

I count it a tremendous privilege to be invited to become Chair of the Central Readers' Council of the Church of England, not least because (as I wrote in the last edition of The Reader magazine) my mother has been a Reader for many years and my father-in-law served for more than 30 years as a Reader. So I know something of both the joys, and the challenges of this very particular form of lay ministry in God's church.

I am very grateful to my predecessor as Chair of CRC Bishop Robert Paterson for his tireless work in support of Readers – and to the other members of CRC who have welcomed me so warmly.

Readers are extraordinary gift to God's church. It was very good to be part of last year's celebrations and to give thanks to God for 150 of modern Readers' ministry – both at All Souls Langham Place, and at De Montfort Hall in Leicester. But now is the time to look forward to discern where God is calling us, and I count it an honour to be asked to help with that task.

So the first thing to say very clearly is that reports of the death of CRC have been greatly exaggerated! Not only is the Council alive and well, but I detect real excitement about future possibilities. I know some within the Church of England have questioned the need for Readers /LLMs to have their own national body, but with 8000 willing volunteers, involved in everything from pioneering ministry among children and young people, to leading services in small rural villages, to training small group leaders in large urban churches, to preaching and teaching and theological education – Readers are the unsung heroes of the church, the cogs without which the machine would grind to a halt, the cement without which the building would collapse. The church ignores the well-being of Readers at its peril. And I am very pleased that today will show that we are not short of volunteers prepared to serve the Central Readers Council, and in so doing serve the Readers of every diocese.

That said, the context in which CRC is working is changing rapidly and we will need to re-examine it's structures and it's ways of working. This year's AGM is an opportunity to explore this together. By next year, we will need to return with some serious proposals for change.

So let me take a moment to briefly explore our changing context.

### **1. The mission context**

The Church of England faces significant challenges as we look ahead in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century.



We are called to become once again a Church in mission and to pray and work for the re-evangelisation of our nation.

Throughout the past century, church attendance and the influence of Christian faith in the lives of individuals and communities have been in rapid decline across much of Western Europe. It is important to understand that the church has not in itself caused these changes: we are caught up in much larger movements. And the appropriate response is neither a sense of failure nor of blaming one another for the situation we find ourselves in but rather an enquiring and questioning interest in what these changes mean for the church and its mission.

A key response to the changes around us has been the steady realization that we are now in a new kind of mission context, that much of our nation needs to be re-evangelised and that we need to shape our common life and ministry more intentionally as a church in mission. Our understanding and structures of ministry in the Church of England have evolved for hundreds of years with an emphasis on pastoral ministry: sustaining communities of Christian people in a stable context. As social bonds and communities have become less stable over the past century, there has been a need to catch again a vision of God's mission to the whole of our society. The full implications of that vision for our structures of ministry have still to be grasped and will form a major part of the process of re-imagining the future lay and ordained ministry in general, and the future of Reader ministry in particular.

## 2. Baptism and ministry

A second major movement of the last century, again shared across all churches, has been a recovery of the theology of baptism. Every baptized Christian is called to live out their life as a disciple of Jesus Christ and to serve according to their gifts and vocation. The Church must not and cannot be divided between the few who are called to serve and the many who are not.



Context 2: The whole baptised people of God

It is therefore the whole baptized people of God (the laos) who are called to a life of discipleship and service. This is the fundamental starting point for re-imagining all ministry in our own generation. This is the key to the Church of England rediscovering the God-given resources we need to ensure there is a growing and sustainable Christian presence in every community.

In the economy of God's calling, certain ministries need to be prioritized in the life of the

Church at particular times. So, in thinking afresh about ministry in God's church, we are not called to invent something new but rather to discern particular priorities in ministry and bring them to the front and centre of our life again. At this moment in our history, I suspect this is about the whole baptised people of God rediscovering their many and different vocations.

### 3. Discipleship and ministry

The terms discipleship and ministry are closely related but not identical. Both terms are used generously in the New Testament. A disciple is a learner: someone who is caught up in a continual process of formation of character and lifestyle in the pattern of Jesus Christ. At the centre of discipleship is the offering of our whole life to God.



The term "ministry" has a dual meaning. It means loving service to others and can therefore be used of any act of service. The major part of the ministry exercised by Christian disciples is hidden from public view and consists of acts of love, kindness, witness and transformation in home, workplace, church and community. Like a root system in a forest, a substantial part of the ministry of the Church of England is below the surface, deeply embedded and interwoven into the life of parishes, communities and institutions. It needs no authorization beyond the mutual encouragement of Christian people.

However the term "ministry" also carries the meaning of "commission". Authority is given by the community to carry out a particular ministry on behalf of the local church or the whole church. It is absolutely right to speak of every member ministry in that every person who makes up the Body of Christ is called to service in Church and in the wider community. However, the term minister is normally (and best) used for those who have been given a specific commission and authorization to serve in a variety of ways (for example as Readers).

This has two implications: firstly, those of us who have been commissioned for a particular ministry, need to be sure that our ministry is rooted in our discipleship. Discipleship is a life-long journey of learning and formation of character and if this isn't the foundation of our ministry as Readers or Bishops, then we have lost sight of our primary calling.

In practice, this means that the top priority for any minister are the spiritual disciplines or holy habits of discipleship: individual and corporate

Discipleship:  
Some holy habits: individual and corporate prayer and worship, study of the Bible, fellowship with other Christians, the breaking of bread, hospitality, generous giving, simple acts of kindness and service, making more disciples.

prayer and worship, study of the Bible, fellowship with other Christians, the breaking of bread, hospitality, generous giving, simple acts of kindness and service, making more disciples. I don't care whether you have been commissioned to be an archbishop or a pastoral worker, an evangelist or a Reader – discipleship has to come first. Ministry is discipleship focussed in a particular way.

I wrote in the last edition of The Reader magazine about Tanton Joe, the Reader I worked with in West Africa. He was a real character – not only in his fear of snakes, abandoning me in church when a snake appeared one time. But also because the only thing he wanted to do as a Reader was preach. He wasn't interested in anything else. So we ended up having lots of conversations about practising the holy habits and growing as a disciple. Forgive me for being blunt, but if we lose sight of our primary calling to be with Jesus as his disciples, then all else counts for very little.

In reimagining the role of CRC, I want to put discipleship front and central. We will of course, have to continue to do others things – offer advice to dioceses on licensing issues or discipline issues and so on, but the vast majority of our work will be focused on learning and formation, enabling Readers to be disciples who make disciples.

The second implication of this understanding of discipleship and ministry is that there is now a much wider variety of ministries in the Church of England. Until very recently, you were either ordained as a deacon, priest or bishop, or you were admitted and licensed as a Reader, there were very few other alternatives. Now we have a huge variety: from pastoral workers to evangelists, pioneers to children and youth workers, funeral celebrants, worship leaders, occasional preachers, and more seemingly being added year on year.



The recent Lay Ministries Working Group which Bishop Robert co-chaired with Des Scott of Church Army, set out to review these changes. The report has so far only gone to Ministry Council but we will be looking at it soon at CRC and I am already in discussion with Julian Hubbard and colleagues at Ministry Division about follow-up. There is a lot still to do to map this new landscape.

For Readers, this diversity of lay ministries could be seen as a great threat, particularly when it would appear that many younger people seem to be opting for these newer forms of authorized ministry rather than Reader/LLM ministry. However, I want to encourage us to see the opportunity this presents. In this new landscape, how is God calling us to refocus Reader ministry?

*I would not give a fig for the simplicity this side of complexity, but I would give my life for the simplicity on the other side of complexity.*

Oliver Wendell Holmes

I've always loved this Oliver Wendell Holmes quote: "I would not give a fig for the simplicity this side of complexity, but I would give my life for the simplicity on the other side of complexity." This is what we are working towards.

So is Reader ministry a generalist ministry – lay theologian, one who 'reads the things of God'

and 'reads contemporary society, both in local communities and with regard to the bigger issues of the day' to quote Cathy Rowling and Paula Gooder? Or are we being called, in the light of so many other focussed lay ministries, to a more focused ministry of, for example, teaching or catechising? I only ask the question at this stage, but we will need to work through the complexity and get to the point where we can articulate very clearly an answer to that question, particularly if we want younger people to discern a vocation to Reader or LLM ministry.

And once we have articulated a clear answer to that question, then I will want to focus the energy and resources of CRC towards supporting Readers in that ministry. I will at this stage simply flag up my own interest in exploring how we move from a position of heavily front-loading all our training to a position where theological reflection, coaching, mentoring and specialist training become the norm throughout the length of Reader ministry. Or to put it another way, how do we develop holy habits for Reader ministry – study of Scripture and theology, reflection on practices of team working, facilitation, conflict resolution and enabling others in ministry, specialist training a regular discipline not one off, and so on...

Reader Ministry  
Some holy habits: study of the Bible and theology, reflection on our practice of team working, facilitation, conflict resolution and enabling others in ministry, specialist training...



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And so finally, before I hand over to you for discussion and questions: later in our agenda we will be bringing some very minor alterations to CRC's constitution and regulations. The changes are basically to reflect what is already happening. But in the light of all I have said above, it

should be clear that we will need to undertake a root and branch review of the structures and work of CRC – that includes our financial model, our committees and our activities. So this is advance notice, that by this time next year, I would hope we will be returning, not only with clarity about purpose but also about structures.

So now some questions for discussion before you have an opportunity to feed back to me.

1. How is our mission context impacting the role of Readers / LLMs?
2. How is the recovery of baptism & discipleship as the foundation for ministry shaping the role of Readers?
3. How might CRC reshape it's work in the light of these changes?

+ Martyn Leicester

1<sup>st</sup> April 2017