

A Vision for Lay Ministries

Introduction

Lay ministries are growing and proliferating within the Church of England as more people respond to God's call in their lives and share their God-given gifts in a wide range of ministries. This evidence of the inspiration of the Holy Spirit and creative human imagination in shaping new forms of service in ministry is something to celebrate joyfully while acknowledging that we hope for a future of increased confidence in and of lay ministries.

This vision for lay ministries is not a standalone document. It is rooted in Ministry Council's 2019 *Ministry for a Christian Presence in Every Community* which outlines the call to particular ministries that represent and enable the whole church and to be disciple-making disciples that build up the whole Body of Christ in mission and ministry. *Ministry for a Christian Presence* points towards signs of renewal of ministry in the Church of England, where ministry is relational, missional, collaborative, adaptive and diverse. These areas are picked up and expanded below to explore what these signs of renewal might look like for lay ministries, in all their breadth, scale and diversity.

This vision is also firmly situated within the theological thinking of *Kingdom Calling*, including its diagnosis of some of the key challenges facing lay ministries and as it offers theological foundations for further reflection on vocation, ministry and discipleship of all God's people.

This vision seeks to inspire the whole church in reflection and action around lay ministries across the Church of England. To quote *Ministry for a Christian Presence*, "the responsibility for the discernment, formation, deployment and support of these will be held locally by the bishop through those with whom the bishop shares this ministry, or collectively by the House of Bishops, according to the form of ministry, with safeguarding a priority at each stage and for all ministries."

This document intentionally provides a vision for the future which will guide us as we clarify the detailed steps we need to take in order to achieve it, within a church seeking to discern how ministries are being and will be re-shaped for our emerging new context and trusting that God continues to renew, inspire and equip us to witness to God's love and work for the coming of God's kingdom. For this vision to become reality, the Lay Ministries Advisory Group together with Ministry Council will need to develop a clear implementation plan to support parishes, dioceses and the national church in the development of lay ministries. While this vision therefore marks the start of work on a national strategy, it is also hoped that it will also inspire reflection and conversation within diocesan teams as they explore lay ministries in their own contexts.

What is meant by ‘lay ministries?’

There are a variety of interpretations of what constitutes ‘lay ministry’ within the Church of England, and on the relationship between ordained and lay ministries. *Kingdom Calling* offers a nuanced exploration of some of the history and discussion around the meaning of “ministry” and some of the challenges in moving towards a culture free of competition or contest between different ministries.

Following *Ministry for a Christian presence*, in the context of this vision, ‘lay ministries’ is used to describe those roles which are publicly recognised as representative and enabling roles within the Church of England, though not necessarily within the place and space of the gathered church. Lay ministers are those who have been called to these particular ministries and commissioned for specific responsibilities.

This is not in any way to imply that vocations to public ministry are of greater importance, status or even holiness than vocations which might be described as relational or social. Every Christian is called by God, equipped with gifts for the building up of the common life and commissioned for the service of Christ through baptism. All are called to be a part of the ministry of the Church as it serves God’s mission in God’s world and public ministers are called to enable this wider ministry.

Lay ministries within the Church of England might broadly be divided into three categories: Authorised, Locally Recognised and Licensed.¹ These categories are a helpful framing though there is overlap and not all forms of ministry will naturally fit into just one area. They have the advantage of providing a reminder that lay ministries are varied and widespread. These categories should in no way be construed as a hierarchy; that some roles or activities require a licence or episcopal commissioning does not denote them as inherently more valuable.

This vision is intended to move us along the pathway to being a church where all ministries are celebrated, recognised and supported as God-given. With this in mind, it is worth observing that the term ‘lay ministry’ is in some ways deeply unhelpful. Outside of the church context, ‘lay’ often refers to people without detailed knowledge or professional expertise in a subject. There is a risk that this definition creeps into our understanding of ministries described as ‘lay’ within the Church of England. As a translation from *λαός*, ‘lay’ is also unhelpful in this context, by implying that those who are ordained are no longer a part of the *laos*, the people of God. Knowing that in our contemporary church, when people see or hear ‘ministry’ they often assume it relates to *ordained* ministry, ‘lay’ has been retained in this vision for the sake of clarity, but conversations exploring this term more fully would be welcomed.²

¹<https://www.churchofengland.org/life-events/vocations/exploring-lay-ministry>

² In some places this conversation is already underway, for example in the Diocese of Leicester, which is exploring using the term ‘Associate Minister’ in place of ‘Lay Minister’.

Vision

We want to see lay ministries thriving in a church that has confidence in lay ministries and celebrates the abundance of those in lay ministries. This vision looks forward to a church where lay ministries abound and flourish fruitfully as part of the ecosystem of the whole people of God, enabling the ministry of the whole church as it serves God's mission in God's world.

If the context of lay ministries in the Church of England is like a garden, it is one of extraordinary abundance, with a multitude of plants of different varieties. In different areas of the garden things may look a little different to each other. Varying conditions enable a range of plants to flourish and indeed need different plants to make the best of the conditions they have. There are some plants which crop up in all the areas, and some might be unique to a very particular type of soil, but the overall variety is vital.

There is something important in recognising and giving thanks for the great gift of this beautiful garden in its scale and diversity, to pause to recognise those plants that can often be hidden from view and to give thanks for each part and for the whole. However, this is not a garden that exists for admiration for its own sake, wonderful though the plants within it may be. It's a garden that exists to bear fruit, giving thanks to the one who provides the sun and water essential to its growth.

For this garden to flourish more fully and bear fruit in even greater abundance it requires careful nurturing. This will require new shoots of emerging vocations to be spotted and supported so they can develop and flower. It will require knowing what care and support different plants require to flourish and providing it from first shoots to full maturity. It will require knowledge of what blights the plants and protecting them from it. Finally, it may require some careful pruning to ensure growth is healthy and there is space for new and different plants to emerge. And all this require those caring for the garden to be wise, sharing their knowledge and learning with each other.

What are the signs of renewal of lay ministries?

Ministry for a Christian Presence in Every Community sets out the characteristics of public ministers today that indicate signs of renewal of ministry as it is reimagined and reoriented. What might this look like for lay ministries, as green shoots of the more confident culture we hope to see emerge?

"Ministry is continually renewed by the Spirit, responding to the needs of each generation. Signs of renewal are seen where ministry enables the Church to be outward facing and where it is relational, missional, collaborative, adaptive and diverse"

Ministry for a Christian Presence in Every Community

Relational

Lay ministries flourish where there are healthy, life-giving relationships as ministers grow in Christ-like maturity, cultivate deep roots of holy habits of discipleship within the life of their communities and engage in God's mission in God's world. Formation for relational ministry is a life-long task of learning in communities of prayer and service that model genuine mutuality in ministry with clergy and lay colleagues learning alongside, with and from each other and their communities. We will also see lay ministries flourish where they contribute to outward facing worshipping communities where all are supported in deepening discipleship. Those in lay ministries must model and share the vision of all ministry as relational, not individual, acknowledging that the harvest is plentiful but the workers are few, and celebrating ministries working alongside others.

Where ministries are relational, we will see all ministry rooted in love of God and people. It is likely that many lay ministries will have significant focus on relationships with communities, organisations and individuals beyond the gathered church, emphasising the 'connecting role' between church and world. Lay ministries will ensure that teaching is applied to the concerns of the workplace, the home and social networks; intercessions are informed by the issues of the local context; pastoral care is exercised among those who don't come to church as well as those who do; acts of service are done in partnership with other community groups. They will be 'instruments of love' who work with the Holy Spirit to embody the embrace of the Father and the Son, the church and the world.

Missional

Lay ministries flourish where they are missional; alert to the work of God in the world, sharing in that activity and enabling, encouraging and resourcing the whole people of God to join in God's mission in the world, maintaining a dynamic focus on the transformation of church and world in the service of God's kingdom.

Enabling all the saints in mission and evangelism will require more emphasis on supporting people to try new things, bringing with it an element of risk. We need a culture of confidence in encouraging and enabling others and worshipping communities where gifts and vocations are explored by all. This might require new approaches to learning as people are released into mission, with opportunities for learning from failure and from success in reflection alongside others. It may also require reflection on the extent to which lay ministries encompass all the Marks of Mission.

Where ministry is missional, we will see an increase in disciple-making disciples, reading the signs of their times and context and equipped to respond to them confidently and creatively. Lay ministers may have an opportunity to focus particularly on setting an example of wrestling with the challenges of discipleship and mission in the world, for example what does it look like for a Christian to share their faith with friends? How does a Christian wrestle with ethical decisions or challenge injustice in the workplace?

Collaborative

Lay ministries flourish when ministry is truly the work of co-labourers, God's servants working together to bring in the harvest. This is a key area of challenge for lay ministries, in an institution that can be hierarchical in myriad ways including in terms of clericalism, in terms of relationships between different lay ministries and between those in public ministry and other members of their worshipping communities. The challenge of power dynamics is nothing new for followers of Christ yet the challenge for the church is deeply ingrained and a key barrier to flourishing lay ministries.

This area of challenge needs candid exploration with lay and ordained ministers and their worshipping communities, seeking to explore barriers to true collaboration and providing support in overcoming those barriers for the fuller flourishing of all involved in ministry.

Where ministries are collaborative, lay ministers, alongside clergy colleagues, enable individuals and communities to explore their calling and gifting and grow in confidence. We will see the mutual respect and accountability already present in many places modelled at all levels, rooted in our common discipleship and baptism. Lay ministries will set an example of collaborative working both in the church and in the world will work with clergy to promote an economy of encouragement rather than grievance, celebrating the strength in our different giftings and callings.

Diverse

Lay ministries flourish when the diversity of gifts given to all of God's people are truly celebrated and where the gifts of the whole body of Christ can be exercised. Jesus called a wide range of people to share in his ministry, including people who were unexpected to the religious leaders of the day, and lay ministries will only truly flourish when ministers are representative of the communities they serve in their rich diversity. Barriers of unconscious bias and exclusion at all stages of people's journeys into and through ministries need exploring, examining and dismantling to equip, enable and release all those who are called into ministry.

Lay ministries are already diverse in the sense of the scale and scope of roles across the church and we should expect to continue to see the emergence and development of diverse ministries as the Holy Spirit equips the body of Christ to respond to the needs of God's world in each local context.

Adaptive

Lay ministries flourish when we see ministers from all parts of the body of Christ exercising ministry with flexibility, creativity and imagination.

Where ministries are adaptive, we will see ministers alert to emerging opportunities and the needs of the communities to which they are called, equipped to discern God's activity in individuals and communities and able to be imaginatively adaptive in response. This has perhaps never been truer than in the times of

great uncertainty in which we find ourselves during which many traditional church-buildings based ministries have been rendered impossible and when imagination and flexibility in exercising ministry have been vital.

There is great freedom in this but also great responsibility. Life-long formation for ministry will be even more important as lay ministries focus on the work of enabling all God's people to respond and adapt to what they see God doing and life-long discernment of God's call afresh the lives of individuals and communities will be essential.

What is the future we hope to see?

“The whole people of God, by baptism, share in bearing Christian presence through worship, witness and service, being the Body of Christ in every and any place and context.... Ordained and lay ministers teach and equip lay people to follow Jesus confidently in every sphere of life in ways that show the difference the Gospel makes. They recognise that all are baptised into Christ, complementary in gifts and vocation, mutually accountable in discipleship, and equal partners in mission.”

Ministry for a Christian Presence in Every Community

We long for a church where lay ministries are enabling of whole-life discipleship of the whole people of God and the ministry of the whole church in mission in God's world.

We need to move to a climate where ministry is always missional, with lay ministers who have confidence in their calling as disciple-making disciples.

This requires a culture where supporting the gathering of the worshipping community never loses sight of its connection with the dynamic sending out of the community as disciples in the world, where the focus remains on fruitfulness, and not on the flowers for their own sake. It needs a renewal of lay ministries understood as enabling of others. Lay ministries will need to be adaptive as ministers respond to their evolving contexts and needs of their communities, requiring life-long learning that continually equips ministers to be adaptive, creative and appropriately innovative.

We long for a church where lay ministries are recognised, valued and celebrated as God-given and where all ministers, lay and ordained, are co-labourers in the Kingdom of God.

Achieving this vision will result in a celebration of the scale, impact and rich diversity of lay ministries, both existing and potential, recognising in them the inspiring energy of the Holy Spirit and human creativity coming together to enable the whole people of God in mission and ministry in new and exciting ways.

This will be supported by having a shared national narrative and language of lay ministries that is theologically rooted and practically inspiring, that celebrates this garden in its abundance, beauty and

fruitfulness; a narrative of mutuality, not hierarchy, and of complementary gifts and vocations, not competition, that sharpens our understanding of all ministry as mutual and collaborative, rooted in God's call to us in our baptism. This culture will be strengthened by lay ministries being valued in clear messaging ranging from public communications to private conversations and where joy-filled stories of lay ministries in all their diversity, scale and blessing are shared and celebrated.

We long for a church where all those called into lay ministries are equipped and supported to exercise their gifts and ministries.

Achieving this vision will result in a climate where those in ministries grow in confidence as they are supported in their calling, and equipped, enabled and empowered in their ministry; where each plant is given the care it requires.

This requires a positive culture for every disciple who is discerning a vocation to lay ministry and appropriate support for lay ministers as they are formed for and exercise their particular ministries. It will include appropriate formation and life-long learning, ensuring ministers are enabled to exercise a flourishing ministry safely and appropriately, relevantly and creatively. This may require imagination and more confident risk-taking, to unleash unexpected potential and exploring new types of lay ministries as contexts change, for example exploring new models of leadership within worshipping communities.

We long for a church where those involved in lay ministries have opportunities to share learning so that confidence is built, innovations are shared and inspiration is ignited.

Achieving this vision will require a climate of increased opportunities for peer-support, learning and theological reflection around lay ministries so that work is not unnecessarily duplicated and opportunities are taken to share and reflect upon successes, failures and learning by all those who nurture and care for this garden.

This will be supported when we have a culture where lay ministers and those who support them have access to networks for sharing in learning, discussion and reflection, including working with partner and parachurch organisations where appropriate. This will allow them to build capacity, allow fresh insights to emerge and enable those involved in lay ministries to receive support, encouragement and appropriate challenge. It will be important to keep eyes open to see what is happening at the margins, where God is so often to be found.

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