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# Ordained Ministry: Divine Calling or Career Choice? Is there Anything Distinctive About a Vocation to Ordained Ministry?

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## Abstract

This article addresses current ambiguities and potential confusion around the language and nature of vocation to ordination, focusing specifically on the process by which that vocation is discerned by the individual and by the church. It suggests that the particular shape of ordained ministry differentiates the process of vocational discernment to ordination from career choice. Drawing on the Ordination rite of the Church of England, the distinctive Christological, pneumatological and ecclesial elements of ordained ministry are expounded and offered as a theological framework for articulating and discerning a call to ordained ministry. Although the focus of this article is on vocational discernment for ordained ministry within the Church of England, the theological framework presented will be of wider relevance as churches reflect on how they identify those whom God is calling to ordained ministry and on how this may be constructively communicated with those who are discerning this vocation.

## Keywords

Calling – Career – Church of England – Discernment – Ministry – Ordination – Vocation

## Introduction

Since the early twentieth century, decreasing clergy numbers in the Church of England have been a constant concern, along with a recognition that the

patterns and expectations of ordained ministry have changed and are changing.<sup>1</sup> This phenomenon has resulted in several national initiatives focused on vocations to ordained ministry, including the goal set in 2015 under the *Renewal and Reform* programme to increase the numbers of ordinands by 50% by 2020.<sup>2</sup> Concurrently, there has been a reappraisal of the relationship between clergy and laity with a focus on the empowerment, equipping and releasing of lay people in the church and in the workplace. In 2017 an Archbishops' Council's report *Setting God's People Free* (SGPF) sought to 'affirm and enable the complementary roles and vocations of clergy and of lay people' by surveying the contemporary church context and setting out a plan for implementing change.<sup>3</sup> The report highlighted the need to challenge clericalism and to increase the confidence of lay people to play an active role in the mission of the Church.<sup>4</sup> Subsequently, dioceses have been implementing a programme of change and offering resources with the explicit aim of emphasising that 'vocation' is not a conceptual category applicable only to church roles, whilst also seeking to 'affirm and enable the complementary roles and vocations of clergy and lay people, grounded in our common baptism – not to blur or undermine these distinctions'.<sup>5</sup> Additional resource texts have also been published by the Church of England in light of the recommendations of SGPF which have sought to articulate and explore the theological foundations of an understanding of vocation and calling.<sup>6</sup> These documents have emphasised the need to offer a broad theology of vocation to envision and equip all Christians for mission and service, whilst also recognising the challenges presented by secularization, institutional views of the church, and sacred/secular compartmentalisation.<sup>7</sup>

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- 1 Robert Reiss, *The Testing of Vocation* (London: Church House Publishing, 2013), p. 27.
  - 2 Church of England, 'Renewal & Reform: Growing Vocations', accessed 11 December 2019, <https://www.churchofengland.org/about/renewal-reform/growing-vocations-0>.
  - 3 Archbishops' Council, 'Setting God's People Free' (United Kingdom: Church of England, February 2017), p. 1.
  - 4 Archbishops' Council, p. 4.
  - 5 Diocese of Chichester, 'Setting God's People Free', accessed 18 May 2022, <https://www.chichester.anglican.org/setting-gods-people-free/>.
  - 6 Church of England, *Calling All God's People: A Theological Reflection on the Whole Church Serving God's Mission* (London: Church House Publishing, 2019); Faith and Order Commission, *Kingdom Calling: The Vocation, Ministry and Discipleship of the Whole People of God* (London: Church House Publishing, 2020), <https://www.churchofengland.org/sites/default/files/2020-10/Kingdom%20Calling%20Web%20Version.pdf>; Ministry Council, 'Ministry for a Christian Presence in Every Community' (Church of England, July 2019), <https://www.churchofengland.org/sites/default/files/2019-10/Ministry%20For%20A%20Christian%20Presence.pdf>; National Ministry Team, 'A Vision for Lay Ministries' (London: Church of England, 2020).
  - 7 Faith and Order Commission, *Kingdom Calling*, pp. 12–14.

Alongside these initiatives there has been a recognition of the impact of language on assumptions and behaviours as some explore a call to ordained ministry and others seek to articulate and affirm their sense of purpose in secular employment. The Church of England often uses words such as ‘vocation’, ‘ministry’ and ‘calling’ interchangeably, without definition or distinction, and research suggests that this has perpetuated a confusing range of concepts being presented to candidates for ordained ministry.<sup>8</sup> Thus it appears that ‘vocational language’ has not always been used in a way that offers a vision for discipleship which inspires and empowers lay people.<sup>9</sup> In the 1960s, in a move with ramifications beyond the Roman Catholic Church,<sup>10</sup> Vatican II sought to affirm the role of the laity by widening the language of ‘vocation’ to encompass the life ‘they live in the world ... in all of the secular professions and occupations [and in] ... the ordinary circumstances of family and social life.’<sup>11</sup> However, this does not seem to have filtered down to the grassroots, with many continuing to interpret the word ‘vocation’ as relating primarily to the call to religious or priestly roles.<sup>12</sup> Although there have been various historical and theological influences within the Church of England, Reiss notes that over the past century ‘one word was regularly used about the ordained ministry: it was a vocation.’<sup>13</sup> It is possible that those who compiled *Setting God’s People Free* had this in mind when they noted the need to ‘learn to see how existing structures, language and practice unintentionally damage healthy clergy-lay relationships.’<sup>14</sup> In 2020, *Kingdom Calling* was published with a central goal of seeking to explore the theological resources to overcome these linguistic and conceptual issues.<sup>15</sup>

This article will contribute to these ongoing discussions around the impact and use of language as it relates specifically to the process of discerning a call to ordained ministry in the Church of England, although it is anticipated that this discussion will also be of relevance and interest to those from other churches. I will highlight the need to be precise about the theological understandings

8 Sally Myers, ‘New Directions in Voicing a Vocation’, *Theology* 122, no. 3 (May 2019): p. 173 and p. 177.

9 Faith and Order Commission, *Kingdom Calling*, pp. 26–30, p. 35.

10 Faith and Order Commission, pp. 4–5.

11 Pope Paul VI, ‘Lumen Gentium’, 21 November 1964, p. 31, [https://www.vatican.va/archive/hist\\_councils/ii\\_vatican\\_council/documents/vat-ii\\_const\\_19641121\\_lumen-gentium\\_en.html](https://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19641121_lumen-gentium_en.html).

12 Edward P. Hahnenberg, *Awakening Vocation: A Theology of Christian Call* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2010), p. xv.

13 Reiss, *The Testing of Vocation*, p. 2.

14 Archbishops’ Council, ‘Setting God’s People Free’, p. 4.

15 Faith and Order Commission, *Kingdom Calling*, p. 4.

which inform the use of ‘vocational language’ in the discernment process. Rather than repeating the work of many in offering definitions of ‘vocation’ and related words, I will explore how and why ‘vocation’ has come to be interpreted in the contemporary Western cultural context as synonymous with paid employment or practical professional training.<sup>16</sup> I will argue that there is potential for this dominant cultural interpretation to result in some confusion as the process of vocational discernment for ordained ministry differs in significant and substantive ways from career choice and employee recruitment and selection. Having outlined the need for linguistic and conceptual clarity, I will subsequently explore in more detail some of the distinctive features of ordained ministry which differentiate the process of vocational discernment to this role from career choice to secular and lay callings or employment. Within the scope of this article, it will not be possible to fully explore the aspects of ordained ministry in Anglican ecclesiology which give it a distinct shape and function within the church, and indeed this has been explored comprehensively elsewhere.<sup>17</sup> Rather, this article will focus specifically on the implications of these distinctive features of ordained ministry and their relevance for the formal process of vocational discernment for ordination within the Church of England.

I will argue that the nature of ordained ministry as a public office, rooted in Christ, and requiring particular gifts of the Holy Spirit should determine the means by which a vocation to ordination is to be discerned. From these central features of the role, I will contest that the formal process of discerning a call to ordained ministry differs from choosing a career in other lay or secular roles because it requires a discernment of vocation which is distinctly and visibly Christological, pneumatological, and ecclesial in shape and substance.<sup>18</sup> Of course, this does not imply that the call to ordained ministry should be

16 For example, see definitions of ‘vocation’ offered by: Kathleen A. Cahalan, *Introducing the Practice of Ministry* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2010), p. 49; Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, ed. Clifford J. Green, trans. Reinhard Krauss, Charles C. West, and Douglas W. Stott (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2005), p. 293; Gary D. Badcock, *The Way of Life: A Theology of Christian Vocation* (Grand Rapids, MI: W.B. Eerdmans, 1998), pp. 15–16.

17 For example, see the exploration of the distinctive nature of ordained ministry in: Paul Avis, *A Ministry Shaped by Mission* (London: T&T Clark, 2005); Stephen Cottrell, *On Priesthood: Servants, Shepherds, Messengers, Sentinels and Stewards* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 2020); Simon Cuff, *Priesthood for All Believers: Clericalism and How to Avoid It* (London: SCM Press, 2022); Graham Tomlin, *The Widening Circle: Priesthood as God’s Way of Blessing the World* (London: SPCK, 2014).

18 This tripartite definition of ministry is drawn from and develops the work of: Cahalan, *Introducing the Practice of Ministry*, p. 59.

more highly valued or accorded greater status when compared to other roles; rather it acknowledges that there will be some features of the institutional ecclesial discernment process which will differ due to the nature of the role of the ordained minister.<sup>19</sup> Recently Simon Cuff has helpfully argued that intentional reflection on the particularity of differing vocations, including the particular vocation to priesthood, can be a means by which clericalism may be challenged and the variety of vocations honoured and enabled to flourish.<sup>20</sup> This article seeks to contribute to this need for reflection on the particularity of ordained ministry by considering the means by which God's call to this ministry is discerned. It is anticipated that such clarity will also prompt a deeper understanding of the dynamics of discerning God's call in other roles and areas of life.

### Vocation as Career Choice

In the cultural and historical context of the first century Roman empire there was little autonomy granted to a majority of the population with most people engaged in trades determined by family and geography. Badcock notes that, 'The New Testament ... not only *does* not consider the question of vocation in terms of 'career choice', but it *could* not have done so, for such a question would have been virtually unintelligible to its original audience.'<sup>21</sup> This scenario differs in significant ways from contemporary Western society with its 'modern ideals of freedom and social mobility' along with strong expectations of personal fulfilment and self-realisation.<sup>22</sup> It is important to recognise that these drivers are a recent phenomenon and that the concept of choice in occupation remains the privilege of the relatively wealthy, educated and secure.<sup>23</sup>

When Martin Luther made his seminal contribution to the notion of vocation in the 1500s there remained little opportunity to improve one's lot through individual choice. Luther took the feudal structure of society for granted and his theological work incorporates this form of societal organisation as a foundational concept in the guise of a station (*Stand*) or office (*Amt*) in which, by God's providence, each individual finds themselves located and learns to

19 Faith and Order Commission, *Kingdom Calling*, pp. 36–37.

20 Cuff, *Priesthood for All Believers*, pp. 123–26.

21 Badcock, *The Way of Life*, p. 42.

22 Hahnenberg, *Awakening Vocation*, p. 16.

23 Faith and Order Commission, *Kingdom Calling*, p. 31.

love God and serve neighbour.<sup>24</sup> Luther was adamantly opposed to efforts to change the social order and argued against confusing the spiritual equality between people with a necessary distinction in roles between the feudal lords and the peasants who should obey them.<sup>25</sup> This has led to a critique of the subsequent trajectory of Protestantism on vocation as one which downplays the potential of being called to something new and instead promotes maintenance of the status quo.<sup>26</sup> One of Luther's central concerns was the way in which the Church had infused the spiritual relationship with God with distinctions of hierarchy and status which were apparent in the world. He identified one of the ways in which the Church of Rome had sustained its authority and preserved its own interests as the placing of spiritual power over temporal power and thereby elevating those in ecclesial office.<sup>27</sup> Luther connected this two-tiered system with the way in which the words *Beruf* and *vocatio* (calling) were used to refer only to those entering priestly or monastic roles and did not have any relevance for the ordinary lay person.<sup>28</sup> In his German Bible, he chose the *Beruf* to translate the Greek *klesis* in 1 Corinthians 7:20 and in so doing he drew a connection between the call of God and the everyday task of living out Christian discipleship.<sup>29</sup>

Luther's reworking of the language of calling has proved remarkably influential over the intervening centuries. Although 'classical Protestantism never committed itself to the view that the Christian doctrine of vocation was fundamentally a question of secular work',<sup>30</sup> that has not prevented wider society from developing the concept in this direction. This has resulted in the word 'vocation' being used, from the eighteenth century onwards, to refer to employed occupations in general.<sup>31</sup> In contemporary Britain 'vocation' is commonly used to describe professional caring roles, such as those in the medical or teaching fields, while 'vocational training' describes hands-on learning schemes for practical trades, such as plumbing or bricklaying.<sup>32</sup> Thus,

24 Gustaf Wingren, *Luther on Vocation*, trans. Carl Rasmussen (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2004), p. 248.

25 Wingren, p. 111.

26 Hahnenberg, *Awakening Vocation*, p. 98.

27 Martin Luther, *The Christian in Society I*, ed. James Atkinson (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress Press, 1966), p. 123.

28 Hahnenberg, *Awakening Vocation*, p. 15.

29 Martin Luther, *Commentary on 1 Corinthians 7*, ed. Hilton C. Oswald (Saint Louis, MO: Concordia Publishing House, 1973), p. 46.

30 Badcock, *The Way of Life*, p. 88.

31 Reiss, *The Testing of Vocation*, p. 4.

32 John Williams, 'Farewell to the League of Gentlemen: Ordained Ministry as Vocation, Profession and Career', in *In and Out of Service: Priesthood and Its Problems*, ed. Jeremy Morris (London: Affirming Catholicism, 2001), pp. 6–7; Francis Dewar, *Called or Collared?*

Hahnenberg comments, 'Luther's attempt to highlight the sacredness of work led to a secularisation of the concept of calling ... God became superfluous to a theory of vocation. The calling no longer needed a caller.'<sup>33</sup>

The use of the word 'vocation' in wider society presents Christians with a confusing picture of what it means to engage in work as a meaningful expression of discipleship. Some Christians have a clear sense of being called by God to a particular role, job or task, others consider the winding road they have taken as an indication of God's guidance, while for many work will be experienced as dull, laborious or demeaning without a clear purpose beyond financial sustenance.<sup>34</sup> In a cultural context in which choice is a dominant paradigm, the responsibility for finding one's vocation can induce anxiety or uncertainty about what it means to live as a disciple in the workplace.<sup>35</sup> Furthermore, discussions around career choice have changed significantly in recent years as the work environment has shifted towards offering fewer long-term contracts and has required greater geographical mobility and flexible work patterns from employees.<sup>36</sup> Dewar notes that it is tempting to respond to uncertainty by seeking a 'ready-made niche' to fulfil the Christian's desire for purpose and meaning in work and that 'ordained ministry is ... a handy receptacle which feels as though it will accommodate our vague longings and give some shape to them'.<sup>37</sup>

Having traced the historical developments which have contributed to a variety of linguistic and conceptual interpretations being made of 'vocation', I will now explore whether any distinction can be made between the discernment of a vocation to ordained ministry and the process of choosing a career path.

### The Shape of Ordained Ministry and Vocational Discernment

The current cultural interpretation of 'vocation' may present a challenge to those working with candidates exploring ordained ministry since elements of personal choice will be interpreted differently within the church's discernment

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*An Alternative Approach to Vocation* (London: SPCK, 2000), p. 4; Christopher Jamison, 'A Culture of Vocation', in *The Disciples' Call: Theologies of Vocation from Scripture to the Present Day*, ed. Christopher Jamison (London: Bloomsbury, 2014), p. 229.

33 Hahnenberg, *Awakening Vocation*, p. 23.

34 Cahalan, *Introducing the Practice of Ministry*, p. 40.

35 Badcock, *The Way of Life*, 46; Archbishops' Council, 'Setting God's People Free', p. 4.

36 Anthony Giddens and Philip W. Sutton, *Sociology*, 8th edition (Cambridge Malden, MA: Polity, 2017), p. 283.

37 Dewar, *Called or Collared?*, p. 7.



process when compared with other forms of career choice or occupational recruitment. As Lynn McChlery notes in her study of vocational discernment processes for ordained ministry within a range of denominations, it is necessary to be explicit about the theological and ecclesial commitments underlying discernment because 'where the distinction between discernment of call and assessment for secular employment is not fully grasped, the paradigm for the latter will remain the default position'.<sup>38</sup>

There is an expectation expressed in the *Common Worship* ordination service for priests that ordinands will have engaged in a comprehensive process of discernment: 'long ago you began to weigh and ponder all this, and ... you are fully determined, by the grace of God, to devote yourself wholly to his service'.<sup>39</sup> This is balanced by the recognition that ordinands need to be 'be called, tried, examined' by others.<sup>40</sup> References within the ordination service to the process of vocational discernment by which the call of God has been recognised are framed by comprehensive descriptions of the role to which the ordinands are to be ordained.<sup>41</sup> It is in the distinctive nature of the roles of deacon and priest that the unique shape of calling to ordained ministry is to be identified, rather than in psychological or cultural frameworks of career choice.<sup>42</sup>

It is possible to identify three central features of ordained ministry expressed in the *Common Worship* ordination services for deacons and priests and reinforced by the bishop directly before the ordination prayer. First, there is a reminder that the ordained ministry is not a position of great personal elevation, but rather 'the ministry of Christ himself, who for our sake took the form of a servant' (Deacons) and the care of 'Christ's own flock' (Priests).<sup>43</sup> Ordained ministry is to be exercised with an awareness that it is rooted in the life and ministry of Christ and has a Christological shape to it. Second, ordinands are prompted to ponder their incapability of bearing 'the weight of this calling in your own strength' and are urged to 'pray earnestly for the gift of the

38 Lynn McChlery, *How Do You Know It's God? The Theology and Practice of Discerning a Call to Ministry* (London: SCM Press, 2021), p. 222.

39 Church of England, *Common Worship: Ordination Services - Study Guide: Services and Prayers for the Church of England* (London: Church House Publishing, 2007), p. 37.

40 Church of England, p. 79.

41 Church of England, p. 15 and p. 37.

42 For an empirical exploration of psychological aspects of discerning a call to priesthood within the Catholic Church and a comparison with psychological theories of career choice, see: Dominick D. Hankle, 'The Psychological Processes of Discerning the Vocation to the Catholic Priesthood: A Qualitative Study', *Pastoral Psychology* 59, no. 2 (April 2009): p. 218.

43 Church of England, *Ordination Services*, p. 17 and p. 39.



Holy Spirit'.<sup>44</sup> In this there is a focus on ordination as effected and enabled by the presence of the Holy Spirit.<sup>45</sup> Ordained ministry is pneumatologically gifted and empowered. Third, the bishop's statements about ordination not only reference the role and responsibility that the deacon or priest will have; they are contextualised by the preceding questions posed to the congregation: 'Is it now your will that they should be ordained?'<sup>46</sup> In this there is a requirement that the people recognise God's call in the lives of the ordinands and understand that ordination will bring about a changed relationship with them as they serve and lead the church community. Ordained ministry is clearly a public role and has an ecclesial origin and purpose to it.

The Christological, pneumatological and ecclesial elements in the *Common Worship* ordination service seek to shape how ordinands subsequently interpret their role, exercise ministry, and relate to the church. I wish to suggest that these three aspects of ordination offer the Church of England a theological and liturgical framework of vocational discernment which could aid in communicating clearly with candidates about the ways in which they should expect that discerning a call to ordained ministry will be distinct from career choice. While recognising that these three elements of ministry cannot be neatly separated, each will now be considered in turn. The Christological, pneumatological and ecclesial shape of ordained ministry will be outlined and the ramifications of these aspects for vocational discernment will be compared with wider notions of career choice along with recommendations for the discernment process of the Church of England.

### The Christological Shape of Ordained Ministry

Since its formation, the Church of England has been influenced by and responded to both Roman Catholic and Reformation theological influences. These theological traditions emphasise different aspects of what it means for ordained ministry to share in the priesthood of Christ. The influence of these traditions upon the theology and practice of ordained ministry has also had a long and varied history within the Church of England, such that Paul Avis notes that 'not all Anglicans have understood their Church in the same way and there is far from being unanimity today about the ecclesial identity of

44 Church of England, p. 17 and p. 39.

45 Paul Bradshaw, *Rites of Ordination: Their History and Theology* (London: SPCK, 2014), p. 190.

46 Church of England, *Ordination Services*, p. 17.

Anglicanism'.<sup>47</sup> The Roman Catholic interpretation of ministry has consistently emphasised the sacerdotal functions of the priest who acts *in persona Christi* pre-eminently in the Eucharist.<sup>48</sup> Influentially, Thomas Aquinas highlighted the significance of the priest uttering Jesus' own words in the first person and in the present tense during the consecration of the elements.<sup>49</sup> This authority and power of the priest to offer the Eucharistic sacrifice 'acting in the person of Christ' is a central feature of the nature of the ordained ministry within the Roman Catholic Church and is understood as something which distinguishes those who are ordained from the laity.<sup>50</sup> This is reflected in the way those writing in contemporary catholic tradition within the Church of England speak of the role of the priest in presiding at the Eucharist as an *alter Christus* and as an icon of Christ.<sup>51</sup>

The Reformation theological trajectory has interpreted the relationship between ministry and the work of Christ differently, founding its understanding on the work of Martin Luther. One of Luther's concerns was how the sacerdotal nature of priesthood elevated the priest above other Christians by emphasising the new relationship with God that he enjoyed having been ordained.<sup>52</sup> Luther drew on 1 Peter 2:9 to offer a corrective to this distortion by highlighting that 'we are all consecrated priests through baptism' and therefore stand before God as equals.<sup>53</sup> The Reformation tradition repeatedly returns to this central insight to inform its understanding of the Church as 'a royal priesthood' sharing in the ministry of Christ as the true High Priest.<sup>54</sup> This has led some Reformed churches to regard ministry as a delegated authority in which a congregation allocates one of its number to perform particular tasks on behalf of them all.<sup>55</sup> Despite referring back to Luther's central insight and

47 Paul Avis, *The Anglican Understanding of the Church* (London: SPCK, 2000), pp. 15–26.

48 Avery Dulles, *The Priestly Office: A Theological Reflection* (New York, NY: Paulist Press, 1997), p. 39.

49 Pope Pius XII, 'Mediator Dei: Encyclical of Pope Pius XII on the Sacred Liturgy', 1947, 69, [http://www.vatican.va/content/pius-xii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf\\_p-xii\\_enc\\_20110947\\_mediator-dei.html](http://www.vatican.va/content/pius-xii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_p-xii_enc_20110947_mediator-dei.html); Robert Sokolowski, *Eucharistic Presence: A Study in the Theology of Disclosure* (Washington, D.C: Catholic University of America Press, 1994), p. 15; Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae III*, ed. Kevin Knight, trans. Fathers of the English Dominican Province, 2017, p. 78 and p. 82, <http://www.newadvent.org/summa/4.htm>.

50 Pope Paul VI, 'Lumen Gentium', p. 10.

51 John-Francis Friendship, *Enfolded in Christ: The Inner Life of a Priest* (Norwich: Canterbury Press, 2018), pp. 100–101.

52 Badcock, *The Way of Life*, p. 34.

53 Luther, *The Christian in Society I*, p. 123.

54 1 Peter 2:9 NRSV; Tomlin, *The Widening Circle*, p. 108; Archbishops' Council, 'Setting God's People Free', p. 1.

55 Badcock, *The Way of Life*, p. 35.

interpretation of 1 Peter 2:9, the Anglican Church has not adopted this congregationalist model and instead emphasises that it is God who calls people to ordained ministry: 'we give you thanks because within the royal priesthood of your Church you ordain ministers to proclaim the word of God, to care for your people and to celebrate the sacraments of the new covenant'.<sup>56</sup>

Despite these varied emphases between theological traditions, there appears to be agreement that a Christological pattern is central to understanding the nature and shape of ordained ministry. This consensus was reflected in the ecumenical statement made at Lima which described ordained ministers as 'representatives of Jesus Christ' who, in leading the church in worship, mission and pastoral care, 'fulfils these functions in a representative way, providing the focus for the unity of the life and witness of the community'.<sup>57</sup> As well as acting *in persona Christi*, the ordained person is also understood to in some way bear the *imago Christi*.<sup>58</sup> The Lima Text further commented that in the ordained person should be seen 'an example of holiness and loving concern'.<sup>59</sup> During the Church of England Ordination Service, priests are asked whether they will, aided by the Holy Spirit, 'endeavour to fashion your own life and that of your household according to the way of Christ, that you may be a pattern and example to Christ's people?'<sup>60</sup> However, Graham Tomlin highlights that when too close an identification is made between the priest and Christ, there is the potential for 'the kind of abusive clerical domination that has been far too common in the history of the Church'.<sup>61</sup> It is therefore essential to clarify that living as an example or 'image' of Christ does not mark the priest out as one worthy of elevation to high status and power, rather it points to the manner in which priesthood should be a reflection of Jesus who 'came not to be served but to serve' (Matthew 20:28; Mark 10:45). The priest is called to love, serve and pastor the church such that its members are spurred on and encouraged in their worship, discipleship and mission and 'all may live as *imago Christi*'.<sup>62</sup>

Having recognised the Christological shape of ministry in which those who are ordained are understood to represent Christ, to follow his model of servant leadership, and to live as examples of discipleship, it is possible to suggest ways in which the nature of this role determines the manner in which

56 Church of England, *Ordination Services*, p. 52.

57 World Council of Churches, 'Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry: Faith and Order Paper No. 111' (Geneva, 1982), pp. 18–19.

58 Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae III*, 83 1.3.

59 World Council of Churches, 'Lima Text', p. 18.

60 Church of England, *Ordination Services*, p. 38.

61 Tomlin, *The Widening Circle*, p. 118.

62 Cahalan, *Introducing the Practice of Ministry*, p. 59.

the vocation to ordained ministry should be discerned and differentiated from career choice. In a society in which autonomy, choice, and personal fulfilment are dominant themes, one's career path is often interpreted as an individualistic pursuit of self-realisation.<sup>63</sup> The call to ordained ministry can sometimes be framed in similar terms.<sup>64</sup> Indeed, on my last day working as an occupational therapist prior to commencing training for ordained ministry, a colleague commented that 'it's great that you can follow your dreams and become a priest'. In this statement it is possible to see the way a society historically influenced by Christianity interprets vocation within a framework which could be described as 'a nearly perfect counterfeit of true religion, a religion in which God appears as the glorious affirmer of self-seeking and self-love'.<sup>65</sup> The call of God is expressed in terms of self-development and self-fulfilment, rather than as something requiring a response of obedience and willing service.

The Christological shape of ministry challenges any personal ambition, desire for advancement, or sense of entitlement to power or prestige when discerning a call to ordination. As those will who model their lives on Jesus and share in his ministry, there will be a cruciform shape to candidates' experience similar to that described by Paul as 'always carrying in the body the death of Jesus so that the life of Jesus may also be made visible in our bodies'.<sup>66</sup> Hence Badcock emphasises that 'a vocation is always to be understood in terms of bearing a cross ... It is not primarily about self-discovery or self-fulfilment at all, but about finding one's life by losing it for Christ's sake – that is to say, for the sake of his mission, for the sake of the kingdom of God'.<sup>67</sup> The self-giving nature of the role determines that the discernment process explores whether the candidate has reckoned with the practical and emotional toll of a role which encompasses the whole of life and is not left behind at the front door at the end of the working day nor laid aside at the supermarket or school gate. This requires that candidates demonstrate insight into what it means to hold a public office and reckon with aspects of their own character and discipleship which might be incongruent with the demands of whole-life ministry.

63 Hankle, 'The Psychological Processes of Discerning the Vocation to the Catholic Priesthood', p. 205.

64 Faith and Order Commission, *Kingdom Calling*, pp. 20–22.

65 Mark McIntosh, *Discernment and Truth: The Spirituality and Theology of Knowledge* (New York, NY: Crossroad Publishing, 2004), p. 80.

66 2 Corinthians 4:10; for a comprehensive discussion of the 'cruciform shape of ministry' presented by Paul, see: Michael Gorman, *Apostle of the Crucified Lord: A Theological Introduction to Paul and His Letters* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2004), pp. 287–337.

67 Badcock, *The Way of Life*, pp. 72–73.

Although on a practical level ‘there is no *one* way of being a priest’,<sup>68</sup> ordination within the Anglican tradition is understood as in some way ontological as well as functional and therefore an account needs to be made of candidates being prepared and willing to give of themselves in response to the call of Christ and the church when they are discerning a call to ordained ministry. The Christological nature of ministry ensures that vocational discernment towards ordained ministry is distinct from career choice for other job roles because it is by necessity self-giving rather than self-fulfilment. However, it would be possible to mistakenly interpret this as a sacrificial act of the human will, rather than dependent on the work of the Holy Spirit, so it is to the pneumatological shape of ordained ministry that we will now turn.

### The Pneumatological Shape of Ordained Ministry

From the earliest days of the church, it has been recognised that the primary call of God is to the life of discipleship following Jesus and witnessed in the waters of baptism. Callings to particular forms of service are subsequent to this foundational vocation.<sup>69</sup> Both the call to discipleship and the differentiation of particular callings are acts enabled by the Holy Spirit, a process described as one in which ‘the Spirit calls people to faith, sanctifies them through many gifts, gives them strength to witness to the Gospel, and empowers them to service in hope and love’.<sup>70</sup>

It would be easy to think that the ordained ministry developed merely as a pragmatic means of organising a group of people which became a practical necessity as the church grew.<sup>71</sup> However, it is apparent in the New Testament that God has bound the members of the church together in dependence on one another through the different gifts bestowed by the Spirit: ‘Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit; there are varieties of services, but the same Lord; and there are varieties of activities, but it is the same God who activates all of them in everyone. To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit

68 Rowan Williams, *A Ray of Darkness: Sermons and Reflections* (Cambridge: Cowley Publications, 1995), p. 157.

69 Cara Lovell, “Do You Believe That God Is Calling You to This Ministry?” Subjective and Objective Factors in Discerning Vocation in the Church of England’, *Theology and Ministry*, no. 6 (2020): pp. 84–85; Douglas James Schuurman, *Vocation: Discerning Our Callings in Life* (Grand Rapids, MI: W.B. Eerdmans, 2004), p. 17.

70 World Council of Churches, ‘Lima Text’, p. 16.

71 Robert Jenson, *Visible Words: The Interpretation and Practice of Christian Sacraments* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2010), p. 188.

for the common good' (1 Cor. 12.4–6).<sup>72</sup> In this way the church is formed, sustained and grown by the Holy Spirit at work in and through members in their willingness to serve in response to need and to the Spirit's gifting. Although the precise composition of the role of the ordained minister has developed and evolved from these early days, Robert Jenson comments: 'The ministerial differentiation of the church and the church's own existence are precisely coeval and mutually dependent.'<sup>73</sup> The church has always been and continues to be a body in which the Holy Spirit bestows different charisms for service and mutual upbuilding.

The discernment of a call to ordained ministry lies in the identification of the charism of the Spirit for this form of service to the church.<sup>74</sup> In ordination the church recognises that a particular individual has the natural talents and Spirit-imparted gifts necessary for ministry.<sup>75</sup> However, this is not a straightforward process of spotting ability and ordaining those with particular skill or inclination. There is a pattern apparent in Scripture which makes it clear that God frequently calls those who would be overlooked in human terms and whose calling is a surprise to them and to their contemporaries: '... the Lord does not see as mortals see; they look on the outward appearance, but the Lord looks on the heart' (from the call of David in 1 Samuel 16.7). In this, ordained ministry differs fundamentally from most other forms of employment in which competence, physical capacity or specialist skills are pre-requisites for appointment and which it is assumed can be assessed through written applications and interviews. Instead, the selection and training process for ordained ministry, whilst recognising the need for certain abilities to be in evidence, places an emphasis on character, spiritual formation and on who the priest will be among the people of God, rather than simply on what they will do.<sup>76</sup>

A charism for ministry is therefore a gift of the Spirit which may be discerned in an individual and lead to them being recommended for ordained ministry.<sup>77</sup> However, this is complicated by the recognition that in the act of ordination a charism for the exercising of ordained ministry is gifted by the Spirit: 'Send down the Holy Spirit on your servant ... for the office and work of a priest in your Church.'<sup>78</sup> With this laying-on of hands and the invocation of the Spirit, ordination has been described as 'a rite which bestows a charism.'<sup>79</sup> Whether

72 Cahalan, *Introducing the Practice of Ministry*, pp. 32–33.

73 Jenson, *Visible Words*, p. 190.

74 Cahalan, *Introducing the Practice of Ministry*, p. 55.

75 World Council of Churches, 'Lima Text', p. 28.

76 Williams, 'Farewell to the League of Gentlemen', p. 13.

77 Avis, *A Ministry Shaped by Mission*, p. 114.

78 Church of England, *Ordination Services*, p. 43.

79 Jenson, *Visible Words*, p. 198.

or not this is interpreted to result in an indelible and permanent change to the character of the individual being ordained, this charism is what makes ordination an unrepeatable act.<sup>80</sup> Richard Hooker, in his influential contribution to Anglican sacramental theology, emphasised that the invocation of the Holy Spirit in ordination is efficacious and dismissed the possibility of re-ordination: 'They which once have received this power may not think to put it off and on like a cloak as the weather serveth ... let them know, which put their hands unto this plough, that once consecrated unto God, they are made his peculiar inheritance for ever.'<sup>81</sup>

The pneumatological shape to ordained ministry differentiates the process of vocational discernment from other forms of recruitment or career choice in two ways. First, the dependence of ordained ministry upon the activity of the Holy Spirit determines that ordination is not a path which is chosen, but one to which a person is called by God; and second, that this calling should not be undertaken lightly without appreciating the significance of the decision. In identifying the charism of the Spirit to be the identifying factor in discerning and equipping those who are called to ordained ministry, there is a recognition that this is more than a job appointment and is to be interpreted as in some way constituting the call of God. Karl Barth describes how, 'As God in His special command imperatively makes known to man His choice of the special and therefore limited thing which He will have of him, God "calls" him.'<sup>82</sup> This sense of calling may be experienced or mediated in a wide variety of ways, but ultimately those who discern a call to ordained ministry will recognise that their path was not self-selected but was the choice of God.<sup>83</sup> Although there will be some who describe having a clear and personal sense of God's call into a particular job role, this is not essential and will not be the experience of many, if not most, people in secular employment.<sup>84</sup> Even for those who do feel a strong sense of calling to a particular occupation, the process of application and interview will rarely be conducted with a conscious reliance on the Holy Spirit for discernment and the outcome would be unlikely to be framed by the company or organisation as conveying and implementing the will and purpose of God. In this, the process of discerning a call to ordained ministry

80 World Council of Churches, 'Lima Text', p. 29.

81 Richard Hooker, 'Of the Lawes of Ecclesiasticall Politie' (London, 1723), p. 275.

82 Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics III.4: The Doctrine of Creation*, eds. G. W Bromiley and Thomas F Torrance, trans. A.T. Mackay et al. (London: T&T Clark, 2009), p. 595.

83 Michael Ramsey, *The Christian Priest Today*, 2nd ed. (London: SPCK, 2009), p. 101.

84 Dewar, *Called or Collared?*, p. 2.



differs fundamentally from the practices associated with career choice and job appointment.

Furthermore, the permanent and unrepeatable nature of ordination requires that there is a very careful, deliberate and prayerful discernment process for those entering ordained ministry. While those in secular employment may decide to move jobs, retrain, or change career entirely several times in their working life, there is an expectation that the 'initial commitment to ordained ministry ought normally to be made without reserve or time limit'.<sup>85</sup> Even if the ordained person chooses to step out of active ministry for a time, on their return there will be no need for re-ordination as the fact of their ordination and the charism of the Spirit remain.<sup>86</sup> This necessitates that the discernment process towards ordained ministry should provide sufficient time and space for candidates to appreciate the significance and practical ramifications of this call on their lives.<sup>87</sup> The pneumatological nature of ordained ministry ensures that the call to ordination is not interpreted as personal career choice, but rather is experienced as the call of God upon the life of an individual for the sake of the church. It is to this new relationship with Christ's church that we now turn our attention as we focus on the ecclesial shape of ordained ministry.

### The Ecclesial Shape of Ordained Ministry

The ordination service marks the beginning of the ministry of the individual as a deacon or priest and grants to the newly ordained the authority to perform their duties within the church community.<sup>88</sup> This is the culmination of a journey towards this point, such that 'as a person moves through the various paths of call, discernment, formation, authorisation, and ritual blessing, they are "repositioned" in relation to members of the community.'<sup>89</sup> Their role as those who will minister through word and sacrament for the sake of the building up and equipping of the church, does not elevate them above others, but does set them apart for this purpose and necessitates a new relationship with the wider body of the church.<sup>90</sup> The ordained remain fellow disciples with the rest of the

85 World Council of Churches, 'Lima Text', p. 29.

86 Jenson, *Visible Words*, p. 202.

87 Church of England, *Ordination Services*, p. 37.

88 Church of England, p. 22 and p. 44; Avis, *A Ministry Shaped by Mission*, p. 115.

89 Cahalan, *Introducing the Practice of Ministry*, p. 64.

90 Tomlin, *The Widening Circle*, p. 119 and p. 127.

baptised people of God, and yet are gifted with a public responsibility to spur others on in their discipleship and to equip the church in mission.<sup>91</sup>

As well as a changed relationship with the church community, after ordination a new relationship is formed with other ministers.<sup>92</sup> Jenson likens this movement to the new relational connections instigated in baptism, so that 'as baptism is initiation into the believing community, ordination is initiation into a community within the believing community'.<sup>93</sup> This is more than a warm comradeship amongst colleagues as the ordained are collectively responsible for ensuring that the church remains faithful to the teaching handed down by the apostles and also sensitive to the living and dynamic presence of the Holy Spirit in their midst.<sup>94</sup> It is to this shared duty that the newly ordained are welcomed and initiated.

In recognising that the proper focus of the ordained ministry is upon the life and health of the church, it becomes apparent that the call to this ministry should arise within and be discerned by the people of God. This is at odds with how vocational discernment has often been interpreted as a strong, compelling personal sense of calling experienced by an individual and ratified by the church.<sup>95</sup> The difficulties with this emphasis were outlined in the *Call to Order* report published in 1989 along with the recommendation that 'the language of an inner call is neither the sole nor the most appropriate language to be used in connexion with what is essentially a community office or role'.<sup>96</sup> In this it is apparent that the nature of the role determines that there is an ecclesial shape to the discernment of vocation to ordination.

On a practical level, it is essential that the formal selection process for ordained ministry emphasises that vocational discernment is a task for the whole church rather than purely a matter for the individual.<sup>97</sup> This has not been consistently reflected in the formal discernment process over recent decades, although there are changes to the new system being introduced in 2021/2022 which may shift the emphasis. Until recently, the 'Vocation Criteria' by which the Church of England has determined the potential of a candidate

91 Cahalan, *Introducing the Practice of Ministry*, p. 50.

92 Avis, *A Ministry Shaped by Mission*, p. 115; World Council of Churches, 'Lima Text', p. 28.

93 Jenson, *Visible Words*, p. 188.

94 Jenson, p. 197; Rowan Williams, "'The Christian Priest Today'" (Cuddesdon, Oxford, 28 May 2004), <http://aoc2013.brix.fatbeehive.com/articles.php/2097/the-christian-priest-today-lecture-on-the-occasion-of-the-150th-anniversary-of-ripon-college-cuddesd>.

95 Reiss, *The Testing of Vocation*, p. 287–89.

96 ACCM, *Call to Order: Vocation and Ministry in the Church of England* (London: Ludo Press, 1989), p. 59.

97 Faith and Order Commission, *Kingdom Calling*, 36; Lovell, 'Discerning Vocation in the Church', pp. 85–87.

for ordained ministry required that they were 'able to speak of the development of their inner conviction and the extent to which others have confirmed it', which implies that the call is rightly identified first by the individual and only subsequently by those around them.<sup>98</sup> Empirical research by Peter Gubi suggests that this has set up an inherent tension within the discernment process whereby those who are not subsequently selected to train for ordained ministry experience considerable feelings of rejection and confusion as they struggle to reconcile their strong personal sense of calling with not being recommended.<sup>99</sup> This is further exacerbated by the length of time and the amount of prayer and reflection which has often preceded this final outcome.<sup>100</sup>

Although it is tempting to make an analogy between the formal process of selection for ordained ministry and interviews for job appointments or career advancement in other spheres of society, this does not accurately reflect the way in which the church should be actively involved throughout the process of discernment. Thus it is encouraging to see recent initiatives which place the emphasis on the local church playing an active role in proactively identifying and encouraging those who might be called to ordained ministry.<sup>101</sup> In this way, the ecclesial shape of ministry will be reflected from the earliest moments of discernment as the individual experiences the call of God mediated through the church and for the purpose of building up and leading the community.

## Conclusion

This article has highlighted the need within the current cultural climate to review the concepts and language used to refer to a call to ordination. It has traced the potential for confusion to occur to two main influences. The first is the desire to value and encourage the laity in serving within the church as 'ministry' and to view their everyday lives using an interpretive linguistic framework of 'calling'. The second is a wider societal tendency to use the word 'vocation' to describe certain professional jobs or forms of practical training; a move which has been traced back to the work of Martin Luther, but which has

98 Ministry Division, 'Criteria for Selection for the Ordained Ministry in the Church of England' (London, 2014), p. 1.

99 Peter Madsen Gubi, 'When the Personal Call to Ordained Ministry Is Not Recognised by the Church: Implications for Selection and Pastoral Care' (University of Chester, 2019), pp. 132–33.

100 Gubi, p. 135.

101 Andrew Watson and Magdalen Smith, *The Great Vocations Conversation: A Year of Inspiration and Challenge for Ministers* (London: Church House Publishing, 2018), pp. 5–6.

ultimately led to the secularisation of the concept of vocation. With these twin influences apparent in the contemporary context, this article has outlined the necessity for the Church of England to be clear about how the discernment of a call to ordained ministry differs from choosing a career. It has been suggested that the distinction is to be found in the Christological, pneumatological and ecclesial shape of ordained ministry and that clarity about these aspects of the role could help the Church communicate the difference between the process of vocational discernment towards ordination and career choice.

The Christological shape of ordained ministry has been shown to require a process of vocational discernment which explores candidates' preparedness to lay aside models of career choice which prioritise self-fulfilment and personal gain. Candidates need to reflect on what it means to exercise ministry as a representative of Christ and to live out their discipleship as an encouraging example for others. There also needs to be an honest exploration of what it means for ordained ministry to encompass the whole of life and the practical implications of this when compared to other job roles.

The pneumatological shape of ordained ministry necessitates that an account is made of the Holy Spirit's activity in the life of the individual and in the life of the church. The charism for ministry is clearly one of a range of gifts which God gives to the church by the Spirit and, in discerning this particular charism, individuals will be identified for ordained ministry. In the laying-on of hands and the invocation of the Holy Spirit during the ordination service, there is understood to be a bestowal of the Spirit for the new role that the ordained minister will occupy within the church. This factor differentiates ordained ministry from career choice since it is interpreted as the call of God, rather than self-selection or personal choice. The significant ramifications of ordination for the whole of a person's lifespan also need to be emphasised and the process of discernment entered into thoughtfully, prayerfully and seriously.

Finally, the ecclesial shape of ordained ministry is apparent from the focus of the ordained ministry upon the life, health and vitality of the church as it is engaged in worship and mission. In ordination, there is both a change of relationship between the ordained minister and the people of God, and a new relationship formed with other ministers who together share the task of keeping the church faithful. This determines that the call to ordained ministry is not simply a matter of choice for the individual who decides that they are suited for this role, but rather that the church is responsible for discerning the call of God to ordination. This needs to be explicitly communicated to candidates to avoid potential tension between the individual and ecclesial elements of the discernment process.

Drawing on the theological and liturgical resources offered by the *Common Worship* Ordination Service, in this article I have identified three aspects of ordained ministry which shape the process of vocational discernment. I suggest that those involved in the Church of England's vocational discernment process should highlight to candidates that ordained ministry is fundamentally Christological, pneumatological and ecclesial and that the explicit communication of this theological framework would offer candidates clarity about the distinctive nature of vocational discernment for ordination, rather than as a career choice.

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