

Vocations and Changes to the Priesthood

Adrian Vincent

Over the last thirty years, the Church of England has introduced several major changes to the priesthood: non-stipendiary ministry (NSM), local non-stipendiary ministry (LNSM), the ordination of women and the ordination of the remarried after divorce. At the same time, the number of candidates for the stipendiary priesthood has declined. I shall present statistics which suggest that the changes have contributed to this decline, and suggest why this may be so. I shall argue that changes to the priesthood should not be influenced by an expectation that they will increase vocations, but should be made solely on the basis of theology. On that basis, I shall ask whether the introduction of NSM and LNSM is biblically justified. Finally, I shall discuss what action can be taken to increase vocations.

Firstly, it should be acknowledged that a host of factors can influence the number of vocations to the priesthood, including: Christian work in schools, universities and youth organizations; specific vocations work; church attendance figures and level of commitment; the changing role of the laity; changes in society; the status of the priesthood as a profession; finance for training, stipends and pensions; the teaching and perceived direction of the church; prayer.

Secondly, the changes made to the priesthood over the last thirty years, should be seen against the background of an already declining number of vocations. Although no selection figures exist prior to 1949, the trend can be illustrated by the ordination figures. The average number of ordinations annually were: 491 during 1900-19, 472 during 1920-39, 385 during 1940-59.

Those who called for each change to the priesthood often accompanied their theological arguments with the argument that the change would, by widening the constituency of those eligible for the priesthood, increase the total number of vocations. For example, the introduction of NSM and LNSM was influenced by the perceived need to supply congregations with

the frequency of eucharistic celebration to which they have become accustomed. LNSM, and non-stipendiary ministry in general, may

be seen to have arisen partly as a considered response to the same pressures as those which have led to a growing interest in lay presidency.¹

However, whilst vocations did indeed come from the new categories, the total number of vocations continued to decline. This is because the decline in numbers for the traditional category (men for the stipendiary priesthood), has been greater than the numbers coming from the new categories.

The graph overleaf shows the numbers of candidates recommended for training for the ministry of the Church of England, at selection conferences between 1949 and 1996.² The last thirty years have seen a diversification of the categories of sponsorship, as this breakdown of two years illustrates:

1966 470 candidates were recommended at national selection conferences (this was 75 per cent of candidates). All of them were men, for stipendiary priesthood.

1996 453 candidates were recommended.

390 were recommended at national selection conferences (this was 62 per cent of candidates):

178 men and 65 women for stipendiary priesthood

63 men and 69 women for non-stipendiary priesthood

eight men and one woman for local non-stipendiary priesthood

two men for stipendiary accredited lay ministry

one woman for stipendiary diaconate

three women for non-stipendiary diaconate.

63 were recommended at local selection conferences for LNSM (this was 81 per cent of candidates):

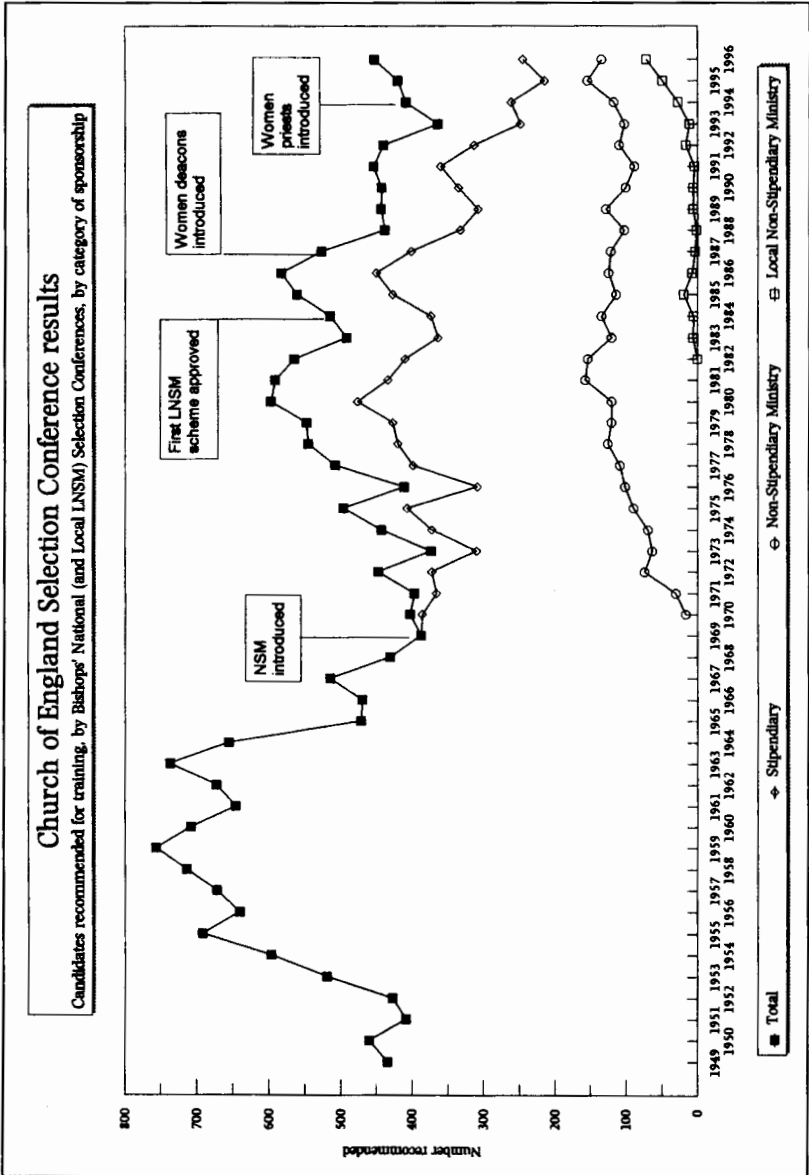
34 men and 29 women for local non-stipendiary priesthood.

As the graph shows, the total numbers of candidates recommended has declined: 453 candidates were recommended in 1996, compared to the average for 1949-96 of 530. This is not due to a smaller percentage of candidates being selected: 64 per cent were recommended in 1996, compared to the average for 1949-96 of 65 per cent. Although there was a declining trend before the changes were introduced, there is statistical evidence that the changes exacerbated the decline in the number of men

1 *Eucharistic Presidency: A Theological Statement by the House of Bishops of the General Synod* GS1248 (Church House Publishing 1997) pp 6-7

2 *Recovering Confidence: The Call to Ordained Ministry in a Changing World* (ABM Ministry Paper 13 1996) pp 47, 54. *Statistics of Licensed Ministers* (ABM GS Misc 492 1997) p 26

recommended for the stipendiary priesthood – from 470 in 1966, to 178 in 1996. (The total number of recommendations increased in 1997, however it is not known how many were candidates for stipendiary ministry, due to new sponsorship categories introduced in January 1997).



I shall examine the effect of each change, upon vocations to the stipendiary priesthood:

i) *Non-stipendiary ministry* was introduced in 1969. NSMs generally remain in their secular employment, both during and after training. NSMs normally train for three years part-time on a regional course. After ordination they serve under a stipendiary priest in a team ministry.

It may be that the decline in numbers coming forward for the stipendiary priesthood was made worse, as men offered for non-stipendiary rather than stipendiary ministry. However, until last year, this could only be the case for candidates aged between thirty and forty-five, because regulations stated that NSMs should be aged over thirty at selection, whilst stipendiary candidates should be under forty-five.

ii) *Local non-stipendiary ministry* is a form of Ordained Ministry whereby men and women are called out by a local church for ministry within a specific locality.³ LNSMs train on a diocesan course, the first course having been approved by the House of Bishops in 1984. By 1997, fourteen dioceses had an approved LNSM scheme. The length of training can vary, as some candidates for LNSM are selected during a course of training for a lay ministry. After ordination, an LNSM serves under a stipendiary priest in their home parish or group of parishes. The age restrictions of NSM also applied to LNSM. Furthermore, a candidate's family circumstances often make them unavailable for the national deployment, which is a requirement for stipendiary ministry.

One may argue that, at a more fundamental level, NSM and LNSM affect stipendiary vocations. If potential aspirants see the priesthood as something which can be taken up in addition to a job, or after retirement, they may no longer see the priesthood as a sacrificial, full-time commitment to aspire to.

iii) *The ordination of women to the diaconate* was introduced in 1987. This has effectively replaced the lay order of deaconess. The resulting numbers of women recommended for the diaconate were similar to those who were recommended as deaconesses (around 130).

However, following the change, the number of men recommended for the stipendiary priesthood fell from 320 in 1987, to 239 in 1992. This was a sharper decline than the trend: an average fall of sixteen each year from 1987-92, compared to an average fall of five each year from 1966-86.

3 *Local NSM* (ABM Policy Paper 1 1991) p 1

iv) *The ordination of women to the priesthood* received the approval of the General Synod in November 1992, and was introduced in February 1994 following the Royal Assent. Women, like men, now offered for the priesthood, rather than the diaconate. In 1992, 136 women were recommended for the diaconate (72 stipendiary, 59 NSM, five LNSM). In 1995, five women were recommended for the diaconate (one stipendiary, four NSM) and 178 women were recommended for the priesthood (67 stipendiary, 87 NSM, 24 LNSM). The number of men recommended for the stipendiary priesthood fell further, from 239 in 1992, to 147 in 1995. This was again a sharper decline than the trend: an average fall of 31 each year from 1992-95, compared to an average fall of eight each year from 1966-91. A feeling of financial uncertainty after the reduction in the value of the assets of the Church Commissioners, has been blamed for the decline. But the fact that female stipendiary vocations remained steady over the same period, leads me to question this as a complete explanation. The decision to ordain women to the priesthood was the reason for some men, who disagree with the ordination of women, not offering themselves for the priesthood. In 1996, the number recovered a little to 178. It is my hope that the Church of England's recognition of the 'integrity' of the view of candidates opposed to the ordination of women⁴ is helping to increase their confidence to offer for the priesthood.

v) *The ordination of the remarried* was made possible in 1991, by legislation enabling an application for the granting of a faculty to set aside Canon C4.3:

no person shall be admitted into holy orders who has remarried and, the other party to that marriage being alive, has a former spouse still living; or who is married to a person who has been previously married and whose former spouse is still living.⁵

In a survey of Roman Catholic seminarians,⁶ seventy per cent of vocations had come about principally because they had been 'impressed by the life of priests whom they knew'. It may be argued that a priest who has remarried is a less effective role model for vocations.

I have presented the above statistics and possible explanations for them, in order to show that those who attempt to boost their argument for a change to the priesthood, by saying that vocations will increase, are wrong in practice, as well as being wrong in principle. (They are wrong in principle because if a change to the priesthood resulted in an increase in

4 'Episcopal Ministry Act of Synod 1993' *Priests (Ordination of Women) Measure 1993 Code of Practice* (General Synod Jan 1994)

5 *The Canons of the Church of England* (Church House Publishing 1993) p 80

6 John Danson 'What About Vocations?' *Priests and People* vol X no 6 June 1996 p 246

vocations, that does not necessarily mean that the change was right - that would be a prosperity gospel. Similarly, if the changes have made the decline in vocations worse, it does not necessarily mean that the changes were wrong). The fact that changes to the priesthood in the Church of England have not increased vocations, has contemporary relevance for the Roman Catholic Church, because those who call for the ordination of women, or the removal of the requirement for clerical celibacy, often argue that such changes would reverse the decline in vocations.

The Church of England teaches that 'it is not lawful for the Church to ordain any thing that is contrary to God's Word written'.⁷ I believe that, because 'the word of God is living and active,'⁸ changes should not merely be checked against Scripture, but Scripture should be the driving force behind them. I have nothing original to contribute on the questions of the ordination of women, and divorce, so I shall restrict myself to raising some questions concerning the biblical justification for NSM and LNSM:

Theology

Both Jesus and Paul are recorded to have said that, 'the labourer deserves to be paid'.⁹ Nonetheless, Paul worked so as not to be a burden upon the church.¹⁰ Paul's practice supports the case for non-stipendiary ministry, and for the freedom to move between being financially supported by the church and being financially self-supporting. In January 1997 the sponsorship categories of 'Stipendiary' and 'Non-Stipendiary' were changed to (1) 'Stipendiary and Non-Stipendiary' and (2) 'Permanent Non-Stipendiary'.¹¹ The first new category has enabled an easier change between being stipendiary and being non-stipendiary. However, I cannot see a biblical justification for the second category.

With regard to Local non-stipendiary ministry, I have two concerns. Firstly, a distinguishing mark of LNSM is that the exercise of their priestly ministry is limited to the local area from which they were called,

It has been asked whether a form of ordained ministry should be permitted that brings with it so strong a possibility that ministers who move from place to place may not receive the Bishop's Licence to continue to exercise the ministry which they have received in ordination. ...These considerations serve to underline the importance of 'non-mobility' among the criteria for selection of

7 Articles of Religion *The Book of Common Prayer* Article XX

8 Heb 4:12

9 Luke 10:7; 1 Tim 5:18

10 Acts 18:3-4; 1 Cor 9:1-15

11 *A Review of Selection Procedures in the Church of England* (ABM Policy Paper 6 1995) pp 22-4

candidates for LNSM. ...If the church is serious about the 'local' character of LNSM, it should not find these limitations surprising.¹²

This seems to 'go against the grain' of the Bible, where God often calls people, against their expectation, to leave their home area and serve Him elsewhere.¹³ The restriction suggests that the church does not expect to see God working in this way with LNSMs.

My second concern is that LNSMs serve under the oversight of a stipendiary priest. I believe such a place is more properly that of a deacon, because presbyters (elders) had the role of oversight¹⁴ and deacons the role of service.¹⁵ Furthermore, if the twelve, Paul, Barnabas and Titus are identified as bishops,¹⁶ then I can find no difference in role between presbyters (elders).¹⁷ Therefore, I cannot see the justification for separate categories of priesthood. The creation of NSM and LNSM has certainly added aspects that had been lacking with the traditional stipendiary priesthood, such as a greater local focus to ministry (LNSM), and self-supporting or work-based ministries (NSM). But it is my view that these aspects should be available for all priests, and not formally separated.

Vocations

If changes to the priesthood should not be made in order to increase vocations, what action can be taken? The rapid growth in numbers for LNSM has something to teach us. Firstly, the growth has been as a result of diocesan initiative. Dioceses who have introduced their own LNSM scheme have, as a consequence, been more proactive in the areas of recruitment, selection and training. Secondly, parishes have accepted 'a greater measure of responsibility for the provision of ministry as part of their mission in and to the community, and to call ministers from among themselves'.¹⁸ Both of these elements could be applied to stipendiary vocations. Firstly, *Recovering Confidence* recommends that bishops should introduce initiatives to 'encourage active recruitment work in their dioceses' that develops 'a culture of formation and recruitment rather than intermittent recruitment campaigns'.¹⁹ Regarding a greater involvement of the parish in the calling of the individual: *Call to Order*²⁰ emphasizes that

12 *Local NSM* (ABM Policy Paper 1 1991) pp 32-3

13 Gen 12:1; 26:2-3; 35:1; Exod 3:10; Jer 1:7; Ezek 2:3; Jonah 1:2; Matt 4:19-20; 28:19; Luke 9:59-10:12; Acts 8:26; 9:6

14 Acts 20:28; 1 Tim 5:17, 1 Pet 5:2

15 Phil 1:1; 1 Tim 3:8-13 – see George Knight *The Pastoral Epistles* (Eerdmans/Paternoster 1992) pp 166-77.

16 Acts 14:23; Tit 1:5

17 Acts 11:30; 15:2-23; 20:17; 21:18; 1 Tim 4:14; 5:17; Jas 5:14; 1 Pet 5:1-5

18 *Local NSM* (ABM Policy Paper 1 1991) p 6

19 *Recovering Confidence: The Call to Ordained Ministry in a Changing World* (ABM Ministry Paper 13 1996) p vii

20 *Call to Order: Vocation and Ministry in the Church of England* (ACCM 1989)

Churchman

God's calling to the priesthood can come through the church as much as through the individual heart, and this is as true for stipendiary as it is for LNSM vocations. However, LNSM candidates are generally called forth out of the large number of committed, middle-aged Christians in the churches. Whilst churches can play a greater role in calling forth young stipendiary vocations, there is also a need for more young people in church. To create the pool from which to draw, fine youth work is required; but that is another story.

Postscript

In the January 1998 issue of *Theology*, Dr William Jacob states that:

Without ordaining women as deacons or priests, the Roman Catholic Church in England and Wales suffered a more dramatic decline in vocations than the Church of England experienced for men.²¹

He quotes figures for vocations to the priesthood in the Roman Catholic Church in England and Wales declining from 144 in 1982, to 64 in 1996.²² Corresponding vocations for the male stipendiary priesthood in the Church of England were 350 in 1982²³ and 178 in 1996²⁴. The difficulty with comparing vocations figures between Churches is that you are not comparing like with like. There are not only different results from common factors (for example, the Church of England may have had more effective youth work, or more proactive diocesan vocations initiatives), there is also the influence of factors which are peculiar to one Church (such as a Church doctrine, discipline, structure or culture). Therefore, in comparing between Churches there are more variables and differences, which makes the identification of the effect of one factor more difficult. It is for this reason that, when the number of male stipendiary vocations in the Church of England declined more sharply after the ordination of women to the diaconate and the priesthood, I stand by my suggestion that this factor contributed to the decline - rather than the reverse.

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21 *Theology* Vol CI No 799 Jan/Feb 1998 p2

22 Vocations 1996 figures collated for the Committee for Ministerial Formation of the Bishops' Conference and the Conference of Religions

23 *Recovering Confidence: The Call to Ordained Ministry in a Changing World* (ABM Ministry Paper 13 1996) p52

24 *Statistics of Licensed Ministers: Some facts and figures as at 31 December 1996* (ABM GS Misc 492 1997) p26