

Ad Clerum 3e.1

THE AUTHORISATION OF MINISTRY IN THE LOCAL CONGREGATION

Background

Over the past hundred years or so there has been an increasing emphasis in the Church on the value of lay ministry. This has been partly out of necessity, with the decline in the number of stipendiary clergy posts, but also largely - and thankfully - out of a renewed understanding of what is sometimes called 'all member ministry.'

In addition, there has been recognition of the diversity of Christian vocation. So the Church has trained and authorised the ministries of Church Army Officers, Readers and Accredited and Diocesan Lay Ministers several of whom trained with ordinands on our diocesan Ministerial Training Scheme.

In more recent years parishes (and deaneries?) have appointed other 'ministers' including youth workers, administrators and parish assistants. These may be paid or unpaid, full-time or part-time and should have been given training prior to authorisation and as the particular ministry develops.

Since the approval of the diocesan Local Ministry Scheme in 1999, we have also encouraged the development of this formal expression of ministry as an example of the way God's mission and ministry should be shared by all who are baptised.

The present position

The question is often asked about the authorisation of those exercising God's ministry and mission approved by the PCC or other equivalent body. Could they not all have the bishop's authorisation? Such a question is welcomed, as it expresses a desire not just to 'go it alone' but to have the full support of the bishop and the diocese.

The difficulty lies in where to draw the line. If the bishop authorises youth workers and lay assistants, should he not also do the same for leaders of children's church or house-group leaders? It is clearly impractical for the bishop to authorise all forms of ministry exercised across the diocese. So, there need to be principles for determining when episcopal authorisation is necessary or helpful.

The way forward

We believe that ministry should be rooted locally, within, or better, across parishes and denominations. It is also best practised within a ministry team than by individuals. In most cases, therefore, it is for the parish priest, with the PCC (or equivalent) to approve lay ministries within Sunday worship where the local congregation(s) can be present to pray for and support those being authorised and to be reminded that God calls us all to share His ministry and mission. Local churches can then develop their own way of providing shared ministry, depending on the local needs and gifts available.

By way of support, we would suggest the following guidelines where this local and 'informal' ministry is shared:

- Training prior to authorisation should be given as appropriate
- Ongoing support should be provided
- There should be a time limit for any authorisation

- A job description may be helpful, which could be reviewed if and when the period of authorisation is extended
- Authorisation should not continue beyond the age of 70, which is the age when clergy and Readers cease to be licensed
- Safe-guards, including child protection and protection when working with others who are vulnerable, need to be in place
- Authorisation would clearly not be transferable to another parish.

As well as the informal ministries referred to above, there are some formal ministries which do require authorisation and/or permission from the bishop.

These include the distribution of the elements during Holy Communion and the taking of Holy Communion to the sick - using the prescribed order of service. In addition, formal Local Ministry Teams receive the Bishop's Mandate and, most recently, the Bishop's Permission is to be sought before Holy Communion by Extension is administered.

In all such cases, training is given – either 'in house' or provided with the support of the appropriate Diocesan Officers – and there is a time limit attached to the authorisation.

Finally

As one of the aims of Vision for Action says, we want to: 'encourage, support and develop the ministry of each person' and we welcome initiatives which put this into practise. We pray for the day when this vision is clearly put into action in all our parishes.

[Reissued January 2008]