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Course of Study: All Saints - Transforming Faith

Name of Designated Person authorising scanning: Caroline Hill

Title: Reader Ministry Explored

Name of Author: Cathy Rowling and Paula Gooder

Name of Publisher: SPCK

ISBN: 978-0-281-05981-2

Year: 2009

READER MINISTRY EXPLORED

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4

Discerning a call to Reader ministry

Vocation in the Bible

One of the essential characteristics of God is that he calls. Throughout the Bible, time and time again we find God calling out to people, drawing them onwards into the life that he yearns for them to have.

The word 'call' in Hebrew is *qara* and is a very general word used to describe many different forms of communication for which we need a range of English words. It can be used for naming ('God called the light Day, and the darkness he called Night', Gen. 1.5), to refer to someone being summoned personally ('Then Moses said to the Israelites: See, the LORD has called by name Bezalel son of Uri son of Hur, of the tribe of Judah; he has filled him with divine spirit, with skill, intelligence, and knowledge in every kind of craft', Exod. 35.30–31), and even for crying out ('Out of the depths I cry to you, O LORD!', Ps. 130.1). This last example is particularly interesting, as it illustrates the way in which the same word in Hebrew is used for our crying out to God as for God's calling to us.

In essence, then, 'calling' is about communication. Just as we cry out to God in the hope that he will hear and respond, so God calls out to us in the hope that we will hear and respond. We can be sure, therefore, that God is calling out to each one of us, and just as we hope that our cries to God will result in his doing something for us, so also does God's call to us have within it an expectation of action. This pattern of calling and responding continues into the New Testament. One of the first things that Jesus did in his ministry was to call people to follow him, something which he continued to do throughout his life.

Calling, however, can take many different guises. Sometimes in the Bible people were called to a complete change of life. Abraham, for example, was called to leave everything behind and to journey onwards to a destination as yet undisclosed ('Go from your country

and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you', Gen. 12.1). In the same way, Jesus' first disciples were called to leave everything behind and to 'follow' with little indication of what this would entail ('And he said to them, "Follow me, and I will make you fish for people"', Mark 1.17). Both of these callings were to a completely different life.

Other people were called to a task, which, though life-changing at the time, was limited and came to an end. Take, for example, Jonah, a prophet who was called to proclaim doom to Nineveh (a call which he strenuously avoided as long as he could). Once his task was fulfilled, however – and the people of Nineveh had, much to Jonah's surprise, heard his message and repented – we can presume that Jonah went back to his normal life and continued doing what he was doing before. Again, the call to Isaiah the prophet, in Isaiah 6.1–11, seems to be to a short-term, not long-term, calling. Isaiah 6 records Isaiah's remarkable vision of God in the Temple, with the end of God's cloak (his train) filling the Temple and the seraphs flying around and crying out that God is holy. Within this, God asks who he can send and Isaiah volunteers: 'Here I am, send me.' The task God gives him is confusing but also very specific – he is to tell the people to keep listening but not to comprehend, to look but not understand. He appears to have an immediate task to prevent the people from understanding (why this is, still remains unclear), but which, once achieved, would probably have been over.

Both of these examples of short-term tasks involve prophets who were called to specific action as a part of their general calling of being a prophet. This is important, because it reminds us that 'vocation' occurs at many different levels. God calls us in ways that transform our whole lives and demand that we will never be the same again, but God also calls us to tasks (both great and small), which might disrupt what we are doing already, but ultimately fit into it.

What this means is that God is calling us at every point of our lives. Sometimes that call will be to a large life-transforming change of direction, but at other times (and more often) it will be to specific tasks that lie alongside other vocations we already have. In short, we do not have a God-given vocation but God-given *vocations*, and we must be constantly on the alert for the new ways in which God may be calling us.

You can be confident, therefore, that God *is* calling you and drawing you further on into your life of faith. What is less clear is what God is calling you to. It might be to an enormous life-changing vocation or it may be to a new vocation which lies alongside a number of other vocations to which you have already been called.

The word 'vocation' is used of more things than public ministry: people talk of a vocation to teach, for example, or to be a doctor. It is also used for a whole range of 'hands-on' skills and occupations for which 'vocational training' is given. Many of these reflect jobs within society that have an element of providing a service for others. This is a recognition of the fact that a sense of calling is something that exists in the whole of life and not just in church. Thus we all have multiple vocations which include being (for example to be in relationship as mother, father, sister, brother, daughter, son, friend, partner, etc.) as well as doing (for example to be a doctor, teacher, carer, minister . . .).

Of course, when we use the word vocation within the Church we often use it to refer to ministry, and not only that but to refer to a particular role within ministry (e.g. Reader, pastor, ordained minister). One of the challenges that people often encounter is how they know *what* it is that they are being called to by God.

Discerning God's call

Even within the Church of England people have different views about how to recognize when people are 'called' by God to public ministry within the Church.

- Some say that there must be a very real, personal sense of being called by God to undertake this particular task for, with and on behalf of the Church;
- others are more interested in whether someone has the skill or ability to 'do the job' required of a public minister, in this case a Reader.

There are of course a range of perspectives in between these two; but the range itself is valuable. We need Readers who have both the depth of conviction that God is calling them to Reader ministry and the skills to carry out this calling effectively.

When we talk about vocation, we often use the language of discernment. Discernment involves taking a serious look at all the possibilities and all the options that are open to you, and thinking them through with a few simple questions in mind:

- What do I feel God drawing me towards in my life?
- Of all the ways of serving God that I can identify in my situation and context, which of them seems to be the most life-giving both for myself and those around me?
- What particular gifts have I been given and how can these best be used in the service of others, of Christ and of the Church?
- What needs do I perceive both in the Church and outside it, and in what way can I respond to these needs?
- What do I enjoy doing and what gives me the most energy?
- What do other people most often ask me to do; does this tell me something about where they think my gifts lie?

These are the sorts of questions that all Christian people ask to help them discern how best to live their Christian life. So, in a very real sense, discerning a call to Reader ministry is simply an extension of the ordinary ongoing reassessing and reappraising of one's walk with God that is part of the life of every Christian disciple.

The first part of discerning a call involves a process in which we should all be involved as a part of our everyday walk with God. This involves asking questions about what God wants of us and how we might best use our skills as a part of our everyday discipleship.

Being honest with ourselves

It is also important within the discernment process to be honest with ourselves about why we are seeking a particular form of ministry. People's motives, even if honourable, are always likely to be mixed and may sometimes be unrealistic; it is vital to face up to every aspect of our sense of vocation. Unfortunately, as with many things in life, vocation is affected by some of the less attractive aspects of our human nature, some of which we acknowledge, others of which are hidden under the surface and not even identified by us as being present. These might include:

- self-serving – a desire for recognition or status;
- a ‘need to be needed’;
- a need to control;
- competition with others;
- unwillingness to be led.

It is understandable that those seeking ministry are likely to want to present their ‘best face’, but it is essential that anyone who is seeking to minister publicly within and on behalf of the Church looks at all their motives and acknowledges before God those aspects of themselves that are perhaps less honourable. It is probably true to say that no one is 100 per cent pure/altruistic/God-centred in their motives. All have fallen short of the glory of God, yet God uses all sorts of people to further the work of the Kingdom. The ‘perfect candidate’ is almost certainly someone who is not perfect but who is aware of their imperfections and has learnt to face them.

How do I know whether Reader ministry might be right for me?

The next step in the discernment process is to begin to identify whether Reader ministry is in fact the ministry to which God is calling you. Without doubt one of the hardest aspects of working through any vocation to ministry is the question of how I know whether this particular ministry is right for me.

Reader ministry finds its expression in many different forms within our churches. Indeed, one of the challenges of talking about Reader ministry is that it can differ from person to person, local context to local context and diocese to diocese. Nevertheless, a basic definition of Reader ministry is often considered to involve a preaching and teaching ministry exercised within a pastoral context. Potential Readers, therefore, need to ensure that they feel comfortable with both aspects of the Readers’ role:

- preaching and teaching
- pastoral context.

It is important to remember that you don’t have to be good at either preaching and teaching or at pastoral work yet – don’t forget that Reader training is there to help you to grow into the role of Reader –

but you do need to be able to face both aspects of Reader ministry without too much horror!

As well as checking that you are comfortable with the major features of Reader ministry it is also valuable to ensure that your sense of vocation is not to another form of ministry, such as ordination.

How do I begin to decide?

Many Readers with substantial and effective ministries can recall facing questions about what kind of ministry they are being called to and whether they are the right person for that ministry in the early days. There is always a balance to be found between rushing in too quickly, and letting ideas chase around one's head for too long. Either approach can be counterproductive. Sooner or later, though, the issue must be aired if it is to be resolved. There are a number of things that people can do to help themselves work through their questions. Probably the most important thing to do is to pray about them over a period of time, both before and while doing some or all of the following:

- Read through the Church's selection criteria (see pp. 50–1 below) and think through or write down the extent to which you think you fulfil them. Be as honest as you can be.
- Write about your hopes and fears, especially the ones that seem the most exciting or the most frightening and strange. The process of writing things down can of itself sometimes be a way of seeing things in a clearer light, as can drawing ideas and images when it is hard to find the right words. Some people are helped by writing a 'conversation' between God and themselves as a way of discerning what they ought to do.
- Share them with a few close family and friends, and ask for an honest response.
- Seek out a Reader to talk to, not necessarily someone who has been licensed for a long time who might have forgotten just how powerful such thoughts can be, but perhaps someone fairly new to ministry, or maybe someone still in training. Sharing thoughts with another, perhaps someone who does not know you very well, can help to bring a fresh sense of perspective, and discovering

that others have been down the same path before you is generally hugely reassuring.

- Talk to someone whom you consider to be wise, and who knows you well, about your hopes and fears and thoughts. (Examples of this kind of person include your spiritual director or soul friend, a prayer partner, someone in leadership within your church.)
- Discuss it all with your incumbent (i.e. the vicar or rector of your parish).

Here are some of the most common areas that might need to be addressed by those wondering whether to apply to train for Reader ministry.

Capability

Would Reader ministry demand things of me that I could not do? This is a hard question for any of us to answer because few of us can do now the same things as we can do after months and years of training. It might be more productive to ask whether you are the kind of person who enjoys being stretched, learning new things and trying out new skills. Readers are a group of people to whom the Church has entrusted parts of its public ministry. You do not have to be ready now to undertake this role, but you do need to be someone who is willing to learn new ideas and approaches and who is ready to undertake whatever it is that the Church needs doing in each generation. All of us will from time to time feel as though more is being asked of us than we can possibly have the skills, knowledge, training and inner resources to deliver. This is OK! The danger comes not when we feel out of our depth, but when we become so self-sufficient that we stop learning new ways of doing things and engaging with new ideas. We do not need to be endlessly capable, but we do need to be endlessly interested and willing to be drawn into new ways of being and thinking.

Time

Do I realistically have enough time to give to Reader ministry and training? Both training for Reader ministry and the exercise of it will make significant demands upon your time. Most Reader candidates are already significantly involved in the life of their church and it is likely that some responsibilities will have to be laid down

in order to make time for the requirements of training. The capacity of people to absorb additional demands varies greatly from one person to another, but it is important to say here that it is the long experience of the Church that God does not call people to a ministry that is not sustainable or that puts existing commitments, to marriage, family, professional life or health, under intolerable pressure.

Worthiness and finding an appropriate sense of self

Am I good enough to do this?

All Christian people are called to live lives that follow the example of Jesus – and all fall short. Being a follower of Jesus is not about belonging to a club whose members think that they are good; to be a Christian is to be a witness to the good news of Jesus in the midst of our failure. There is an important distinction to be made here between having on the one hand an appropriate sense of being an unworthy servant of the Lord, and on the other hand a lack of personal self-worth that has less to do with humility and more to do with an inability to recognize that we each have an intrinsic value as a much loved child of God. People sometimes get these badly muddled; it is essential that those offering themselves for the Church's ministry think this distinction through in order that they might be free to minister to others effectively. If this is left unaddressed it can easily lead people to use ministry as a covert (though often unrealized) means of seeking ministry *from* others under the guise of offering ministry *to* others. We are all unworthy, that is the reality, but if we are hampered by an inappropriately self-condemnatory image we will struggle to grasp the liberating power of the gospel, both for ourselves and for others.

On the other hand, sometimes, in the early days of thinking about whether or not they should offer for Reader ministry, people become quite focused upon themselves. 'I'm going to be a Reader!' Perhaps the call of the prophet Isaiah has something to say to us here. You might have noticed that when people read aloud the account of the calling of Isaiah from chapter 6, the emphasis is sometimes: 'Then I heard the voice of the Lord saying, "Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?" And I said, "Here am I; send me!"' But on other occasions it is read as: 'Here am I; send me!' The same thing can be seen when people sing the hymn, 'I, the Lord of Sea and Sky'. The question posed by the chorus, 'Here I am, Lord, is it I, Lord?' seems

to have entered many people's consciousness as, 'Here I am, Lord, *it is I*, Lord'. The questioning and self-offering has been replaced by an assertion that sets the individual at the centre of the picture.

Being part of the public ministry of the Church is not just about self-proclamation, it is about responding to the invitation of God in Christ to share in that ongoing work of a creation that will groan with longing until the end of time (Rom. 8.22). But at the same time our individuality is important; it matters to the Church and its ministry because it matters to God. It is the people we are, with all our history, our experience, our gifts, our faults and our failings who are being called into God's service; real, living, praising, worshipping, sinning, repenting people, each with a story of redemption to proclaim as part of the Church's, the world's – and ultimately of course, God's – bigger story of redemption.

Family support

Does my family support me?

Of course, your family does not need to have the same degree of enthusiasm for the idea of your entering Reader ministry as you do, but if they are entirely resistant to the idea then your time as a Reader will be fraught with difficulty and possibly also conflict. While there are some who would argue that people ought not to be recommended for training for an authorized ministry in the Church if they have a spouse or partner who does not share their faith, the reality is that there are very many families in this situation who accommodate one another's beliefs and hopes in a manner that is fully supportive while not being totally shared. What is important at this point, however, is that you ensure that your calling to Reader ministry is not going to put an unbearable strain upon your closest relationships; beyond this you will need to do what many people in ministry do which is to work it out as you go along, balancing your calling and enthusiasms with the needs and concerns of those you love.

Seeking the support of the local church

Do my incumbent, PCC and local congregation support me?

It is vitally important that all those who are seeking to be selected for training for the Church's public ministry have the support of the local church. A central tenet of the Church of England's approach

to ministry is that all ministry is done within a local context; it is not possible to be an itinerant minister in the Church. One of the key aspects of the Church of England's self-understanding is that it is an episcopal Church; it is led by bishops, with the diocesan bishop being responsible for all the ministry that takes place within the diocese. This means that all those who engage in public ministry are responsible to the bishop, and that while at its heart all ministry is carried out in Christ's name, in organizational terms it is the bishop who has oversight. In other words, all those in permanent, public ministry within the Church of England should have the bishop's permission to minister. Of course most Readers will not have day-to-day contact with their bishop but will relate to the incumbent of the parish or benefice in which they are to serve. This does not undermine the model of episcopal leadership, but is the way in which it is worked out in the life of the Church. It will be expected in almost every case that the candidate has the full and enthusiastic support of the incumbent, who will be asked to write a reference as part of the process of selection. In addition it would be usual for the candidate to have the strong support of the PCC, and it is the norm for a motion to be passed at a meeting at which the candidate is not present, stating that this is the case.

So why say that the incumbent must be supportive in *almost* every case? This raises an interesting question about the nature of Reader ministry. Reader ministry is, almost by definition, collaborative, because, with a few exceptions, Readers minister alongside their incumbent – and often alongside other members of a ministry team, which will include people who are both lay and ordained. In order for this relationship to work, it is important that wherever possible the incumbent, the PCC, and ideally the congregation as a whole, are supportive of the Reader's vocation and ministry within the church.

This raises the question of whether, if someone feels called to offer themselves for selection for training as a Reader and they happen to worship in a parish where the incumbent is not personally supportive of Reader ministry, the individual must lay aside their sense of calling and continue to take an active part in their parish in the ways that are permitted. Or should they seek an alternative place in which to minister? The answer to this will not be the same

in every case. It may be that the candidate will train on the understanding that he or she will be licensed to a church other than that in which they began the process of discernment – and some dioceses have a general policy of telling potential candidates from the outset that they may be deployed in a new parish or setting when they are eventually licensed. Or it might be the case that someone would need to move to a different parish and spend some time there, getting to know the people, before seeking to apply to train as a Reader. Such instances are rare but not unknown, and they can lead to real heart-searching on the part of all involved if a resolution is to be found that neither leaves the individual feeling as though their call has been dismissed or negated, nor leads to a sense of uprootedness and loss. The worst possible outcome is for the incumbent and PCC to express their support and for the candidate to complete training satisfactorily and be licensed, only to find that their ministry is never thereafter incorporated into the life of the parish. What this highlights is the importance of ensuring that you have an honest conversation with your incumbent both before you put yourself forward for selection and at regular intervals during your training so that you can both be confident that you have shared expectations of your future ministry.

Working with the selection criteria

At some point in the process of discerning your call, you will reach a point where you begin to identify Reader ministry as an area to which you may be being called. You have worked through the issues with various people, and feel that having a part in the preaching/teaching and pastoral heart of Reader ministry is something that either attracts you or at least doesn't horrify you. At this point, then, it is valuable to look at the national criteria laid down for Readers.

The Church of England produces criteria for selection for all its authorized public ministries. There is considerable similarity between the general descriptors of the criteria for ordained and Reader ministry, but the detail, outworking and interpretation of these will vary according to the ministry being considered. Criteria for Reader Ministry as set out by the Church of England (Selection for Reader Ministry, ABM Policy Paper No. 7, 1998) are shown in the box on pp. 50–1.

Ministry in the Church of England

Candidates must be baptized and confirmed and regular communicants of the Church of England who are familiar with its traditions and practices. They must complete the necessary disclosure statement in connection with the House of Bishops' Policy on Child Protection before undergoing the diocesan selection procedure.

Vocation

Candidates should be able to speak of their own sense of vocation to ministry and mission, referring both to personal conviction and to the extent to which others have confirmed it. Their sense of vocation should be obedient, realistic and informed.

Faith

Candidates should show an understanding of the Christian faith and a desire to deepen that understanding. They should demonstrate personal commitment to Christ and a capacity to communicate the gospel.

Spirituality and worship

Candidates should show evidence of commitment to a spiritual discipline which involves individual and corporate prayer and worship. Their spiritual practice should be such as to sustain and energize them in their daily lives.

Personality and character

Candidates should be sufficiently mature and stable to show that they can sustain the demanding role of a minister and to face change and pressure in a flexible and balanced way. They should be seen to be people of integrity.

Relationships

Candidates should demonstrate self-awareness and self-acceptance as a basis for developing open and healthy personal and pastoral relationships as ministers.

Potential for training

Candidates should be capable of undertaking satisfactorily a course of study and ministerial preparation with an open and enquiring mind.

Leadership and collaboration

Candidates should show the potential to offer wise leadership in the Church community and to some extent beyond it. They should also show ability and willingness to co-operate with other ministers and to work as team members as well as leaders.

These criteria exist for a number of reasons:

- they enable candidates and those working with them to prepare for selection;
- they inform advisers, who undertake their work on behalf of both their diocesan bishop and the wider Church, about what qualities to look out for in a potential Reader candidate;
- they play a vital role in ensuring consistency across the Church in the recommendation of candidates;
- they provide an outline of the theological framework upon which Reader ministry, as one aspect of the Church's public ministry, is based.

In short, the criteria provide guidelines which allow all those involved in selection, whether as advisers or as candidates, to be confident that the decisions made are fair and equitable.

The selection procedure

So far in this chapter we have explored the idea of how you can begin to discern whether your sense of inner prompting is leading you to Reader ministry or not. It is important to recognize, however, that the vocational process is two-sided. God calls, and once we have heard and discerned this call we offer ourselves for ministry. The challenging fact, however, is that our vocation also has to be received. For example, there is no point insisting that God has called me to visit people in the parish if no one in the parish wants me to visit them. The purpose of Reader selection is to test whether others

within the Church (who know the diocese and Reader ministry well) can also perceive within you a vocation to Reader ministry. Our own personal acceptance of our vocation is only a part of the picture; it also needs to be accepted by others.

What happens if the answer is no?

One of the hardest features of a discernment process occurs when someone's vocation is not accepted by the church or community to which it is offered. If this should happen to you it is very important, once you are able to, to view this decision in its proper light. First, remember that such a decision is not saying that God is not calling you at all – we established above that God calls everyone all of the time – it simply means that your calling is not to Reader ministry but to something else.

You need, therefore, to find a way of discerning what it is that God is calling you to. It can often be very hard to move onwards to this discernment process again. You will just have spent a long time discerning in order to get as far as the selection process for Reader ministry and the thought of (what will feel like) going back again will be hard. You may also feel bruised and hurt by the experience, which may feel like rejection (even though it is not).

In this situation, a few guidelines may be helpful:

- Give yourself time. You do not have to know *now* what God wants from you. Sometimes the period of waiting is vital to help us grow into the person that God wants us to be.
- Be gentle with yourself. You are allowed to feel hurt, but don't allow this hurt to diminish your self-esteem. God loves you for who you are.
- Be honest with yourself. You don't need to tell anyone else unless it helps, but sometimes it can be helpful to be brutally honest with yourself about your inner motives. Ask yourself whether there might be anything to be learned from this experience (of course the answer may be no).
- Most importantly of all, seek out someone who can help you to reflect on this whole experience. It may be your incumbent, spiritual director, soul friend or someone else entirely. In fact, sometimes it can help to talk to someone entirely outside of the process and to see what emerges from your conversation about your experience.

What happens if the answer is yes?

Sometimes the answer yes can be as daunting (if not more so) than the answer no. Some people offer themselves for ministry in the hope that God or the Church will say no and then discover that they have to live with the yes! As after a 'no' answer, give yourself time, be gentle with yourself, be honest with yourself and find someone to talk to (in this case an already licensed Reader or one who is training might be helpful). Once you begin training you will enter a whirl of new ideas and new ways of looking at things. It helps to be as ready as you can be!

Some stories of people who felt called to Reader ministry

Now read what prompted some very different Readers to seek this ministry. It doesn't happen now quite as it did for Bobby in the early 1980s!

Bobby – a Reader for 23 years

The local vicar was the Scout master; he took us to church and if you could read a psalm and sing a scale you joined the choir. My family didn't go to church but I sang in the choir and eventually became a server. I wanted to be a vicar when I was at school but my father was a miner and couldn't afford to keep me, so I left school and became a nurse as it was a caring profession. Much later when the children were young we didn't go to church for a while because they made a noise, but eventually I returned. One day someone asked whether I would stand for election as a churchwarden. I gradually became more involved in the life of the church, reading and so on. One day, out of the blue, the vicar said that he had asked the bishop about me being a Reader; this was followed by a letter from the bishop: 'Congratulations, I am delighted to hear that you are going to be a Reader.' That was it. There was no interview or selection procedure. I worked with a local tutor for two years and I put all my heart and soul into it. Being a nurse linked the whole thing for me; everyone at the hospital knew that I was a licensed Reader – I was a bridge between people there and church. People ask when I decided to become a Reader, but I didn't, I just grew into it. I was a very slow-growing plant!

Dianne – a Reader for three years

I had nearly died during the birth of my first child and during that experience I felt as though I was in the company of someone who knew me totally. When I recovered I knew that something was missing from my life. I went to church and my faith and that of my husband (who initially only came to church to please me) began to grow, though in very different ways. Eventually I wanted to read and learn more and grow so I talked with a friend who said, 'You need to take time out to listen to what God is asking of you.' But I didn't like what I felt God was asking of me, which was to stand up and do something more. I wondered about Reader ministry, whether this was a good match and someone made a remark about my becoming a Reader. I found out later that they were being flippant because they didn't think I could do it but it made me begin to explore. I didn't tell or discuss it with many people, but gradually others began to mention it to me and eventually I told my vicar.

At selection, when asked, 'Why do you want to be a Reader?' I could honestly answer, 'I don't want it but I feel it might be what God wants me to do so I need to explore it.' During training I always said, 'If I feel this isn't right I'll stop it. I don't want to be licensed to a ministry that God doesn't want me to do.' I've now been licensed for three years and I know that it has been the right thing.

Carol – a Reader for one year

I was approached by an elderly Reader in the parish about ten years ago. I hadn't thought about Reader ministry and was about to train as a counsellor. My perceptions of Readers were different then and I found myself wondering, 'What does he see in me? How will I be able to stand up in the pulpit and speak?' The idea remained in the background and I became involved in some voluntary counselling work with bereaved people, with drug and alcohol users, and in a prison. Even though I wasn't sure that I was up to it academically, the idea of Reader ministry persisted. One thing led to another; I found myself in so many situations where people clearly wanted to become closer to God, and I found

myself ministering to them. I took a break from voluntary counselling after six years to think things through. I didn't really know who to talk to at this time. Eventually I spoke very tentatively to my incumbent and I was gradually encouraged towards Reader ministry.

I wondered whether I'd be accepted because I'd had breast cancer some years earlier. It had come out of the blue and the prognosis was not good. The company had sent a chaplain to the house. I was devastated, but as I talked with the chaplain I realized that I had a real faith that was lying dormant; I felt there was something missing and went back to church. Thirteen years on I am in good health and have now completed my initial training and been licensed as a Reader.

I've realized that it's about who you are as a person, not presenting yourself as what you think you ought to be. I felt that God was in the timing – I don't think he calls people to do things for which he doesn't equip them. Going back over my personal journey like this has been good and it's made me realize that there's been a lot of learning through all of this.

When you have finished reading all of these stories you might like to begin writing your own. Telling your story of vocation can often be helpful in trying to discern what you are being called to do.

What do I do next?

If, having read this chapter and having reflected at length about your sense of calling, you feel called to explore Reader ministry further, your first course of action should be to approach your incumbent, who should have the details you need in order to pursue the matter further. The discernment process is likely to include a number of in-depth interviews that explore your calling; you can expect to be invited to share something of your personal story of faith, your prayer life and your engagement in the life of your church, as well as having an opportunity to say what you understand Reader ministry to be about. The process by which people are recommended for training varies from one to diocese to another; in some dioceses selection interviews are arranged as and when required, while in other places they occur at regular intervals during the year or

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at one annual event. This means that you might need to wait for a little while for an interview date, but don't let this put you off applying. In every diocese the final arbiter concerning recommendation for training for all public ministry is the bishop.