

# Called to Minister

edited by Tom Frame

Barton Books  
Canberra, Australia



# **Called to Minister**

**Vocational Discernment in  
the Contemporary Church**

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Canberra, Australia  
2009

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## A Discernment Prayer

O Lord, the fountain of wisdom, and the sure guide of those who depend on thee; thou hast promised that if we commit our ways to thee, thou wilt establish them, and if we trust in thee with all our hearts, thou wilt direct our steps – Lord I rely on this thy good word which has been tried and found faithful in every age.

Vouchsafe to direct me by thy Spirit in the course of my present deliberations, and do thou lead me so to determine, as may be most agreeable to thy will, most conducive to thy glory.

May my heart be divested of all prepossession and self-seeking, may I be enabled to see and to follow my duty; and may I maintain the comfortable testimony of a sincere, teachable and obedient conscience in thy sight.

O may thy Spirit witness in my heart, and my conversation witness in the world, that I am indeed thy disciple, thine without reserve, thine and not another's, thine and not my own. Amen

John Newton  
23 June 1758

[Taken from John Newton, 'Miscellaneous thought and enquiries on an important subject', published as *Ministry on My Mind* by the John Newton Project, Stratford-upon-Avon, 2008, [www.john-newton.org](http://www.john-newton.org)].

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# Introduction

Every person who claims to be a Christian is called to serve God in every facet of their being and in every aspect of their lives. Some of this service will be rendered within the confines of the church. For the greatest part, however, Christian service ought to find expression in the world God has created and called ‘good’. Its venue might be a school or a shop, a factory or an office. Everyday life is sanctified when lived in a spirit of selfless service. The doctrine of the Incarnation, that God took human flesh and entered human history, is proclaimed every time a Christian takes this life and this world seriously by imitating the works and emulating the words of Jesus Christ the incarnate Son of God, whose mission was to bring wholeness and healing to broken lives and a fractured world. It is a mistake to believe that the only valid or worthwhile service is overtly religious in character or focused on believers. Temporal pursuits are not in themselves profane—they are made sacred by the spirit in which they are pursued. Notably, some forms of service are referred to as ministry.

Christian ministry is a gift from God, indispensable to the church’s existence and integral to the redemption of the whole created order. The New Testament view of Christian ministry is that

it is actually the ministry of Jesus. Leon Morris points out that the ministry exercised by Jesus

is the one essential ministry. All human ministry depends on His ministry, and, indeed, is nothing more than the continuation of it. Christian ministers must take their starting point in what Christ has done, and they can do no more than minister His gospel.<sup>1</sup>

In the letter to the Hebrews, Jesus is said to be the ‘apostle and high priest of our profession’ (Hebrews 3:1). In the first epistle attributed to St Peter, Jesus is spoken of as ‘the shepherd and bishop of your souls’ (1 Peter 2:25). When Christians engage in ministry, Christ works in and through them. George Bromiley explains:

It is Jesus who speaks when the word of the Gospel is truly preached. It is Jesus who is proffered and who blesses when the sacraments are rightly administered. It is Jesus who heals or helps when practical assistance is extended to the needy. It is Jesus who bears and endures when persecution or hardship is imposed and accepted. It is Jesus who rules when spiritual discipline is exercised [and it is Jesus] who is the True Minister.<sup>2</sup>

Within the ministry to which all are commissioned when they follow Jesus some are called to particular service that is differentiated by the existence of certain gifts in the context of the church’s continuing needs. St Paul explained that God

gave some to be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, some pastors and teachers, for the perfecting of the saints for the work of the ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ. (Ephesians 4:11–12)

The church recognises and gives thanks for the grace of God in the lives of those provided for this vital work. It deliberately sets them apart in orders of ministry so as to maintain godly order among ‘the household of God’. The Anglican Communion recognises three orders of ministry—the diaconate, the priesthood and the episcopate. The consecration of a bishop provides for the pastoral oversight of a region known as a diocese. The ordination of a priest is to pastoral

‘charge’ of a congregation. The ordination of a deacon is authorisation to assist in pastoring a ‘cure of souls.’ No-one can choose to become a deacon, a priest or a bishop—they must be inwardly ‘moved by the Holy Spirit’ and believe themselves to be ‘truly called’ to ordained ministry ‘according to the will of our Lord Jesus Christ.’ Article 23 of the *Thirty-nine Articles of Religion*, headed ‘Of Ministering in the Congregation,’ states: ‘It is not lawful for any man to take upon him the office of public preaching, or ministering the sacraments in the congregation, before he be lawfully called, and sent to execute the same.’

But who does God choose to exercise this ministry? A vocation to holy orders is not the preserve of a privileged group of people who are endowed with superior intellect or physical prowess. In many instances, God calls the weak and wayward—imperfect people whose lives have the capacity to exude divine light. There is no sense, then, in which God calls the good and is indifferent to the rest. Innate goodness has nothing to do with a vocation to the diaconate or the priesthood. It would appear that God tends to call unlikely and unassuming people who are to exercise humble service rather than to assume a superior status. Nor does God seem to be particularly concerned as to whether those called are willing volunteers. When Jesus gathered his disciples it was as though they had little choice. Indeed, at one point he told them, ‘You have not chosen me, I have chosen you.’ He asked them to follow him and they did.

Very occasionally, a person senses a vocation to ordained ministry with instinctive or intuitive certainty. They ‘just know’ they have been called by God to the diaconate or the priesthood without any persistent anguish or inner turmoil. But this level of conviction and degree of confidence is given to few. The majority require an extended period of deep reflection and inner examination before arriving at any clear sense that God is preparing them for a specific ministry. Sometimes confirmation of a call to ministry is largely circumstantial. Doors of opportunity are opened just as others are closed. Conversations take place in which family and friends point to the existence of personal abilities or attributes that might find their fullest expression in the ordained ministry. There is, of course, the possibility that a person might experience spiritually the full force of God’s voice through prayer or Bible study and be convinced that God

has expressly directed them to embrace a specific way of life within the discipline of the diaconate or the priesthood.

Notwithstanding its origins, a call to ordained ministry is usually the coincidence of a person's gifts with the church's needs, informed and illuminated by the Holy Spirit. Although the call of God is often enveloped and obscured by the language of piety, a 'called' person possesses the abilities and attributes that will equip them for a life of service as a deacon or a priest. The Holy Spirit reveals the existence of these gifts and the ways in which they can be expressed through diaconal and priestly ministry. The gifted person recognises, sometimes with the prompting of family or friends, that their gifts exist for the sake of the church and its ministry to the world, and that a failure to exercise these gifts in obedience to God's call is an affront to the Holy Spirit. Dr Frank Barry, the Bishop of Southwell in England (1941–64), thought that, 'A growing recognition of the world's need and of Christ's sovereign power to meet it may present a claim which is not to be denied.'<sup>3</sup>

The presence of a call to ministry is discerned in many ways. The approach of John Newton (1725–1807), the former slave ship captain turned abolitionist, has much to commend it. Nearly a decade after his conversion to Christianity, Newton set aside six weeks to discern whether God was calling him to the ministry. Within that period he would devote

so much of my time as I can conveniently command, to wait upon the Lord, to examine my own heart, to consider at large the nature, dignity, difficulty and importance of the great undertaking I have in view—and if after this term, I find my mind still engaged to the work, I intend to dedicate the day of my entrance upon a new year of life (my thirty-fourth) to solemn fasting and prayer, in which I will endeavour to engage my dear Christian friends at London, Leeds, etc., to concur with me.

He set himself five disciplines. The first was a commitment 'once a day at least' to pray specifically about whether God was calling him to the ministry. The second was a determination to fix his 'thoughts and meditations to this point when I am in business or mixed company'. The third was writing 'down short observations upon such texts of

Scripture as may occur to me most pertinent to the case in hand. Fourthly, Newton decided to ‘enter immediately upon a ministerial deportment, to lay aside from this day and forever, whatever my conscience tells me would render me unsuitable to that high and holy calling’. Finally, he would ‘study the epistles to Timothy and Titus, my Lord’s parting discourse in the 14th etc. chapters of John, and the first epistle of John, as portions of Scripture especially suited to my present occasion’. After coming to the firm conviction that God was indeed calling him to ordained ministry, he submitted this conviction to the scrutiny of trusted friends whose thoughts coincided with his own judgment. Their counsel was that he should offer himself for ordination.

The very existence of an inward call of some kind is, of course, taken on trust by the church. There is a sincere reliance on the genuineness of the individual and their possessing sufficient maturity to distinguish a spiritual call from a worldly ambition. The call of God cannot be verified by psychological assessment or measured by clinical tests. But its inward reality will be displayed in outward signs. The life of someone called to the ministry will disclose signs of the *gifts* of the Spirit—wisdom, understanding, right judgment, courage, knowledge, piety and fear of the Lord (Isaiah 11:2–3). These gifts aid and extend the work of sanctification and, as the Roman Catholic catechism explains, help to ‘complete and perfect the virtues of those who receive them’. The life of a person called to the ministry will certainly be marked by what St Paul referred to as the *fruit* of the Spirit—love, joy, peace, longsuffering, gentleness, goodness, faith, meekness and temperance (Galatians 5:22–3). These fruits are essentially characteristics of a life that is shaped by the indwelling of the Holy Spirit. Given that a call to ordained ministry involves the existence of certain abilities and aptitudes, there should already be some evidence of their exercise in the person’s congregation and some proof of a demonstrated willingness to serve God’s people diligently and with humility.

The existence of a call to minister must finally be affirmed by the diocesan bishop, who alone has the authority to ordain and the people in whose midst the ministry is to be exercised. The point has already been made—there are no self-appointed deacons or priests. The ordaining mandate of the bishop is never exercised, however, in

isolation. The consent of the clergy and people to an ordination is signified by the people being asked whether they ‘know an adequate reason why the ordination should not proceed’, when the archdeacons and representatives of the laity are asked for an assurance that the candidates ‘are suited by their learning and godly living to minister’ in the household of God and when the ‘College of Presbyters’ joins the bishop in the laying on of hands during the ordination of a priest. In effect, the clergy and the people have the right to veto any candidate who is presented for ordination. Once the church is consulted about what is to be done in its name, the whole people of God are asked to confirm the candidate’s call and to profess their willingness to accept them as people set apart for service as deacons and priests. The bishop and people then pray that those who have been ordained may be made ‘worthy of their calling’.

There is a great deal of uncertainty in the contemporary church about what it means to discern a ‘call to minister’. There is debate about the scope of the ministry to which God calls all believers, confusion over the duties and responsibilities of various orders of ministry, inconsistency in the processes for discerning vocations to the diaconate and priesthood, misunderstanding of the respective roles of different groups in affirming a specific call to ministry, ignorance of the demands associated with preparation for ordained ministry and inadequate appreciation of what an ordered religious life will mean for family and friends. But disagreement should not be a reason for despair. There are few things committed to the church that are more important or more difficult than the discernment of leadership. There is ample evidence in the New Testament that the selection of leaders was a demanding activity that required great sensitivity and enormous wisdom. Jesus prayed all night before choosing his disciples. The apostles counselled against any haste in selecting overseers. But the rapidly changing context in which ordained ministry is exercised requires that the church ‘hasten slowly’. The origins, objects and outcomes of ministry have not altered. The abilities and aptitudes of those called to ministry remain the same. But the circumstances in which ordained ministers are currently deployed, the complexity of the pastoral settings in which they work and the conflicts they face in an increasingly hostile world oblige the church to take stock of

its status and standing and the need to be faithful and fruitful in its participation in God's mission and ministry.

This collection of essays has been prepared to assist the people of God to think about who God calls to minister, discerning the specific ministries to which some may be called as deacons and priests and preparing them for the exercise of those ministries. The impetus for this publication was a perceived lack of clarity within the Diocese of Canberra and Goulburn over what examining chaplains and vocational panels were meant to be looking for among those seeking to discern a call to ordained ministry. This book is concerned entirely with what occurs prior to ordination although it is conscious of all that happens subsequent to ordination. It is intended primarily for those who detect what might be a call to some specific service in the church. Is the call to a particular or specialised lay ministry rather than to an ordained ministry? If the call is to ordained ministry, is it the diaconate or the priesthood? Is the call to one parish or outreach, such as hospital chaplaincy, or to general leadership in the diocese? As a call to leadership in ministry must be affirmed by the church that will be subject to that leadership, what is the church's role in discerning vocations and how does the church discharge its obligations? Once the church affirms a vocation to ordained ministry, what education and training does the ordinand need to receive? How is the ordinand formed for the ministry to which they are called? How does the ordinand learn reflective practices and acquire spiritual disciplines? Does the ordinand appreciate the need for education, training and formation and who will support them as they move towards ordination?

In addition to explaining the duties and responsibilities of those who are ordained (as outlined in the ordinal) these essays will help those managing vocational discernment to be aware of the evolving demands placed upon leaders in a mission-shaped church and the aptitudes and abilities that are integral to emerging models of ministry. With the continued proliferation of specialist ministries, those experiencing a call to ministry will come from more diverse backgrounds and possess more varied gifts. Responding to the needs of a mission-shaped church will require broader vision from the entire Christian community, especially those charged with determining those people God has indeed called to ordained leadership. The contents of this

book will hopefully be of great interest to prospective ordination candidates and their families, examining chaplains (lay and clerical), members of vocational panels, ordaining bishops, supervising clergy, post-ordination training supervisors, parish councils, ministry leadership teams, candidates for ordination, clergy trainers, theological educators, spiritual directors and retreat conductors. Indeed, anyone concerned with the ordained ministry of the church should find something of value in the chapters that follow.

The layout of the book is largely self-evident. It is divided into three parts with the first devoted to some general principles and specific practicalities. In the opening chapter, Bishop Stuart Robinson very helpfully outlines the context in which Christian ministry is currently being exercised and insightfully describes the demands being experienced by church leaders. He considers the questions: what characterises Christian leadership? What is the mission of God? What can the diocese and bishop reasonably expect of its leaders? In chapter 2, Heather Thomson explores the origins and nature of the Christian calling to serve, the baptismal call to ministry and the priesthood of all believers, outlines the common tasks and shared obligations of clergy and laity and discusses how the laity are commissioned and authorised for their ministries.

Part Two outlines the distinctive features of the Anglican understanding of the diaconate and the priesthood. The third chapter by Bruce Kaye warns against the 'clericalisation' of the laity in his description of lay vocation and how it ought to be understood, before giving an account of the need for lay people to receive theological education and ministerial training. Chapter 4 is the first of three brief personal reflections. Lynlea Rodger, a lecturer in theology at the postgraduate level, explains why, when and how she knew she was called to the laity. Chapter 5 is a semi-autobiographical description of the office and work of a deacon by Peter Pocock, a permanent deacon. He explains what is distinct about the ministry in the diaconate and its location on the fringe of society and at the edge of the holy table. There is also some discussion of what 'permanent' means in relation to the permanent diaconate. The next chapter is the second personal reflection. In it Peter Rose writes about his call to the diaconate and not to the priesthood. In chapter 7 Mark Short explains how a call to the priesthood is discerned and then confirmed and validated by the

church. He outlines the role of examining chaplains and vocational panels, and summarises the duties and responsibilities associated with the office and work of a priest. Then follows the final personal reflection in which Bronwyn Suptut relays her experience of being called to the priesthood and how the church confirms her place in that particular order of ministry.

Part Three concerns the preparation of those called to minister for the exercise of the particular ministry to which they have been called. In chapter 9, Stephen Pickard gives an account of theological education—its content, structure, point and purpose. In the following chapter, I try to explain the difference between theological education and vocational training and to outline the necessity of clergy being able to exercise their ministries confidently and competently. Chapter 11 by Sarah Bachelard concentrates on the importance of ministers growing in spiritual maturity. It considers the church's expectations of the spiritual life of its ordained leaders and the place of prayer, retreats and journaling in deepening personal life and enhancing ministerial performance. Neil Millar considers the place and importance of critical reflection in the exercise of ministry. He asks, 'What do I bring to ministry and what must I leave behind?' This chapter concludes with a plea for continuing reflection on pastoral practice. In chapter 13 Garth Blake draws on his considerable experience of church and civil law to explain the importance of professionalism and discipline in ministry. He examines the origins and outlook of clergy codes of conduct and clarifies the church's expectations of the conduct of the ordained. The chapter on the place of family in the discernment of a call to ordination and in the exercise of ministry draws on the personal experience of Kirrilee and Ewan Reid. They give a vivid picture of how ordination impacts on relationships with family and friends, and stress the need for clergy to attend to their marriages and the needs of their families. Their message is complemented by Ian Palmer, who wants his readers to understand the difficulties of personal life and public vocation. After explaining the importance of a minister having an integrated life, he writes with firsthand acquaintance of the tensions between private life and public persona, and the need to ensure personal integrity in relation to finance, leisure and hobbies. This book ends with a fitting postscript from Graeme Garrett. His sermon, 'On being called to the

ministry' ought to be prescribed annual reading for every deacon, priest and bishop.

This book does not attempt to propose or defend a particular view of ordination or the three-fold ordering of ministry within Anglican polity. There is a place for continuing conversation about these matters but it is beyond the scope of this collection. Although the authors are Anglican and describe their experience of Anglican Christianity, what they have to say will be relevant to other traditions. This book does not deal with the third order of ministry in Anglican polity—the episcopate.

The essays and reflections you are about to read have been prepared by members of the wider community associated with St Mark's National Theological Centre in Canberra. They write from different perspectives with a wealth of insight and experience. I want to thank them for sharing their convictions and for their candour in writing about the highs and lows, and the joys and frustrations of ministry. It is noteworthy that each of the contributors has separately affirmed the same truth—every person who follows Jesus is called to minister in his name. This book will hopefully help to clarify the nature of that ministry together with the privileges and responsibilities associated with its discharge. Those called to the diaconate and the priesthood have a reasonable expectation of our prayers. One of the most insightful intercessions is the 'Prayer for the Clergy and People' found in the *Book of Common Prayer*:

Almighty and everlasting God, who alone workest great marvels; send down upon our bishops and curates, and all congregations committed to their charge, the healthful Spirit of thy grace; and that they may truly please thee, pour upon them the continual dew of thy blessing. Grant this, O Lord, for the honour of our Advocate and Mediator, Jesus Christ.

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The Feast of St Peter, Apostle and Martyr 2009

**Notes**

- 1 Leon Morris, *Ministers of God*, IVE, London, 1973, p. 32.
- 2 George William Bromiley, *Christian Ministry*, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, 1960, p. 17.
- 3 Frank Russell Barry, *Vocation and Ministry*, James Nisbet, Welwyn, 1958, p. 26.

