

# Celebrating Reader Ministry

## Out there and out loud

Hereford Reader Day  
Rev David Runcorn

'Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit; and 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 for the common good.' 1Cor 4-11

In a way I could not have anticipated when I was invited the chance to reflect on Reader ministry with you today feels quite poignant – as I am shortly to leave my present role as Warden of Readers in Gloucester. I arrived four years ago just as we were making plans to celebrate 150 years of reader ministry. A great way to start.

### **It was a very different world in 1866:**

Queen Victoria was on the throne and the British Empire spanned the globe. American Civil War had only just finished the year before - 1865

Thomas Edison was trying to invent the first light bulbs. Alexander Graham Bell was 10 years from inventing the first telephone in 1875. Over in Ireland land and people were barely beginning to recover from the potato famine. 1 million people had died of starvation or disease. 2 million had emigrated.

In 1859 Charles Darwin published his theory of "Origin of Species by means of natural selection" 1859

In London for some years a novelist had been building up a huge following by serializing his novels in the London Daily News. Starting with Pickwick Papers Charles Dickens relentlessly exposed the appalling slum conditions and poverty in London.

(In the mid C19 the life expectancy of a Londoner was - 20 years)

**In the Church of England** there was a growing awareness of the need for new patterns of mission and ministry – rural and urban. The Industrial Revolution had triggered large shifts of population. Some towns and cities were seeing quite explosive levels of growth. Large, poorly planned estates had sprung up and the ancient churches were now left on the edge and out of touch with the communities they existed to serve.

The work of ministry also increased hugely. In the 1830s, in the ancient Parish of Bethnal Green in London, the Rev John Mayne, was single-handedly conducting around 800 christenings, 200 marriages and 670 funerals a year.

This relentless round continued even on Christmas Day. The population of his parish trebled to 40,000 over that 20 years period. He was the only minister.

Faced with massive missionary challenges the Victorian church responded in two ways.

### **i. They embarked on a huge building program.**

By 1870 there were 4000 new or rebuilt churches in the country. In modern day terms they spent over £1.2bn on this. Some of your churches date from this time? This was part of a bold missionary strategy. The vision was for a priestly presence in every parish in the land – a spiritual welfare state. Cradle to grave.

We now know that not all this building was wise. Some churches were built in areas where the population was actually in *decline*. Many were built considerably larger than the local population could ever fill. It has left a misleading impression that there was once a golden age of faith in this country when these churches were full every Sunday. But it was an honourable missionary vision. They were willing to dream dreams for the Kingdom.

But one church's fresh expression can become another's millstone. These are the buildings that are now costing this generation a considerable amount to keep up.

Likewise the vision for a priestly presence in every parish was never achieved - never proved sustainable. And it isn't now. So let's beware of speaking today as if this too was part of a golden age we have fallen from. Nor was there a Golden Age when those churches were all full every week.

### **ii. The creation of a new ministry in the church called 'Lay Readers'.**

Lay – because they were not ordained.

Readers – because - well initially that was all they were allowed to do. They read the readings in public worship. It is hard to appreciate how radical that was in those days. Until then everything in public worship and ministry in the CofE had been conducted by ordained clergy.

It was a nervous initiative. It is of course a very risky thing to let laity loose in the church. It still is. Only very slowly were other tasks entrusted to Readers – such as the dangerous job of leading intercessions – and eventually preaching and pastoral visiting. They did not preach in church until 1904 – though only from the chancel step.

Only slowly there was training offered.

But a 1870 newspaper reported this initiative stating that part of their ministry was to visit and 'read to the poor. This was a largely illiterate population.

Unless someone read aloud to they would never hear.

## Readers today

Well here we are in our own generation – facing the challenges of our day, listening to the Spirit and seeking to discern the journey forward.

Once again buildings are part of the debate. And once again Readers and lay ministry is being talked about.

Now if I was vicar in Bethnal Green conducting my 700<sup>th</sup> christening and 600<sup>th</sup> burial of the year on Christmas Day I think I would be a candidate for a Damascus Road conversion to the importance of lay ministry in the church. Wouldn't you? But that the clergy are overstretched is not a reason to start talking about involving lay people in the mission of the church. It wasn't then. It isn't now. This is about a vision for the ministry of the whole people of God.

Not everyone likes the name 'Reader'. The complaint is that no one knows what it means. But hardly anyone knows what a 'Dean', 'Rector' or 'Vicar' means either.

I think the name says something important - because this is still **a calling to living something out loud** – something that has been studied and prayed about. We are an illiterate age again in Christian and bible terms

'Reader' is a ministry expressed **out loud and out there**.

But Readers, like ordained ministers, or not a special way of serving God that others don't have. If we think that then Readers will end up as overworked as clergy. We are repeating the mistake. A Reader is one example and visual aid of the work and gifts of the Spirit that are found in *everyone*.

Listen again to the experience of the first churches ...

'there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit; and 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 for the common good'.

Reader is one expression - among many - of the ministry of *the whole people of God* ....

**Ministry in those early churches** was varied, experimental, exploratory, evolving – often messy – and part of the life of the whole community. There was no one pattern. *All* were involved. To each was given the Spirit for the common good.

**The National Reader Council has decided to focus on Readers as**

## **'Teachers of the faith'**

I think this is very high priority.

Not to become academics - but to be people who have a firm grasp of the faith and can put it in to the local language for others to explore and respond to. Please don't underestimate the priority of this. Readers receive extended theological and ministry training for this reason. The work of leading worship and pastoring can be shared. But a core task is to enable people to hear and understand the faith.

**Ministry in those early churches** was varied, experimental, exploratory, evolving – often messy – and part of the life of the whole community. There was no one pattern. *All* were involved. To each was given the Spirit for the common good.

This is a vision we need to recover.

**The creation of Reader ministry has been defined 'as a flexible response to a particular need and context'.**

Perhaps that is still a helpful definition of this ministry.

### **If so:**

what does 'flexible' ask of you in your context?

what 'particular needs' require a response in your context?

### **In the light of this:**

Are there ways your ministry priorities need re-focusing?

Are there resources, training and support to seek out, to enable the 'flexible response' our 'needs and context' require?

Open discussion and reflection .....

[www.davidruncorn.com](http://www.davidruncorn.com) September 2018