

READERS - WHO NEEDS THEM?

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Ministers are ordained. Deacons are commissioned. Readers are set apart. Except that often they feel that, like a farmer's field which is expected to produce nothing, they have been set aside. I was warned when responsibility for Readers was first added to my job remit three years ago that they were often an angry bunch - angry because they are seldom used, angry because they feel ignored by their presbyteries, angry because they are not sure that they are really wanted at all.

I believe that the Church does need Readers. But first it needs to escape from the baleful effects of some of the history of the Readership, while perhaps learning from that history some of the more dynamic possibilities for the future.

One part of the history is that the Readership has been an expedient for emergencies. Now there's nothing wrong in being an expedient for emergencies - fire brigades do quite nicely on it - but, as fire brigades have been discovering recently in the face of government cuts, it does tend to leave you a bit vulnerable.

Readers were introduced into the Kirk at the Reforming Assembly of 1560. The Assembly was faced with a dilemma. It needed to put reformed ministers into local parishes as quickly as possible. Some existing parish

priests were now more or less “reformed” and more or less well educated, and could be trusted to become ministers. Others were not.

Readers were part of the solution. They were a second best to be used until a full slate of ministers was available. The term “Reader” meant what it said. Readers read. Effectively, there were two kinds of Reader. Some simply read the service from the Book of Common Order, so that at least a service in the proper Reformed form took place. Other Readers were recognised in addition as being competent to exhort, or preach. They lived and worked in the one parish; they were certainly not the providers of pulpit supply, like many Readers today. Within 14 years, there were 700 Readers working in the parishes.

In 1580, however, the General Assembly - despite the fact that it still could not furnish a minister for every parish - decided that the Reader’s office was “no ordinary office within the Kirk of God” - and after 1581 no more were appointed. Those already working did, it seems, often continue in office for many more years - General Assembly deliverances were even less likely to be carried out then than they are now - but by the end of the first two decades of the next century, the office had disappeared. It therefore existed for barely half a century, and only as an emergency provision to cope with an unsatisfactory situation.

When the Readership was restored in 1918, it was again in response to an emergency. It was re-created by a General Assembly facing an acute shortage of ministers during wartime. It was again an expedient to make it

possible to keep services going. Claimed to be a re-introduction of the Readership of the Reformation era, in reality it was modelled much more on the Church of England Lay Readership, which had been introduced in 1866. It was seen only as a temporary measure for a five year period and was hedged about with restrictions. Readers could only be used when no minister or probationer was available. Although the office was given a reprieve and became permanently established, it remained the rule for almost half a century that Readers were to be used only as a last resort. No doubt there were some Readers whom one wouldn't want to use even as that, but its not surprising if it gave the Readership a bit of a complex.

So one negative bit of history that Readers carry round their necks is the idea that they are an unfortunate necessity to help cope with emergencies, but "no ordinary office within the Kirk of God."

A second historical albatross has been an association of the Readership with under educated, slightly unreliable people, who weren't "good enough" to be ministers, or alternatively were still climbing the ladder to make the ministerial grade. You can see it at the Reformation. Many of the Reformation Readers were former clergy or religious in the old order - this was particularly true in areas where the bishop had gone over to the Reformation and taken many of his clergy with him - who weren't sufficiently learned or reliably enough "reformed" to be admitted as a minister, but were nonetheless willing to serve the new order. Such Readers would continue to receive a stipend, and might

even live in the manse (poor as it probably was). In effect, they were second class ministers.

Some showed distinctly Vicar of Bray like tendencies. William Tefler, for instance, former vicar of Cruggleton became a reader in 1562 but was, twenty years later, convicted of saying the Roman mass. Others would raise eyebrows if their application came before the present Readers Committee. John Anderson was compelled by the Kirk Session of St Andrews to marry his mistress, and was then appointed a Reader. He had, of course, been supposedly celibate as a Catholic priest.

Others of the new Readers were local laity, chosen from amongst those who were able to read. Sometimes, it seems this could be a provisional stage on the way to full recognition as a minister.

When the Readership was restored in 1918, those appointed as Readers were asked to do no training - they simply had to satisfy their presbytery that they could preach. A small committee would come and listen to them, and that was it. Training was not regulated until 1974, and even after that was very unevenly operated by the different presbyteries. If we are honest, we know that a lot of people avoided using Readers simply because too many of them were no good at the job. It was not until 1992 that Readers all began to be trained on a common course, and not until this year that the training begins to lead to a university award - a Certificate of Higher Education in Church Studies.

And just as, at the Reformation, the Readership was in some ways a consolation prize for those who couldn't

make it into the ministry, so presbyteries still sometimes treat it that way today. Of course there *are* some who are gifted for the Readership and *not* gifted for the ordained ministry, but too often it is offered to people as a way of being kind when they fail to get through selection school.

So that's a second piece of historical baggage, which weighs down the Readership and creates the kind of inferiority complex which too often results in unhelpful anticlericalism - the kind of anticlericalism which makes me extremely glad that I'm a layman!

A third concerns the relationship of this ministry of the Word with the sacraments.

It is possible to read the history of ministry as the slow absorption of a variety of ministries into the one dominant ministry of Word and Sacrament - a process many of us are now busily trying to reverse. In the early centuries, when ministry, especially liturgical ministry, was seen more as a team affair, the office of Reader or lector was distinct. In time it was regularised as one of the minor orders of the clergy, but was then absorbed into the sacramental priesthood. By the time of the Reformation it was held in the Catholic West as a distinctive office only for a brief while by candidates for the priesthood - and in the Eastern Church only for a few minutes, as in the one ordination service the candidate was admitted in turn into a series of minor orders before being ordained priest.

When in 1581 the Reformation Readership was abolished, it was decided that those who already were

Readers should either be dismissed or be ordained ministers. Again, the office of Reader had been absorbed or displaced by the one “proper” ministry of Word and Sacrament. Interestingly, however, for a brief while some Readers had been authorised to conduct the *sacrament* of baptism. In 1572 the Convention of Leith permitted Readers, if found qualified, both to marry and baptise. Four years later - presumably to avoid the separation of Word and Sacrament - the permission was clearly limited to those who could exhort, or preach.

The issue came up again in another way in 1977, when it was tackled by the Committee of Forty. The Committee found itself embarrassed by the existence of Readers. Having described the Reader’s role, they went on to say:

“We find it anomalous that a man or woman may be licensed to preach the Word to God’s people, without any expectation that he or she may subsequently be given authority to administer the sacraments in signal fulfilment of that Word. We hold that authority to preach the Word should not be separated from authority to administer the sacraments.”

They followed this up, however, not by concluding that Readers should therefore be authorised to administer sacraments, but by proposing *another* spare-time ministry of Word and Sacrament - the Auxiliary Ministry, as it is now known - which seems to have been intended in the long run to supersede the Readership.

So Readers serve in a Church which has inherited ambiguous feelings about the whole concept of a ministry of the Word which does not also include a

ministry of the sacraments. Who needs Readers? Does a Church with a history of seeing them as a temporary expedient for emergencies, a second class or perhaps even second rate ministry, and a ministry whose whole nature is theologically suspect, does such a Church need them at all?

I believe it does. In fact, I think the very negative bits of history can in fact be re-interpreted to produce a positive, liberating picture for the future.

The “emergency” nature of the Readership has been felt as negative. Reinterpreted, it suggests that the Readership is by its nature a flexible ministry, bending and shaping to meet the needs of the day. Now we are now facing a different kind of emergency. In the sixteenth century and in 1918, Readers filled a gap until there could be a stipendiary minister in every parish. We know that in the future there cannot be a stipendiary minister in every parish. I believe very firmly that it is both a missionary and liturgical imperative that there should be a worshipping community at the heart of every natural community, but if we tie the presence of a congregation to the ability of the Church to provide a stipendiary minister, we shall be forced to withdraw from more and more communities. We shall join the doctor and the school in their exit from the village, for instance, but we shall be removing a kind of liturgical life-spirit which is far more important even than either of them.

So we need, not as a temporary expedient but as a long-term strategy, people other than the stipendiary ministry to work *with* ministers in sustaining the worshipping

life of congregations up and down the land. And it seems to me that Readers, rather than Auxiliary Ministers, are better able to provide this. The Church has not been comfortable with the auxiliary ministry, not least, I think, because it is inevitably seen *de facto* as a second class ministry of word and sacrament in a Church where any suggestion of an inequality of such ministers sets the presbyterian nerves a-jangle. Auxiliary ministers are few, and few are the presbyteries who promote them. The Readership has the advantage of *not* being the ministry of Word and Sacrament, and therefore clearly a different - perhaps less threatening - role.

Second, I think the history of the Readership allows us the possibility to rethink what we mean by emphasising the unity of word and sacrament in the ministry. The Church has been right to be cautious of a ministry of the word detached from any sacramental role or community. But I would argue for a concept of team, rather than individual ministry as the locus for the unity of word and sacrament, and within that it is quite possible for a ministry primarily of the word to exist. Within a team, the unity of word and sacrament is *modelled* in the Minister, but other members of the team do not all need to engage in both. So I would argue that there is nothing inherently wrong in a ministry authorised to preach the word but not administer the sacraments, provided it is part of a team ministry which as a team clearly unites the two.

The emphasis on “team” is vitally important. I do not see a return to the sixteenth century solitary reader in pastoral charge, for there word and sacrament were

disunited. Equally I am profoundly unhappy with a peripatetic ministry where the one who preaches does not share in any way in the sacramental life of the congregation, and does not preach out of pastoral engagement with it. We need to move ever further away from the concept of pulpit supply, or of the Readership as a solitary ministry, towards a picture of Readers working as part of a team ministry led by a minister, in either a single charge or a linkage, focusing on the ministry of the word, but engaging in the life of the congregation.

As such they will make it possible to run the large extended linkages which are the inevitable future. As such, too, they can help provide the evangelical ministry of worship in schools and homes for the elderly and in sharing the load of parish funerals and in other aspects of a large single-charge parish.

Readers themselves are often keen to be allowed to administer the sacraments. I would not favour any such blanket authority, since it would confuse their role in relationship to the ministry of word and sacrament. I would especially not favour it while they are peripatetic, for I am certain that sacraments ought to be administered by one who is at the heart of the continuing life of the congregation. But because I regard the sacraments as so vital to the life of a Christian community, I would be prepared to argue that a Reader working in a charge as part of a team ministry - and only such a Reader, not one providing pulpit supply - might, when pastoral strategy requires it, be authorised by presbytery to administer the sacraments. The context would be the place of the Reader in the

team, which as a team united word and sacrament, and in need could see the Reader as one who might for the time being administer the sacraments.

Third, the tendency of the Readership in history to disappear might be reinterpreted as seeing Readers as those part of whose task is to work themselves out of a job. We need to emphasise in the Readership as in other ministries that ministry is less about doing than it is about enabling others to do. I was saddened at a Readers' conference last year to hear Readers who had spent some time arguing they should be allowed to do a number of things that currently only ministers can do go straight on to argue that elders should not be allowed to do what currently only Readers can do. I do not see the Reader as one who jealously guards the right to mount the pulpit steps. I see him or her as one whose role it is to help others participate in worship - to share, for instance, in enabling elders to take a growing role in the leadership of worship in their congregations.

And fourth, all of this suggests that we must escape from any lingering feeling that the Readership needs little training and limited competence. Perhaps that negative piece of history can be turned round to say that the Readership should model those who always know they have more to learn. With tongue in cheek, I wonder whether it is significant that Readers are required by Act of Assembly to undertake regular in-service training, while ministers are not. Readers need enough knowledge of the Bible and the theological tradition to be able to engage in the theological reflection which feeds effective preaching. They need good skills in worship and preaching - the test at the end

of a Reader's training is no longer "could you put up with hearing this person occasionally?" but rather "could you with profit hear this person regularly, and find your life in Christ nourished by the worship they lead?". They need enabling skills. And they need to avoid the temptation to become semi-clerical, learning instead to root their preaching and worship in the realities of their secular lives.

All this is already beginning to happen. In 1992, the General Assembly passed an Act which did what the Assembly in 1956 refused to do and that in 1977 failed to do - permit the development of the Readership as a regular element within parish ministry, by authorising the attachment of Readers to charges. A good two thirds of all the Readers we have trained since then have been so attached by their presbyteries when they finish their course. In some presbyteries, there is a deliberate plan to attach a Reader to each charge, and ministers are queuing up for the next one to come off the production line. In others, Readers are grouped in twos or threes with a minister who has a number of linked parishes, and together they plan and sustain weekly worship. At the very least, it saves the minister the 15 minute dash from one service to the next. We are looking too at how in island communities a Reader might be the regularly present face of ministry, working under supervision from a minister across the water. In several cases Readers are attached to their *own* congregations, becoming a true example of a ministry growing up from within. The Readership is changing fast. It may even come to be regarded as an "ordinary office within the kirk of God".

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