The Reader: an exploration of the history and present place of Reader ministry in the Church of England


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Abstract

A substantial part of the Church of England ministry is provided by Readers, but little information is available about their past or present position in the church. This thesis addresses this absence of knowledge by the exploration of Reader history and its contemporary expression.

History is examined using primary and secondary sources. The contemporary place of the Reader is researched through a survey of diocesan Reader Officers and by a longitudinal study of student Readers. Interviews with Readers and clergy from varied backgrounds provide a check on my findings.

Reader ministry is identified as a resource used primarily in crises. When there is no obvious need, the church, unclear as to how to use Reader ministry, is ambivalent and expresses this in the uncertain place it accords to the Reader. I suggest that living in uncertainty is the natural environment for the church. From this I argue that the ambivalence of the church to Reader ministry may be a symptom of this uncertainty. The Reader therefore has to be trained for and function in an unpredictable context and the Reader's effective actualization of this role provided and provides an essential contribution to the ministry of the Church of England. I conclude that the Reader represents a trained and available ministerial resource able to work and live with uncertainty and to respond when specific needs arise. Consequently the Reader may be described as holding a unique and vital place in the Church of England, essential for its wellbeing and for its future ministry. This fresh understanding of Reader ministry provides an opportunity for a reassessment within the church of the place at present ascribed to Readers, together with the identification of appropriate education and training patterns.