

GENERAL SYNOD**Private Member's Motion: Strategy for encouraging the ministry of people from working class backgrounds**

'That this Synod welcome the work that has already been done to encourage the ministry of people from working class backgrounds, and request the Ministry Development Board to go further in developing a national strategy for the encouragement, development and support of vocations, lay and ordained, of people from working class backgrounds and report back to Synod to debate that strategy within 12 months.'

1. Executive Summary

This motion is calling on the Ministry Development Board (MDB) to develop a national strategy to encourage, develop and support the ministry of people from working class backgrounds at all stages of the vocations and training process. Working class people can experience barriers to entering and flourishing in ministry in the Church, which I explore in this paper. In my research I have also found some examples of good practice that help to remove those barriers, but overall this work could be better joined up and made consistent across the Church. I have consulted with +Mark Tanner and Nick McKee, the Chair of the MDB and Director for Ministry respectively, throughout the progress of this PMM and they welcome this debate at Synod to guide their work in strategy development. I look forward to a wide ranging debate that will bring Synod together in support of working class people and value all they have to offer as God calls them to his service.

2. Why are we talking about this?

This motion has been brought out of a concern that some people from a working class background with a calling to ministry have found it difficult to progress because of expectations and assumptions based on their social class. The reasons for this are complex and nuanced, and in this paper I will explore some of those and also explore some ways forward to removing barriers to participation. In researching this I have discovered many examples of good practice in supporting people through the vocations and training processes for ministry, although these are not found uniformly across the Church of England. I am therefore asking Synod to request the Ministry Development Board to develop a national strategy, building on best practice and taking account of the lived experience of people from a working class background, to further encourage, develop and support work across the Church in this area.

One question I have been frequently asked in preparing this PMM is to outline what "working class" means. I will resist putting together a formal definition, as I hope the debate will focus more on people's experiences and how they relate to the Church rather than getting bogged down in specific sociological definitions. In my experience, working class people know who they are! It is a background that many of us who hold to are proud to be from. Working class people often feel that they are not sufficiently understood by those from other socio-economic backgrounds, and we often feel that some would prefer working class people to fit more easily into middle

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class expectations. I would also stress that being working class is prevalent across the country; it is not just an urban phenomenon nor is it restricted to council estates. Issues facing working class people are present in all of our communities, including our rural areas. Helping the Church to understand and relate well to working class people will help its ministry in so many ways.

So, what barriers do some working class people feel hinder them moving into ministry? My own experience of training for ministry while working full time in the retail sector was a constant challenge. Each week after a full days work I had a 100 mile round trip for a two hour tutorial. Summer schools during the summer recess meant using my holiday entitlement and missing out on family vacations. I had absolutely no free time for family and I missed birthdays, weddings, and anniversaries. When I enquired about full time training I was offered £220 a month to support a family with three growing children.

Financial insecurity is one reason that places a barrier in the way to progression. Chris has felt a call to ministry for some years, but has been cautious in exploring the call due to his financially precarious situation. Working in a low paid job, most of his income is spent simply covering bills. He has savings of £500 to his name and only keeps his head above water because he lives in a Council flat on a low rent. He is concerned that, if he gave up his job and left his Council flat to begin residential training, what security he does have would be lost. He is very aware that if the residential training he is being encouraged to pursue did not work out for any reason it would leave him unemployed, homeless and sinking into debt.

There can also be issues of a cultural mismatch between those exploring ministry and the expectations of the Church. While being interviewed at a selection conference Lee was asked by an interviewer who his favourite artist was. He answered "Eminem". The interviewer corrected him, saying he meant an artist such as a painter, not a rap singer. It is clear that the expectations of the interviewer did not take into account someone from Lee's background.

Such stories remind us there are many circumstances bound up with being working class that do not always fit well with the way the Church of England can approach vocations to ministry. This is not to describe being working class as an impediment, or to criticise the ways the Church has traditionally sought to select and train its ministers, but shows how many people's lived experiences are not best shaped for the Church's systems. Such lived experience includes:

- **Working class culture.** As the "favourite artist" question showed, working class people may have a different set of cultural reference points, and more widely can have a different way of interacting and living their life. Sometimes this difference can be seen in a negative light, while it is just a different cultural background. Rather than problematize working class culture, are there ways we can celebrate its riches as a gift to God's Church?
- **Financial challenges.** Many working class people are in situations of unemployment, under employment, casual employment or low paid employment. This can put them in financially precarious situations where it would not take much to tip them into destitution. In such circumstances there

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may not be confidence to radically change their work, their housing, perhaps even moving out of their community in order to train, even if residential training would be the best option for their development. Participating in lay leadership can also be a challenge, particularly if doing so requires financial outlay and there is no provision to cover expenses such as travelling to training sessions or buying books.

- **Challenging working patterns.** Many working class jobs do not fit a Monday to Friday nine to five pattern, with shift work and overtime a common feature for some. I recently spoke with someone recommended to train for Reader ministry but was unable to do so as he worked in a call centre and had to work on Saturdays, which were the only times when training took place.
- **Family and community ties.** Many working class people have close family ties, often with caring responsibilities, which they would find it hard to cover through paying for childcare or extra domestic support. This hallmark of close relationships can also extend into the local community, with some working class people living in areas where they and their families have been rooted for generations. Systems of training which require people to move out of their communities, or which create too much dislocation for family commitments, can present another barrier to progression for some.
- **Lack of educational opportunity.** Some working class people were not able to fully engage with the education system as they grew up, while others did not progress to higher education due to financial pressures or a lack of expectation. This can leave an apparent educational gap between those people and the expectations of the Church where academic achievement is highly prized. Despite this many learn a tremendous amount of practical, emotional and life skills as they progress through working life, all of which is well suited to church ministry. Some people may be written off, or feel written off, because the educational expectations placed on them exceed their experience from childhood and teenage years. However, we have seen many excellent priests with an outstanding ministry who left school at sixteen or eighteen and responded to God later in life. Some of those priests have gone on to excel academically, some have needed support to get through the academic side of training yet have an abundance of other skills that are evident once they are in a parish.
- **A lack of expectation and encouragement.** Some working class people do not see people such as themselves going forward for ministry, so are less likely to consider it as an option for them. Sometimes the wider Church can have an expectation of the sort of person who would make a good priest, and that expectation does not include working class people. With a lack of expectation can come a lack of encouragement, creating another invisible barrier to working class people God calls to ministry.

In reflecting on the working class experience in relation to church ministry, I want to stress that many of these factors apply to both lay and ordained ministry. This Private Member's Motion calls for a national strategy that applies to both lay and ordained ministry, taking into account the need to support working class people considering either option.

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I would also want to acknowledge the intersectional factors, with the barriers facing working class people also being present for others. Similar experiences of cultural mismatch, lack of expectation and more also apply for people of Global Majority Heritage, for disabled people, for women and many others who have historically experienced marginalisation in the life of the Church. The exclusion experienced when multiple identities overlap, such as being both GMH and working class, can compound the difficulties in exploring a vocation. While acknowledging these important overlaps, I hope that the debate on this motion stays focussed on the working class experience. We have seen in other debates, such as that on racial justice, that it is important to focus specifically on the lived experience under discussion and not be distracted away from that experience, even though acknowledging intersectionality is important.

3. What's already happening?

The Church of England is a family of many separate organisations, dioceses, parishes, National Church Institutions, TEIs, schools and more. The independence of these different organisations means a diversity of practice, including some innovative work already being done to support working class people in exploring and pursuing their vocation. I want to highlight some of that good work, and hope that in the debate more examples of good practice will be explored.

An early barrier to be negotiated in a journey towards ministry is receiving vocational support. This is arranged at a diocesan level, with some dioceses intentionally ensuring a diverse range of vocations advisers who can support different candidates. Being able to talk to and be supported by an adviser who understands your personal circumstances and where cultural barriers do not get in the way is very important for encouraging vocations.

For training, Theological Educational Institutions (TEIs) provide theological education for learners exploring vocations to ordained and lay ministries. A variety of pathways attempt to deliver a bespoke focus for the individual learner. It is worth recognising at the start that most TEIs offer a choice of full-time and part-time training options. As recognition of the diversity of learners' needs has increased, TEIs have responded by developing innovative pathways such as the Contextual Training option which removes the need to be resident on college premises with the attendant disruption to life circumstances that presents. Instead learners spend part of the week studying at college and the rest of their time embedded in a local church or mission placement.

Recognising the significant barriers on the path of learners from certain demographics in discerning vocations, some TEIs have developed pathways supporting candidates on their vocational journey by playing a role in their preparation for the Church of England's discernment process. Particular mention should be given to The Peter Stream initiative at St Mellitus, a year of discernment and preparation with participants attending part time. Applicants from a wide range of backgrounds are encouraged and no prior formal educational qualifications are required.

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Yet, once past the discernment hurdle, leaners can still be impeded by such barriers as fear of traditional academic work, anxiety about assignments, and a lack of confidence rooted in socio-economic and class difference. Emmanuel College has responded to this with an Action Learning Pathway which allows those training for ordained ministry to present their learning in non-traditional formats while building a portfolio evidencing their attainment of learning outcomes. It seeks to celebrate the value of working class culture, gives people space to do deep theology without the rigours of the academy and allows people to swap to academic programmes if it becomes apparent that such a move would be better for them.

This exploration of currently available pathways, while by no means exhaustive, indicate ways that some TEIs are already rising to the challenge. These need to be commended and encouraged. It should also be noted that there have been programs designed to support people into ministerial training in the past which have been discontinued. There needs to be an ongoing commitment to providing appropriate and good quality ministerial training supporting people from diverse backgrounds; it is not an optional extra.

4. What could we do?

It is clear that there are examples of good practice in different parts of the Church, and good schemes in the past which have suffered from a lack of commitment and continuity. This motion is calling for a national strategy, which will need to take stock of the circumstances of working class people, the good practice already happening, and see how this can be developed further to ensure that no one falls between the cracks. The task of pulling together the national strategy will be for the Ministry Development Board, but I hope that the debate on this motion will raise further ideas which could be included. It will also be important for any national strategy to have joined up thinking, encouraging all parts of the system at all levels of our Church to give working class people the encouragement, expectation and support necessary for them to follow their calling.

In researching this area I have heard many stories with common themes, and recognise there is scope for change. We could learn from the mentoring programme that exists for ordinands and new clergy of Global Majority Heritage, and apply similar principles for working class people. Having a mentor who understands the journey an individual is on, who understands their background and can help them to navigate the processes would really help. There is a strong tradition of working class people helping each other, and this could be embedded in our practice as a Church.

The cultural background of working class people needs to be given greater appreciation and acceptance in the discernment and selection processes. The first concern should be whether a person is called by God to a given ministry, and that encouragement to explore a vocation is well managed within dioceses. Whether they have tattoos or a strong regional accent should not be held against them. Including people from a working class background as vocations advisers, on interview panels

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and training those involved in selection to be more aware of working class culture, will prevent rejecting people for the wrong reasons.

Patterns of training, whether for lay or ordained ministry, need to be thought through so they fit people's circumstances. A greater diversity of training options, including remote learning, contextual learning and apprenticeships will give more people the opportunity to prepare for ministry, and not just those from a working class background. Tailoring courses that fit with people's lives, particularly those with existing work or caring commitments, will allow a more diverse group to enter ministry, including younger people in the early part of their working life. By taking account of people's lived experience and delivering training that works with that experience, this will help the Church's aim of growing younger.

There also needs to be consideration given to the financial challenges facing some in training for ministry, and measures put in place to mitigate any associated risks. The relationship between those in poverty and those from working class backgrounds is not straightforward, there is a higher incidence of financial challenge among working class people than elsewhere in society. We should not allow residential training, for example, to only be a realistic option for those who already have secure housing and financial independence. There needs to be a shift in mindset at all levels to allow people who the Church discerns are called to serve to be supported to do so. Lay people taking first steps into leadership need to be empowered. Not being able to afford the bus fare to attend Diocesan Synod, or not having free Saturday mornings to attend Reader training, can often stop a person's journey into service in the wider Church yet would be relatively straightforward to solve. There needs to be a greater awareness of different people's circumstances and making reasonable allowances so all are included.

5. What difference would it make?

At the heart of this Private Member's Motion is an opportunity for the Church. There are working class people who love God and love the Church who feel called to ministry. At the same time the Church is crying out for people with their skills to step forward, be trained and go on to enrich our mission to the nation. If we can seize this opportunity there are so many benefits for the life of the Church.

- **Increased vocations.** Removing barriers to working class people it will bring forward more clergy and lay ministers at a time of decreased vocations. At a time of vocations crisis removing barriers will boost our recruitment pipelines and future leadership within our churches.
- **Fit to serve the nation.** We are a national church called to the cure of souls of all in our country. Having ministers who understand and relate to all the different communities in our country is essential. We need more ministers who instinctively understand the life and culture of working class communities, and who those communities will trust.
- **Missional Church Growth.** It is often said "you can't be what you can't see". If we have more working class people in frontline ministry it will help others from that background feel that the Church is a place for them. This will apply

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whether the minister is in a working class community or a mixed community where working class people feel like an excluded minority.

- **Increased commitment.** My experience in working class communities is of proud people who will repay any support they are given through loyalty and commitment. Working class people often have a strong work ethic and do not want to be seen as charity cases. If the Church invests in them and trusts them with positions of leadership this will be repaid with hard working, devoted ministers who will not take their role for granted.
- **Social justice.** Raising up ministers from our working class communities will raise up some of the poorest people in our churches and in our society. This is more than a matter of representation, it is one of social justice and declaring that we are a Church in solidarity with the poor.
- **Simpler, humbler, bolder.** If we believe God is calling us as a Church to live more simply, more humbly and more boldly, then there is much we can learn about these from our working class members. Raising up ministers from these backgrounds will help communicate these gospel truths to any church they go on to serve in.
- **Honouring to God.** The bottom line in any vocations process is to ask whether a person is called by God. If they are then we need systems that do not get in the way of that calling, but which nurture and encourage that precious gift so it can mature and blossom. By being more attuned to the needs of working class people in our vocations and training systems we are honouring the God who calls people from all walks of life to serve through licenced ministry.

6. Over to you

This paper has sought to outline some of the issues facing working class people in our society and our church, and relate them to the vocations and training systems we ask them to navigate. There is some great work being done in parts of the church, but also many places where it isn't working as we would hope. We can also see that there are many benefits from a joined up national strategy that promotes best practice across the whole of the Church.

In submitting this Private Member's Motion I am hoping to start a debate, both within Synod and the across the Church as a whole. I encourage Synod members to think how they can contribute to this debate, whether by reflecting on personal experience, through an understanding of different parts of the system, or through looking at this issue from the different parts of the Church in which we serve. If we are able to have a deep, rounded and respectful debate, ensuring the experiences of working class people are put centre stage, this will equip the Ministry Development Board in their strategy development work. I hope that the motion will be resoundingly passed by Synod, that the MDB will enthusiastically respond to Synod's request and that in a year's time we can receive a fully joined up national strategy for the support of vocations, training and ministry of working class people. I further hope that would in turn lead to a better experience for working class people at all stages of their

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vocations journey, with more progressing into ministry, and the mission and life of our national Church being enriched by their work.

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