



The office of Lay Minister

Three proposals for change

A26 Articles series: Structures

This article was first published on the website in February 2011 and last updated in January 2019. It is copyright © John Truscott. You may download this file and/or print up to 30 copies without charge provided no part of the heading or text is altered or omitted.

This article examines the office of 'Lay Minister' in a local church. The role is taken to cover areas such as preaching, leading worship, outreach and pastoral work although specialisation within these may well apply such as in bereavement care, hospital chaplaincy or Bible teaching.

In Anglican churches the office of 'Reader' or 'Licensed Lay Minister' is in mind; in the Methodist Church, that of 'Local Preacher'; in Baptist churches, the role of 'Lay Pastor'. These are lay offices that are formally accredited and so have an authority from outside the local congregation or circuit.¹

The first part contrasts what many see as an increasing lack of distinctiveness from other church volunteers with the very real differences that do exist. Two fundamental shifts in thinking and application are then proposed for how Lay Ministers might be seen in the future.

- 1 That their primary role should become the enabling of other lay Christians into ministry as part of discipleship, rather than simply performing ministry themselves.
- 2 That their work should be more clearly seen in a missiological context, encouraging the Church to become outward looking in its whole being.

The article then turns to the current management of Lay Ministers (and of all other church volunteers). This is followed by a third proposed shift in practice, which logically follows from the first two.

- 3 That Lay Ministers should submit themselves to tighter management discipline as role-models to other church members, demonstrating that accountability and review for volunteers are Christian concepts within a model of discipleship.

The term 'volunteer' is taken to mean a lay and so non-ordained member of the church who is serving their local church in some way and who is not remunerated for such service.² For simplicity this deliberately excludes non-stipendiary (and, of course, stipendiary) Ministers, licensed evangelists such as Church Army officers and lay staff

employed by the church. But there is no reason why the ideas put forward for Lay Ministers could not be formalised into paid posts for some people, as already happens in a few cases.

Some practical examples of how all these three proposals might be applied are given. The conclusion includes a plea that pressure to ordain Lay Ministers (a different term would be required!) should be resisted. Such a move would seriously compromise the impact of these three developments, especially in those traditional denominations where there is a clear distinction between lay and clergy offices.

What is distinctive about Lay Ministers?

If the role of Lay Minister is to be seen as a recognised church office that differs from other kinds of voluntary church ministry, it is necessary to examine its distinctiveness, or lack of it, in a changing church culture. One can argue, after all, that every church member is both 'lay' and a 'minister' so that this title is hardly helpful!

But this then comes up against the very different structures and thinking in various denominations and streams. So, for this section only, a case study is taken of Church of England Readership, possibly the most worked out form of authorised lay ministry that exists. The position of Local Preachers in Methodism is similar.

Case study: Church of England Readers and distinctiveness³

In this section the role of Reader in a Church of England parish is taken for illustrative purposes. You might like to consider which of these points, and which additional ones, might apply in your own tradition.

Some argue that whatever distinctiveness exists, it is not as clear as it used to be. Reasons given for this include the following. Might some of these have the idea of status rather than simply distinction behind them?

- The development of local forms of ordained ministry (such as Ordained Local Ministers - OLMs) can be seen to eclipse the work of a Reader (who remains lay).
- Some dioceses now license other forms of lay ministry, especially those with pastoral responsibilities without a specifically up-front presence, thus making Readership one among different forms of lay licence.
- Many churches now mobilise their members to fulfil public roles that in the past might have been restricted to those holding a licence. Examples range from reading lessons and leading in prayer to teaching small groups and baptism preparation. Some churches have

preaching teams that include people who are not officially authorised but clearly gifted.

- 'A service of the Word' (a relatively recent form of official Anglican service) has given authorisation to a growing diversity in public worship that was already taking place in some churches. Significant parts of the liturgy may now be led by lay people other than Readers (including extended times of worship songs and entire all-age services).
- The present emphasis on 'fresh expressions' of church does not sit easily with a traditional view of 'official' ministry, and brings further diversity and informality.
- A number of leaders in churches no longer robe for services, with the result that Readers cannot be distinguished from other members of the congregation. Such 'dressing-down' has become legally permissible since 2017.

However, trends such as these do not mean that the office of Reader has lost all its distinctiveness. Far from it! It is simply that there is less *visible* distinction. Under the surface there remain major differences between a Reader and other lay workers. Consider the following.

- Those wishing to become Readers have first to go through a diocesan selection process with the endorsement of their PCC (Church Council).
- Those wishing to become Readers have to complete a rigorous (usually three year) training process which in all dioceses includes major elements on theology, church history and liturgy. Note that in Methodism there is a greater emphasis on actual preaching and leading worship through continuous assessment.
- Readers hold the Bishop's licence. This gives their ministry a much wider remit than within the one home church. Readers can minister in churches other than their own.
- Readers are authorised to carry out ministries that other lay people are (strictly speaking) not permitted to do, such as preaching regularly at public worship and taking funerals.
- Readers who move parish and diocese may transfer their licence and continue in this ministry in the new location, although permission is not automatically given.
- Readers are, at least in theory, under discipline and accountable, in differing ways, to both the diocesan Bishop and their local Minister.

The role of Reader has become more diverse over the years. Some now serve as specialist chaplains in hospitals and other institutions. Others fulfil a specifically pastoral ministry in bereavement work associated with taking funerals. Still others work in ecumenical settings. In some more rural dioceses there will be Readers who lead and preach in different churches to maintain a pattern of worship that, with falling clergy numbers, would otherwise no longer be possible.

But at the same time there has been a much greater diversification in the culture of many churches and the changing role of Reader has not kept pace with this. Also, most church members' understanding of the role of Reader is likely to be still in traditional mode: leading formal services and preaching. That is what people see. This raises the more fundamental point: what exactly is the point of a Reader in today's church?

It was this issue that in 2006 led to a debate in General Synod on the role of Readers and eventually to the report *Reader upbeat* (2009 in its revised form) as described in footnote 3.

This article seeks to put forward three radical ideas for development in all denominations. The first two now follow. These are expressed in a general form for all types of churches.

Lay Ministers Proposal 1: **There should be a shift from ministry itself to enabling others in ministry**

What might distinguish the role of Lay Ministers from other lay workers? The traditional answer has been to preach and to lead services. But this is no longer a helpful or affirming approach when others are so clearly fulfilling these roles too, or where there is a Eucharistic ministry which has to be led by an ordained priest. So a more productive approach might be to look instead at the impact that such ministries should have on the rest of the congregation.

This principle is laid out by Paul in the well-known, and perhaps overworked, passage in Ephesians 4. There he identifies five, though some commentators suggest it is four, foundational word-based ministries: the roles of the apostle (perhaps 'church planter' in today's culture, or itinerant leader), prophet (the one who hears the voice of God and brings this to the congregation), evangelist (those who have a specific gift to reach out to an increasingly godless world), and the pastor-teacher (if seen as a single gift). But none of these gifts is an end in itself. Each one is to be employed "to prepare God's people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up" (Ephesians 4:12).

Traditionally, the role of Lay Minister has been seen as the one who can hold the fort when no Minister is present so that services can be maintained, or to work alongside clergy in leading public worship. But this thinking hardly does credit to an army of trained Lay Ministers with a variety of skills and experience.

What, instead, if the role was seen to be one officially authorised nationally in some way after rigorous training, to have the primary aim of building up the body of disciples and enabling them to undertake ministry themselves? In other words, the test of a successful Lay Minister would not just be a good sermon or a well-led service, but a church full of motivated workers.

The advantage of this approach is that it takes the Church away from any idea of status in office to one of function, a more biblical idea. It is not that Lay Ministers are 'senior' to other lay members of the church, but they might have a specialised ministry of enabling.

This would mean that the primary role of Lay Ministers might refocus itself on the concept of training rather than just teaching and leading worship. Teaching and leading would bring people to God's truth and so worship of him and thus to a desire to be active disciples, serving their Master and growing in the faith. Training for service then moves from motivation to developing skills.

It is vital to understand the congregation's service for Christ not just in terms of getting necessary jobs done, but in putting faith to the test and growing as a disciple as a result. It is not that Lay Ministers seek to be those who help church members fill vacancy holes, although that need cannot be ignored, but that they develop people to be the ministers that Christ wants them to be. So the whole focus is on personal and corporate discipleship.

It could be argued that all this should be the role of the clergy, and it should. But Lay Ministers are often better placed for this, simply because they are lay and therefore more closely identified with the rest of the congregation than a Minister can ever be.⁴

Lay Ministers Proposal 2:

There should be a shift from 'doing ministry' to 'being mission'

But this is still thinking within the confines of the Church. Christians tend to distinguish 'ministry' from 'mission' as service inside and outside the church community. This idea has been challenged by those who explain that Christians 'do' evangelism but are part of God's mission.

Mission is not something that church members do, but is at the heart of God. Christians need to read the Bible missiologically and to have the idea of mission central to all activity.

If that is so, then the Lay Minister's proposed role of enabling other Christians to serve needs to be seen in this perspective. It is not just encouraging someone to put their discipleship into practice by leading a children's group, or even by joining the Alpha team, but also by living every day as part of God's mission to the world. This might even mean that 'Lay Missioner' could be a better term than 'Lay Minister'⁵

But it can be argued that to place 'doing ministry' against 'being mission', as this section is headed, is a false distinction. For it is in the doing of ministry that Lay Ministers can and should be mission. It is not a question of switching from ministry to mission mode, but of living out a life of mission in all forms of ministry. Lay Ministers do indeed have special opportunities to do this, but in this they should also be role-models of mission to other Christians. This point completes the loop back to the first idea of Lay Ministers enabling others rather than just doing the work. Not only should they draw other Christians into ministry, they should encourage them into a ministry that is distinctively mission-shaped.

The management of Lay Ministers

The term 'management' is taken in a completely positive sense. There need be no confusion with 'leadership' in this specific context, even though there has been significant dispute between the two terms when it comes to the work of the clergy, both in the role they play within a local church (is it to manage or to lead, and what is the difference?) and in the role of the Bishop or Moderator as pastor-in-chief.

Management here is taken to mean a continuous process concerned with developing the person being managed to their full potential so that they can give of their very best to their responsibilities both for their own benefit and for the benefit of the church or ministry in question. It is concerned with their understanding of the role, their skill level and training, their performance and their overall well-being (emotionally, spiritually, and so on). It involves, where appropriate, challenge, praise, encouragement, reprimand, discipline. This can all apply to a volunteer just as much as to a contracted and remunerated worker.

Currently any 'management' of Lay Ministers will depend to a large extent on the skill and care given to this task by their (ordained) Minister and on the system in operation within the

denomination. From this writer's experience in visiting and examining many churches, few Ministers appear to offer effective management to their Lay Ministers in the sense of the term given above. This is probably because most clergy have been trained as solo workers, are not managed themselves as such, do not have the time to do this properly and are in any case unhappy to do it for others. Any annual review of a written agreement can, on its own, hardly be termed 'management'.⁶

So how does this differ from other volunteers? If in its poor quality, then not a great deal. There may sometimes be greater provision of training if the Lay Minister wishes to take it up, and in some structures a formal agreement which should be reviewed annually. Some churches will have many of their volunteers in teams, and

some teams can be managed very well. One example might be a formal arrangement in larger churches where small group leaders are placed in clusters and cluster-leaders appointed. But the situation is haphazard with so much depending on the person in charge of the team or the climate for care and development set within the church. The concept of managing volunteers has simply not been developed in most churches. The Methodists have more good practice principles than most denominations in this field. And so:

Lay Minister Proposal 3:

There should be a shift to tighter management discipline as a role model

The desire should be that the management of both Lay Ministers and of other volunteers should both be of a high quality. What differences there might be should be in order, in that a Lay Minister may well be an accredited worker and so should expect to have a tougher discipline than other volunteers.

The idea that church members cannot be managed because they are working 'voluntarily' needs to be challenged. Christians are called to be disciples, and their Lord calls for requirements that go far beyond what would normally be expected of a so-called volunteer.

If management is defined as it has been above, and is seen as thoroughly good, and if people can be found who can manage to this level of excellence (and that, in the Church, is sadly a tall order), then the proposal is that both the time and the skill invested in this art for Lay Ministers should be increased.

If there is a shift in thinking to Lay Ministers being appointed not so much to do ministry but to enable and train others and if, further, this is all mission-centred, then it makes sense for Lay Ministers to be under discipline for such an important role. They need every aspect of the definition of management suggested above and should be willing to receive it, both for their own benefit and as role models to every church worker. By taking a lead in this they can demonstrate that accountability and review for volunteers are indeed Christian concepts within a model of discipleship.

The problem then arises, who should undertake such management? The Minister may have neither time nor inclination to do such a thing, but he or she cannot completely divest themselves of such a responsibility. Ideas worth exploring would include the following.

- The Lay Minister's church appoints a group of perhaps three (including the

Minister) who are given this responsibility. Management does not have to come from up the chain, and in any case the idea of 'chain' is not always appropriate in a volunteer and a church setting.

- Where there is more than one Lay Minister in a parish, there might be an element of peer-group management in addition to the above.
- The denomination or area or diocese might appoint one or two external managers for each Lay Minister. Someone skilled in management from outside the specific local church can ask tougher questions and see things in a fresh light.
- The answer may well be a combination of all these ideas, with a small group including at least one external member.

What might such management include? Here are some ideas.

- A detailed annual review to assess the bigger picture proposed in this article: how far the Lay Minister's work is developing other people into ministry, how effective they are in 'being mission' in all they do.
- Regular assessment of sermons, the leading of services and other areas of ministry with the aim of continual improvement.
- A programme of training, not just continuing ministerial development but in-house training, attendance at external courses, etc.
- Assessment of and help with time-management, self-discipline, team-working, overcoming personality short-comings, spiritual development, etc.
- The group's role to include a prayerful and genuine concern to see the Lay Minister develop as both a person and as a minister. There would be regular contact with the person concerned, encouragement and reprimand where necessary, advice on redeployment from time to time, and challenges to fresh initiatives.
- Recommendations and encouragement for deployment to other churches when appropriate, and especially for mission purposes.
- This would mean that Lay Ministers would need to have a 'volunteer contract' with expectations stated on both sides. Methodists are, by and large, more used to this idea than other denominations.

Implications of these new approaches

If the primary role of a Lay Minister is to develop away from 'doing' ministry to enabling others' discipleship (with all that that implies in a missiological context and with a more disciplined approach to management), what differences might this mean in practice?

It does not mean that Lay Ministers would have to do anything particularly different from now, with the exception of adding in a valid training element to their work. But it does mean a major shift in thinking and attitude and this would need to be communicated very clearly. It would also have profound implications for selection and training (topics not dealt with here). Consider three types of Lay Minister.

Gifted preachers

Those who are specially gifted in teaching the Bible would continue to be used as preachers at services, leaders of small groups and speakers at events. But their aim would be refocused to challenge Christians to live as disciples and to express that discipleship in service both inside the church and, especially, in the mission context of the wider community. The Lay Minister's test for success would not be to be known as a good speaker but to see hearers growing in their faith and applying that faith in practical witness and service at work, at school, at home and in local communities – as well as in their church.

Members of the congregation would be learning what it means to 'follow' Christ and to be Good News in all these various settings. Linked with the Lay Minister's work of teaching would be practical training for church members: developing other speakers but also offering training in whatever fields the Reader was qualified in. This might be leading prayers, running children's work, witnessing to faith in the workplace or bringing a Christian influence into local schools, to give but a few examples.

Such Lay Ministers might also be seen as the obvious leaders of Alpha and equivalent courses, the leaders of other events that link in with those not yet within the congregation, leaders of church plants and church grafts, and other forms of practical outreach. Standards should grow through a thorough management process.

Gifted pastors

Those who see a main part of their ministry in visiting the sick, taking funerals or counselling, would continue to do so. But there would be a renewed focus, always in a sensitive and appropriate way for those concerned, at helping people come to a place where they can receive

from God and then move on either in discipleship or towards Christian faith. The aim would not just be to 'take a good funeral' or 'be a good visitor' but to enable others to come towards faith in God as healer from their sickness, grief or pain. People in need are often more open to God than at other times and the Lay Minister would seek to bring Good News to such people with love and sensitivity. Of course, this should not be that different from present work in this field but this idea of witness would now be central to their work. There might also be a more obvious expectation of deployment outside their own church.

It would also become normal for a Lay Minister to be involved in activities that developed practical skills in church members as part of their pastoring. The idea of training pastoral teams would now be central to the office. Some would be gifted trainers themselves. Others would co-ordinate training within a church. But all would be seeking and praying for the church to become an army of workers, actively putting everyone's Christian faith into practice and growing in the faith as a result.

Gifted pioneers

There is no reason why some Lay Ministers should not continue to specialise as hospital chaplains or as pioneers of 'fresh expressions'. But the new emphasis would be on building teams of people to work with them, training such teams and helping them to develop skills and confidence. Mission would be a key component within all this.

Some might also become the equivalent of 'apostles' in Ephesians 4, rarely used in their home church but widely used elsewhere. This would specially apply to church grafts, where a Lay Minister moves from their home church with a small team of others to bring new life to a dying or impoverished church. As team leader the idea of enabling others in ministry would be central in this and the whole focus of this strategy would be mission.

In fact it could come to the point where the first thing that people associated with Lay Ministers was not so much preaching and liturgy but the idea of leading innovative teams to spearhead mission, whether in a hospital, residential homes, other churches, or in community halls and pubs.

Conclusion

It is important for Lay Ministers to know that their work and their office is valued. Many will have spent considerable effort and time in their training, not to mention the emotional energy involved in going through the selection process. If they then have doubts about the distinctiveness of their role in a culture of increasing diversification of ministry, they will lack the assurance that is so necessary for an up-front role.

But at the same time the culture of today is one of constant and rapid change. While Lay Ministers must preach the unchanging gospel and lead people in the worship of an unchanging God, the means they use need to serve a changing world. The church environment they work within can no longer stand still.

If church structures are seen in terms of hierarchy (with Lay Ministers coming somewhere between clergy and people), then that is a false foundation on which to build. If the Lay Minister can see the privilege of leading people to their Lord and of empowering others to do the same, that is a ministry of true satisfaction.

But what of an idea within Anglicanism that Readers, their Lay Ministers, might be ordained to a permanent diaconate?

Such a development would be a dangerous move for it would confuse the position. First, to ordain Lay Ministers (the nice distinction of being a permanent deacon would no doubt be lost on most church members) would be to distance them from other lay members and to make them appear like other locally ordained clergy. One of the advantages of being a lay office is that in their proposed role of mobilising the congregation for ministry they are 'ordinary' members of that congregation though specially authorised. As lay people they would not be seen by outsiders as 'professional' church workers whose job it is to lead the church, but more as representatives of all church members seeking to be the actively deployed body of Christ. This is a position to be cherished, not abandoned.

Secondly, this move sounds suspiciously like a hierarchical view of church life. This unhelpful approach must be resisted. It seems to be saying that if Lay Ministers seem to be unfulfilled in their ministry, give them new status! The whole point negates the Ephesians 4 idea of a holistic approach to the whole body of Christ and their ministry. It would send all the wrong signals.

Thirdly, and this will be a distinctively Anglican issue, the ideas of an Anglican diaconate and the biblical diaconate (as in the Pastoral Epistles, for example) do not neatly match. Deacons seemed to serve more practical ministries, and Elders governed and led the church by teaching. But Readers teach, and at present Anglican deacons move on to be priests. To ordain Readers would add to the confusion. The 2009 (revised) report *Reader upbeat* seems to agree with this line of thought (para 3.16.3).

But as lay people, there needs to be a shift in everyone's thinking so that the primary ministry of a Lay Minister comes to be associated with enabling everyone in a local congregation to become an active minister within a missionary context that permeates all of church life.

It then follows that Lay Ministers need to be managed much more thoroughly and professionally than at present, both to develop their own work to the highest order but also to act as role-models to all church members of the need for disciples to be under discipline.

Who will grasp these issues?

Footnotes

Note that Nos. 3 onwards are taken from a Church of England context.

1 The word 'lay' is used in this article for those not ordained. This is its popular understanding, although the correct meaning of the term relates to all God's people, whether ordained or not.

2 The word 'volunteer' is sometimes used to signify someone who offers to undertake a task, rather than someone who is asked to take it on. This is not the main meaning assumed here. In addition, some argue that lay workers in churches do so as 'vocation' rather than as 'volunteers'.

- 3 Development in the ministry of Readers in the Church of England is at present under discussion, in particular through a General Synod debate in 2006 leading to the report, *Reader upbeat* published in a revised form in 2009. One recommendation (No. 18) is that the title 'Reader' (which certainly needs a rethink) is replaced by 'Licensed Lay Minister (Reader)'. Well, you decide what you make of that!
- There is a wide range of recommendations on vocation, gifting, training, deployment, collaborative ministry, support, function and discipline, most of which make good sense. In contrast, this article makes only three proposals and puts them in a rather more radical form than the recommendations in the report. It should however be noted that Recommendations 2 and 8 concern mission (see Proposal 2 in this article) and Recommendation 20 concerns review (though not proper management as proposed here).
- There are over 10,000 Readers in the Church of England. In 2018 York Diocese put forward a draft scheme to enable Readers to be ordained as deacons (an idea strongly resisted by this author).
- (*Reader upbeat: revised report*, Ministry Division of the Archbishops' Council, 2009)
- Some of the issues listed in this case study are discussed in *Reader ministry explored* by Cathy Rowling and Paula Gooder, SPCK, 2009.
- 4 A similar idea was developed by Bishop Graham Dow when he addressed the Church of England's Central Readers Council in March 2004 (*The Reader* vol 101/3). He stated: "The best way is for those in authorised positions, such as Readers, to see themselves as enablers of the growth of similar ministry in others not yet authorised, and not, as often happens, as those who alone should practise the ministry".
- This article simply extends this argument further so that the primary role of the Lay Minister is not so much to raise up other Lay Ministers (though it should certainly include this) but that the ministry should raise up all kinds of ministry, most of which would remain within the local church. To be fair to Bishop Dow, he went on to say that, "The release and

extension of the ministry of Christ is the overarching aim".

On a similar point, the report *Reader upbeat* (see footnote 3) has a helpful annex by John Pritchard, Bishop of Oxford on the Reader as lay educator.

- 5 Paul Avis has written that, "The Church of England is seeking to reinvent itself as a missionary church. To have credibility, all ministries must be shaped by mission. It would be excellent if Readers were at the forefront of this development." He asks, "Can Readers generally, who give so much to the Church, rise to the challenge of allowing their ministry to be reshaped by mission in a much more explicit way?" (*The Reader* vol 103/4) Tina Upton, a Reader in Chester Diocese, made a similar point in vol 102/3.
- 6 In the Church of England the Bishops' Regulations stipulate that there should be a formal, in-depth review of ministry every three to five years, paying attention to areas of fulfilment and satisfaction, noting opportunities for expansion of ministry or redeployment, and needs for refreshment or retraining. (Para 5.4 of *Bishops' Regulations for Reader Ministry*, Ministry Division of the Archbishops' Council, 2000.)
- But today, the situation would seem to be "patchy", according to Canon Peter Garner who has researched the whole area. A few dioceses do much, most do little, but take-up is poor in all. (*The Reader* vol 103/1)
- Carolyn Headley makes a similar point, even though she does not include every area of management. "If the high ideals of Reader ministry are to be maintained, then a method of review, appraisal and opportunities for developing and learning, is important." She links appraisal with re-licensing and states that "this can only happen when there is a real option to re-license, and this presupposes that it must be possible to withhold a licence. Such a system is obviously very unpopular and hurtful, but if Readership is to be seen as a role-model or 'flag-ship' for lay ministry, then it must be of the highest possible standard." (Page 28 of *Readers and Worship in the Church of England*, Grove Books (W115) new edition 2001.)

This article is available at <https://www.john-truscott.co.uk/Resources/Articles> hen A26. See also items in the Resources section of the website such as Training Notes T17, *Suggested questions for an annual review*, and TN31, *Affirming volunteers*. Also Article A32, *Be creative as a line manager* (though written within a paid staff context) and A43, *Every member on active service*.

Contact John if you would like to enquire about the possibility of consultancy or a training event on aspects of every-member ministry.

Cartoons are by Micki Hounslow for filing categories of Leadership, Management, Structures, Planning, Communication, Administration. File A26 under Structures with a link to Management.

John Truscott, 69 Sandridge Road, St Albans, AL1 4AG

Tel: 01727 832176

Email: john@john-truscott.co.uk

Web: <https://www.john-truscott.co.uk>