

Readers as MSEs

Readership of the Journal has since the start included a number of Church of England Readers, several of whom have made important contributions to the growth of MSE and of CHRISM. With the recent attention on Worker Priests, both in Britain and Europe, what follows is a timely reminder of the Readers' role in the development of ministry at work, and of the Church of England's confusion as to how Readers can be used. Ed.

There have always been conflicting statements in the literature about Reader ministry on whether the Church of England wanted Readers to prioritise their ministry inside the church as preachers and teachers or to act as missionaries, evangelists or theologians in the world. Whilst some of the references to preaching and teaching suggest a ministry to the church community other texts provide a different picture. This is illustrated in a comment by Bishop Christopher Mayfield (until his recent retirement, Episcopal Officer for reader Ministry) that Readers can be "builders of bridges between the believing church and the unbelieving world" and the ABM view that Readers should move out of the church into the world because they had "the opportunity to bring a theological resource to people whom the clergy never meet". There is however a difficulty with the presupposition that the laity have extensive non-church based contacts because church growth studies have shown that members of the laity who have been active church members for some time are just as likely as the clergy to have limited non-church relationships.

'A Church For The World' states that: "Readers have been treated more and more as substitute clergy" rather than "the representatives in worship of the engagement of Christians-in-the-world". The report particularly stresses the desire that Readers would become preachers and teachers who stop being focused on the pastoral activities of other members of the laity, and become people who can interpret the gospel in the light of their experiences in the world. This view was partially endorsed by the Report On Bishops' Regulations For Reader Ministry where Readers were seen as preachers and teachers with liturgical responsibility. A further example is the Bishop of Southampton who believes that the Reader has a responsibility as a lay-theologian to work out the practical implications of the interaction between the church and the world.

The survey clearly showed that 73% of respondents preferred Readers to bring their experience of work and the world into their preaching and teaching ministry within the church. There were, however exceptions, who saw the mission and outreach, function as more important.

The role of the Reader in the workplace highlights the distinction between the functions that Readers carry out because they are Readers and what they could have done without their licence.

The evidence gathered in the survey suggests that the Reader's licence is 'at best' a discussion starter in the work place. This implies that the idea of a bishop's licence enabling Readers to become an outward looking 'bridge builder between the church and the world' is somewhat optimistic. This position agrees with research on NSM, which identified that ordination as a priest gives a person in secular employment far more visibility than that experienced by Readers, which may lead to opportunities and hostility.

The fact remains that a Reader, and equivalents in other denominations, is theologically trained and authorised. They are 'representative' and equipped to 'do theology'. As with NSMs (of various titles!), the Reader has as much ministry at work as they are prepared to take on!