

## Thinking about the Call to Ordained Ministry

St James' Connections, Aug-Sept 2020

A Magazine of St James' King Street, Sydney

Soon after taking up my role as Bishop of Grafton I found that Anglicans on the North Coast like to have Q&A sessions with their Bishop over Morning Tea following Sunday worship. One of the most popular questions seems to be "Can you tell us about your call to ministry?" Hearing about how someone has responded to the call of God in their lives can tell us quite a bit about the person, their Christian journey, their story. While I don't think my story is particularly remarkable, I hope that in some small way it might help others reflect on their own call.

God calls everyone to serve, bringing the love of God into people's lives and reflecting Jesus' servant ministry to others. Bishop John Pritchard writes that in this way, vocation is a broad concept, involving a conviction about a choice or direction of travel in any person's ministry as a Christian. Ordained ministry is only one very specific route. In one sense then, going beyond vocation as simply a personal encounter and focusing on the vocation of communities can help everyone explore their call in the context of the Christian community's wider call. This can help make the nature of the call to Ordained Ministry clearer. In this regard, Roman Catholic theologian Theresa Latini encourages all Christian communities to "... talk about, model and support people in discovering and living into a sense of God's calling for their lives". A culture of vocation such as this urges us individually and collectively to address the broader vocational questions of who God is calling us to be. Recent research in the UK and the USA indicates that a church culture where questions like these are shared, and where vocational exploration is openly encouraged, rather than simply responded to and tested, is a church where more people come forward seeking to explore the possibility of training for Ordained Ministry.

While the picture is a complex one it is fair to say that, in Western countries generally, the number of people coming forward for ordination has declined since the 1970s. The Anglican experience in Australia conforms to this trend. A typical picture in many Australian dioceses includes an ageing clergy workforce and a difficulty in attracting and retaining ordination candidates.

On the positive side, this decline in the number of people coming forward to train for Ordination has triggered a renewed interest in the topic of vocation which has itself resulted in research and action.

Of interest here is the discussion about vocation and vocational formation that has been taking place over the last decade in North America. Lilly Endowment grants totalling over US\$200 million to eighty-eight liberal arts colleges and universities have sought to stimulate theological exploration of vocation amongst tertiary students and to encourage them to discover their God-given callings to lay and ordained ministry. The impetus for this was a concern on the part of the Lilly Endowment's Religion Division about continuing downward trends in people offering for full time ministry in the Roman Catholic and Protestant denominations in the USA. Not surprisingly, given the substantial funding involved, an enormous number of programs and projects were initiated by the recipient institutions. Most importantly, this impetus has created environments for exploring the notion of call and vocation in people's lives. In many cases this re-shaped and renewed the cultures of the participating institutions.

A healthy amount of Social Media activity is also now devoted to call and vocation. On Twitter, for example, some of the better ones include the House of Vocation (@houseofvocation), CofE Birmingham Vocations (@BhamVocations), Vocations Leeds CofE (@VocationsLeeds) and Anglican

Vocations (@VocationSunday). Many dioceses also have their own dedicated vocations Website and YouTube Channel. Worthy of particular mention is the Washington Institute for Faith, Vocation and Culture ([washingtoninst.org](http://washingtoninst.org) and @washingtoninst). This is a high quality resource that works from the premise that faith shapes vocation and vocation shapes culture. This online activity is evidence that the task of stimulating thinking and action in relation to vocation is increasingly seen as the task of whole Christian communities, not just the task of Bishops, diocesan vocations staff and individual Christians.

Recent research on this topic amongst Anglicans in the UK and Australia has produced some practical advice. Dioceses that intentionally devote resources to vocations events and campaigns, over and above the regular work of discernment and selection, tend to have a proportionately higher number of enquirers. These dioceses promote Ordained Ministry as an attractive and viable option, they assume that God is actually calling people, and make it normal, easy and comfortable to talk about vocation. It helps if diocesan vocations staff are encouraging, friendly and welcoming and if websites are attractive, fresh and user-friendly. We need good role models who speak positively about the ordained life.

In Australia, one of our challenges is that the theological and geographical isolation of dioceses has prevented a joined-up approach to vocations work. Each diocese has its own approach to recruitment and selection. In the past there has been little sharing of insights, programs and good practice in these areas. On returning to Australia after many years working as a Vocations Adviser in the Church of England, where vocational discernment and selection is part of a national strategy, I found our approach frustrating to say the least. With the help of some like-minded clergy and lay people, and with the Primate's blessing, the Network of Anglican Theological Educators (NATE) was formed. Our first meeting was held in Melbourne in July 2017. NATE is now recognised as an 'official' network of the Anglican Church of Australia. It brings together vocations staff (such as Directors of Ordinands), Examining Chaplains, Consultant Psychologists, Ministry Development Officers, Formation staff, Theological Educators and Bishops from Anglican Dioceses around Australia. The aim of the Network is to share resources, information, good practice and insights in relation to discernment, formation and training for ministry and to establish connections and relationships between people working in these fields.

Personally I'm excited by the recent resurgence of interest in fostering vocations to the Ordained Ministry and to authorised Lay Ministry. I know that the St James' Institute is interested in this topic and I welcome any contributions that might be made. It's clear that we need to collaborate and to be proactive if we are going to see the number of vocations grow. In the end, we all have the common goal of enabling Christians to uncover their unique calling to fulfil God's plan for their lives.

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*July 2020*

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