay. And if I hadn't been able to do full-time training, I'd have thought, "I don't see how I'm going to be equipped for this. I need to go and get training somewhere else." (Male)

Some younger people find the diocesan structure of the Church and its discernment and selection processes difficult to manage. Most of the participants moved around the country during the discernment process, as they left home for university and then employment. Sometimes this meant having to choose between sponsoring dioceses, or officially switching diocese and potentially starting the process from scratch with a new DDO. In other cases it was the DDO or priest of the sending church who moved, again prompting decisions and new relationships. For some participants movement between people or dioceses was helpful, especially where, for example, they had a difficult relationship with their first DDO. Others found that it lengthened the process and caused frustration.

Institutional identity was a barrier mentioned by several groups. Having entered the formal discernment process, participants were required to locate themselves within the wider Church of England. Several at that point had little idea of the structures and various traditions of the Church, and therefore found this challenging:

all of a sudden, it became about this institution called the Church of England, which I knew nothing about, felt really naïve about, and was really overwhelmed by it all. I was like, "I don't know where I fit in this massive institute." (Male)

This is particularly pertinent for those from non-Anglican denominations:

I got a growing stronger sense of calling and passion for the Church of England and thought, well, it's just like what I'm doing now in this [non-Anglican] church, but just within the Church of England, right? It'd be pretty similar, I can just get to keep being myself, doing what I want, that kind of thing. And actually, how wrong could I be really about what it means to be in leadership in the Church of England? (Male)

In addition, there was a general sense that, once a diocese had decided to sponsor a candidate, the focus shifted strongly to preparing her or him for the BAP. Participants talked of 'box-ticking' and, moreover, having to learn to express their vocation in a very precise, and often unfamiliar, way. Two candidates, who had each been recommended at their second BAP, both described fast discernment processes the first time, with little preparation: 'the first time around I received virtually no coaching because I was at the other end of the country to my DDO' (male). Some participants appreciated help with preparation as support from their diocese: one ordinand told of her DDO reassuring her that 'obviously you're here, just chill out, don't worry about it. We'll just work out the words that you need to say to move you on' (female). Another explained,

I was aware that my Diocese made quite a lot of effort to make sure that as a young person I got the best possible route through BAP, because I think they had very much a sense that BAPs are weighted against young people. Because as a young person, they felt that I might

not have the life experience, I might not have the skill set to offer to a BAP. But still being able to say this is how you stand up and you say, "This is my calling." Just that sort of affirmation to say, "Don't worry what age you are. You might be the youngest person there on your BAP," and I was, but I still came out at the end of it knowing that Diocese has really supported me, putting things in place to make sure that I would get through the first time, which I really appreciated. We had briefing sessions beforehand. We had practice presentation sessions, all that kind of stuff. (Female)

Some, however, found this extremely uncomfortable:

It suddenly felt like ... the spiritual side of things dried up there. Before, it was all about me praying, me praying with other people, me receiving words and weighing it up. And all of a sudden, that stopped and it was, "You need to use this vocabulary. You need to tick these boxes. You need to visit these places. You need to learn how to express your sense of vocation in this way." It became very mechanical and about process. (Male)

These reactions are possibly related to either gender or churchmanship: positive responses tended to come from women of a more catholic tradition, while men from Evangelical traditions tended to find this aspect more difficult.

Conclusions

Key factors in the discernment of vocation to priesthood include: practical experience; vocations conferences; internal prompts; and input from other people in a range of roles. Key barriers to pursuing a vocation to priesthood are heavily influenced by different kinds of social difference, and include: perceptions of self and ministry; lack of opportunity; active discouragement; rejection and hostility; and some aspects of the formal discernment and selection processes. Unsurprisingly, people are central to both aspects, in particular local church leaders, university chaplains, DDOs and Vocations Advisers. Because this research was conducted among ordinands who pursued their vocation into training, it is not possible to assess which of the factors above could cause a potential candidate to withdraw from the discernment process. This would require further research amongst those who ultimately did not pursue a potential vocation.

Given an expressed desire by the Church of England to increase the number of young vocations and address the gender imbalance in this age group, these findings have implications for dioceses, the Ministry Division, local churches, university chaplains and Theological Education Institutions (TEIs), in several areas of practice, detailed below.

Information and communication

Enhance communication and sources of information by:

- Promoting areas that are apparently proving successful, particularly opportunities for practical experience and vocations events, and also providing resources to inform specific concerns of potential candidates.
- Providing further information on the role and life of female ministers, especially regarding marriage and family life; practical arrangements for childcare and maternity schemes etc. during selection, training and ministry; and clergy couples.
- Providing information and advice for families (especially parents) of younger candidates.
- Ensuring candidates receive adequate explanation of financial provision and systems, and managing expectations of candidates regarding financial support.
- Reviewing communication between dioceses regarding geographical movement of candidates.
- Communicating and working with Christian Unions and the Universities and Colleges Christian Fellowship.

Structures and schemes

Review and develop structures and schemes in the following areas:

- Internships and opportunities for practical experience.
- Vocations conferences and events.
- Placement of curates and ordinands to increase visibility.
- Mentoring for both women and men during discernment and training, including both same-gender and cross-gender opportunities.
- Focused vocational counselling for women in particular (but also men), drawing on careers theories to assist candidates in understanding how their choices are shaped and what their potential is.
- Maternity, paternity and childcare.

Training

Increase or improve training related to:

- Identification and nurture of young vocations by church leaders and university chaplains.
- Mentoring.
- Discussion during Initial Ministerial Education (including both men and women) of gender issues in ministry.
- Discernment and proactive engagement by DDOs and Vocations Advisers, perhaps along with increased numbers of and/or resources for both.

Culture

A shift in culture may be required in the following areas:

- Ongoing vocational discernment within (some) churches, for all church members and all vocational possibilities.
- Discipleship of and ministry experience for young people.
- Involvement of and investment in children, especially within local churches.
- Use of language familiar to young people, e.g. 'church leadership' and 'vicar' as well as 'vocations' and 'priest'.
- Role distribution among women and men in local churches.

Research

Further research is necessary in order to:

- Map existing internship schemes and vocations events and their outcomes.
- Investigate good practice among dioceses, churches and chaplaincies sending higher numbers of young (especially female) candidates.
- Understand reasons for withdrawal among young people, especially women, who considered a vocation but did not pursue it.