

## Speaking about God, Vocation and Ordained Vocations

*'You are the body of Christ and individually members of it'*

(1 Corinthians 12:27)

### God and Vocation

All talk of vocation must begin with God.<sup>1</sup> His wonderfully diverse creation means every person has unique gifts, abilities and motivations. God calls each individual to respond to him both as a human being and in ways that reflect the uniqueness of who they are. Over time, people's responses take a particular shape or pattern. They become a combination of who people are and what they do. It is often a joyful blend fundamental to someone's identity as, for example, mother, mechanic or musician. This is the essence of vocation.

### God, Church and Vocation

God not only creates but also rescues, reconciles, liberates, redeems and heals. Those who are baptised into the church are not simply a collection of individuals but a community, 'the body of Christ'. All who belong to the body are disciples, people who have responded to God's call in Jesus to know Him and make Him known. As such, all Christian people, whether lay or clergy, are 'partners in discipleship',<sup>2</sup> sharing a mission to and for God's world.

Individual disciples respond to God's call to grow into the likeness of Christ in particular ways that reflect who they are and the gifts God has given them. Since every area of life is a suitable context to respond to God's call, Christians can be found exercising nearly every vocation imaginable, from artist to zoologist.

The body of Christ as a whole also has a vocation. The ordination liturgy puts it like this: 'God calls his people to follow Christ, and forms us into a royal priesthood, a holy nation, to declare the wonderful deeds of him who has called us out of darkness into his marvellous light' (cf. 1 Peter 2.9-11; Exodus 19:5-6). The whole People of God witness to God's Kingdom through the way they live.

The Church's common purpose does not, however, mean that all disciples are the same. Although it has a common call, a body has various parts with different functions. The famous biblical passage describing the Church as the body of Christ highlights the differences between hand, ear and eye (1 Corinthians 12). It also states clearly that each part of the body is essential, since one part cannot do without the others. Our mutual need for each other is an indispensable feature of vocation: individuals' vocations are different, but one vocation is not better than, or superior to, another.

### God, Church and Ordained Vocations

The vocation of the Body of Christ to know and witness to God requires ministers whose specific calling enables other disciples to exercise theirs. In this way the Church fulfils Jesus' exhortation to bear much fruit

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<sup>1</sup> *Senior Church Leadership: A Resource for Reflection*. The Faith and Order Commission of the Church of England (Archbishops' Council, 2015), p. 21f.

<sup>2</sup> *Setting God's People Free* (Archbishops' Council, 2017), p. 4.

(John 15:1-15) as an anticipation and foretaste of God's heavenly Kingdom.

The vocation to ministry can be held alongside other vocations, or it can be a disciple's main or only vocation. Unlike some contemporary uses of the term, however, in the New Testament 'ministry' is a public and commissioned role. It is something that God calls some individual disciples to and which is recognised by the Church. Ministry in this sense is different to discipleship or a particular sphere of service or activity exercised by individual Christians but which is not publicly commissioned. For this reason, while 'all ministers should be disciples ... not all disciples are ministers'.<sup>3</sup>

The scope of ministry is wide, including service, preaching, pastoral care and administration of the sacraments. At various points in the Church's history nearly all of these have been exercised by lay people, not only ordained ministers. So although the Church has always recognised a variety of ministries, there is a question about the distinctiveness of ordained ministry. The Church of England's Faith and Order Advisory Group expresses the matter like this: 'Ordination makes a particular ministry a public ecclesial sign of what the whole church is. It focuses, clarifies and promotes the calling of all the faithful who are constituted by baptism as a royal, prophetic priesthood'.<sup>4</sup>

In other words, the ordained person is publically to represent God's call to all humanity. He or she does this on behalf of the church, which also shares the joy and responsibility to make God's call known. Ordination means engaging in public acts, which in practice means that ordained ministry includes *all* the essential manifestations of ministry, namely, that it is lifelong, nationally recognised and encompasses word, sacrament and pastoral care.

The Bible contains a number of pictures, ideas and metaphors for the church and ordained ministry within it. Among them are:

- a *body* whose head is Christ; there is no mention of which part of the body the ordained minister is, except that it's not the head (Ephesians 5:23)
- the church as *fellow workers* in the Lord alongside St Paul (Romans 16)
- the *Bride of Christ* being prepared for her wedding by St Paul (2 Corinthians 11:2)
- *God's house* with Christ as the cornerstone and St Paul as the servant (Ephesians 2:19-22; 3:7)
- a flock of sheep with Christ as the chief *shepherd* (1 Peter 5:2)

Although no single image captures everything that needs to be said, these pictures powerfully shape our understanding of both church and the nature of ministry. Together, they help us live in ways that reflect both that we are one body and also individual disciples called to exercise our own vocations, (1 Corinthians 12:27).

## Responding to God's Call

All people are called to respond to God in their lives. For some that will be as a painter, for others as teachers, for yet others as business people, and so on.

The Church of England is working to help all Christians respond to God's call in the prayerful expectation that some are called to ordained ministry. For further information see: [churchofengland.org](http://churchofengland.org).

+Andrew, Guildford, 10 October 2017

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<sup>3</sup> *The Mission and Ministry of the Whole Church: Biblical, theological and contemporary perspectives*. The Faith and Order Advisory Group of the Church of England (Church House, 2007), p. 116.

<sup>4</sup> *The Mission and Ministry of the Whole Church*, p. 152.