

SUMMARY OF REPORT ON READER MINISTRY IN THE CHURCH OF IRELAND

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Introduction

The Commission on Ministry, in consultation with the Bishop in charge of Reader Ministry, decided that it would be appropriate and helpful for a survey of reader ministry to be carried in advance of the Conference being held to mark the occasion of the Centenary of reader ministry in 2009. The aims and objectives of the survey were to elicit information and provide an opportunity for reader feedback of various kinds, including expression of feelings, in the hope that this would help focus discussion at the Conference and, further, assist any reviewing of policy with regard to reader ministry. It was also hoped that the survey would in itself assure readers that their opinions and concerns were valued and worthy of serious consideration.

The following is a less technical summary of the full report, a copy of which is available on the resource page of the Church of Ireland website.¹

Methodology

A questionnaire was sent out by post to all diocesan readers listed in the 2008 Church of Ireland Directory. We regret that some readers, whose details were not listed in this edition, were missed, also that some retired readers still listed in this edition as serving were included. The questionnaire was designed to include 'tick the box' multiple choice answers plus the opportunity to add further comments on training, vocation, ministry direction, and anything else considered relevant. The areas surveyed were training (pre-commissioning and ongoing), duties (including expenses and whether a written ministry description had been agreed), vocational questions, support, and overall ministry satisfaction. To guarantee confidentiality and thereby allow a full and frank response to questions, the questionnaire was anonymous. The foregoing of collection of personal data did limit the analysis but was felt to be essential in the circumstances. The questionnaire was accompanied by a letter from the Chairperson of the Commission on Ministry (Rt Revd Ken Good) and the Bishop in charge of Reader Ministry, (Rt Revd Ken Clarke).

Research questions

The following were the questions to which it was hoped the data would provide answers:

1. To what extent, if any, does the type and scope of pre-commissioning training affect deployment and overall ministry satisfaction?
2. To what extent, if any, are the existence, nature and extent of ongoing training reflected in both training and overall ministry satisfaction?
3. To what extent, if any, does scope of deployment (size of area covered and range of duties) influence ministry satisfaction?
4. To what extent, if any, is the level and type of expenses paid reflected in satisfaction or dissatisfaction with support and overall ministry?

¹ This summary should be read only as a guide to the full report which presents the data in statistical form with the usual indicators of significance in relation to particular results.

5. To what extent, if any, is the type and amount of ministry support reflected in satisfaction or dissatisfaction with support and overall ministry?
6. What are the respective relative importance of initial training, ongoing training, scope of deployment, and ministry support in regards to overall ministry satisfaction?

Analysis and results

The intention was to survey the entire population of readers. However, of the 298 questionnaires sent out, only 171 were returned. Of these, 3 were blank and 45 others were incomplete to a greater or lesser degree. Wherever possible the results from these incomplete questionnaires have been included in the analysis. *Because of the low response rate it is important to be conservative in drawing conclusions and take the trends revealed, however strong, to be suggestive rather than decisive.*

The analysis carried out comprised in the first instance descriptive statistics. [These are contained in Appendix B of the full report.] The following is a summary of these results.

1. Length of service: approximately one third of readers had served for more than 20 years, another third for between 11 and 20 years, and the remaining third for 10 years or less.
2. Education and training: just over half had a tertiary qualification prior to training. Most readers were given training prior to commissioning of between 2 and 4 years in duration involving 4 or more subjects. In roughly two thirds of cases this was delivered via regular classes supplemented in a quarter of these situations with other teaching methods. The remainder were taught via either distance learning or less formal methods, including one-to-one sessions with a tutor or warden. Only one fifth of readers received any award or certificate for their training as such, apart from a readers' licence. Just over one third of readers were receiving no ongoing in-service training. Less than one fifth of readers expressed themselves as less than happy with their training.
3. Duties: almost two-thirds of readers performed one or more other duties as well as taking services and all but a small minority worked beyond their own parish, group, or union. Mileage was paid in two-thirds of cases and half of these received other allowances in addition. Of those not receiving mileage, just over half received fees for services. Only just over one fifth of readers had agreed written ministry descriptions with wardens or rectors.
4. Satisfaction: readers were asked to rate their satisfaction with training, expenses, and their ministry overall. Satisfaction levels were generally high, over four fifths being moderately to completely satisfied with their training, four fifths being moderately to completely satisfied with their expenses, and all but four individuals considering that their expectations of reader ministry had been moderately to completely satisfied.

Further analysis was carried out to establish what relationships, if any, existed between these variables or factors. It is important to recognise that in a study of this kind 'significant relationship' can only be taken as suggestive of possible causality between variables. We may have established here that a pair of variables co-relates but to try to confirm that one causes the other would require a different study. Second, it has also to be emphasised that the statistical correlations found between these

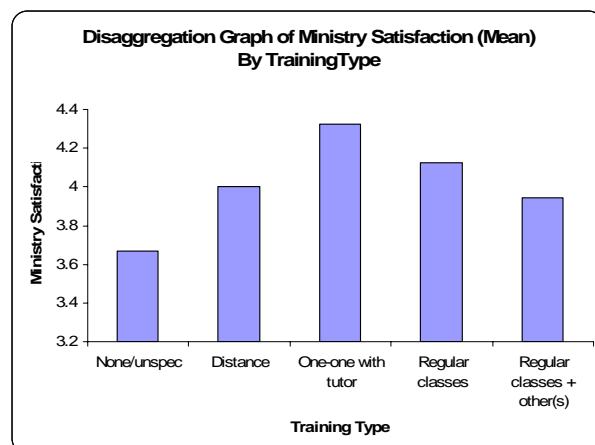
variables were, at best, only moderate in strength [Appendix C in the full report contains all the statistics relating to these findings]. With these points in mind we can examine the eight significant statistical relationships that were found: three negative and five positive. They are listed here in decreasing order of strength.

1. The longer the length of service, the *less* the satisfaction with training.
2. The higher the level of education prior to ministry, the *less* the overall satisfaction with ministry.
3. The higher the level of pre-commissioning training, the *less* the overall satisfaction with ministry.
4. The greater the amount of support given in ministry, the *greater* the satisfaction with that support.
5. The greater the amount of support given in ministry, the *greater* the satisfaction with training.
6. The greater the satisfaction with training, the *greater* the satisfaction with ministry overall.
7. The greater the scope of deployment in terms of territory covered, the *greater* the satisfaction with ministry overall.
8. The higher the level attained with training, the *greater* the satisfaction with training.

Some of these relationships may seem entirely unsurprising; others (such as the first three) seem puzzling. Would the inverse relationship between length of service and satisfaction reflect an improvement in reader training over the years? And could the inverse relationships of both prior education and level of pre-commissioning training with overall ministry satisfaction have something to do with level of expectations?

It was hoped that analysis of some of the other non-numerical data through grouping into categories would cast some light on these findings.

One interesting discovery was that significantly more ministry satisfaction appears to derive from pre-commissioning training involving one-to-one sessions with a tutor than from any other of the methods surveyed. However, no relationship was revealed between *ongoing* training type and ministry satisfaction.



Another finding was a possibly significant relationship between a preference for the status quo in duties (compared to an increase or decrease in duties) and ministry satisfaction. However, the present level of work needs to be taken into account when interpreting this. This finding may appear inconsistent with no. 7 above, but it must be noted that the relationship there is between extent of territory covered – whether one or more parishes or groups or unions, or an entire diocese (or more than one diocese) – and does not relate to the amount or number of duties.

We are now in a position to consider what answers may have been revealed to the questions posed earlier:-

1. To what extent, if any, do the type, level and scope of pre-commissioning training affect deployment (number and geographical scope of duties) and overall ministry satisfaction?

There is a significant relationship between level of pre-commissioning training and satisfaction with training, as might be expected. There also appears to be a significant relationship between the type of training received prior to commissioning and subsequent ministry satisfaction – one-to-one sessions with a tutor standing out in this regard (see graph above – statistics are given in the full report). However level of training does not appear to influence the number (or range) of duties subsequently undertaken, the territory covered by such duties, or overall ministry satisfaction. Interestingly, it is the level of education prior to training which is seen to have the connection with number (range) of duties. And this variable (level of prior education) also relates strongly to subsequent ministry satisfaction. One might speculate that this variable constitutes a measure of ability, at least as perceived and acted upon by others in a position to decide on deployment (see below). As well, the scope of pre-commissioning training as reflected in the number of subjects studied relates significantly but probably unsurprisingly to the number (range) of duties undertaken subsequently in ministry.

2. To what extent, if any, is the type of ongoing training reflected in satisfaction with training, satisfaction with support, and overall ministry satisfaction?

The analysis showed little or no relationship between the type or ongoing training and any of the areas of satisfaction measured, perhaps surprisingly in the light of comments made about the need for more training in relation to frustrations in ministry. (See above).

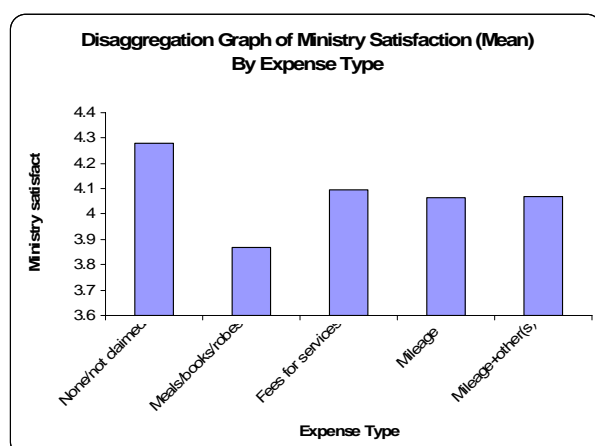
3. To what extent, if any, does scope of deployment (size of area covered and number of duties) influence ministry satisfaction?

The internal association between the two ‘duty’ variables is in itself insignificant – perhaps surprisingly. Number (range) of duties does not correlate significantly with overall ministry satisfaction; however there is a significant positive association between geographical scope of duty and satisfaction with ministry. Those readers who are deployed on a diocesan-wide basis seem happier with their ministry.

4. To what extent, if any, is the type of expenses paid reflected in satisfaction or dissatisfaction with support and degree to which expectations of ministry have been realised?

In the first instance it seems reasonable to relate types of expenses paid to satisfaction with expenses. Unsurprisingly, those who received no expenses or do not claim them appear significantly less happy with their expenses than those who receive the various types, who appear undifferentiated.

While there appears to be no relation between type of expenses paid and satisfaction with support received,



there appears to be a decisive if odd connection between type of expenses paid and ministry satisfaction. The three types of regular expenses seem on a par, averaging 'mainly satisfied'. Readers are less satisfied with the second, more occasional category of expenses if paid these alone. But they are most happy with their ministry when they are receiving no expenses at all – or when not claiming them where they would be entitled to them! This quirky finding should be explored further. It certainly should not be used as policy ammunition!

5. To what extent, if any, is the type of ministry support reflected in satisfaction/dissatisfaction with support and realisation of ministry expectations?

The relationship between support type and support satisfaction is a positive one. *Personal* support from a support person such as a rector, warden, or spiritual director is valued more highly than courses in spiritual development or ministry formation. Unsurprisingly, all of these are preferred to no support at all.

6. What are the respective relative importance of level of initial training, type of ongoing training, scope of deployment, and ministry support in regards to overall ministry satisfaction?

This 'relativity question' is made difficult to answer by the differing types of data here as the varying amounts and types cannot be compared simply. However, what appears to have emerged is that the types of training and support that most influence ministry satisfaction are those which offer personal one-to-one contact with tutor or support person. That the relationship between training, support, and ministry is an important one is underlined by the strong relationships between the degree of satisfaction expressed in relation to these. More understanding of the components of ministry satisfaction is provided by readers' grouped comments, the most significant of which (collectively accounting for almost half of the responses) were:

- Affirmation and support from people.
- Sermon preparation & preaching.
- Pastoral work/visiting/contact with people.
- Joy/privilege/happiness in serving/helping.

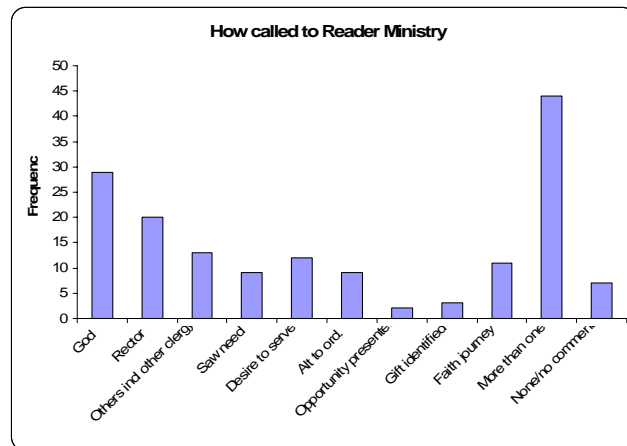
The relationship between scope of deployment (number of duties) in relation to geographical spread of work (territory covered) also seems a significant determiner of ministry satisfaction, although it is interesting that it does not feature in the main grouping above.

The negative relationships are rather harder to explain. Why should level of education prior to training have a negative impact on ministry satisfaction? Is it because better educated people have higher expectations? And why should level of pre-commissioning training have a negative impact on satisfaction with support? Is it because those who received superior training tend to be disappointed with the subsequent level of ongoing training and support? Areas of frustration mentioned might have provided a clue, but collectively they account for only just over one third of respondents. The two most 'popular' were mentioned by just over one tenth of respondents. These were

- Poor relationship or treatment or lack of contact with rector/clergy.
- Insufficient training.

The various comments supplied by respondents are summarised in Appendix B of the full report.

The other main comment areas are to do with calling and general comments about reader ministry (see below). The information about calling is summarised here in a graph:



Suggestions made by respondents regarding what would make their ministry more effective

These were as follows:

- More/ongoing training (31%)
- More contact with other readers (13%)
- More support (including provision of retreats/quiet days (10%)
- Being used more often or more widely (incl. pastoral work and H.C.) (13%)
- Better clergy/reader relationship/better communication (7%)
- Better fee structure (2 %)
- More than one of the above (12%)

Recommendations made by respondents regarding Reader ministry

These are best left to stand alone. They have been collated into five categories:

1. Training issues: [31% of respondents]

- Better use of distance learning
- Bi-monthly meetings to develop communication and belonging
- Clarification of role of warden
- Common curriculum and qualification
- Voice-production training
- Annual diocesan training weekends
- Use of internet as resource
- More flexible training options
- More practical training including preaching practice
- Cross-diocesan reader meetings
- More reader-focused training
- Fast-track training options to take account of experience
- Running in-service training concurrent with final stage of preliminary training.
- Standardized and relevant ongoing training.
- Weekend refresher courses.
- Structured training for deployment of readers in vacancy situations.

2. Personnel issues: [30% of respondents]

- Better clergy-reader communication/relations
- Clarification of mutual expectations between rectors and readers
- Development of Reader involvement in team ministries
- Under- and over-deployment – lack of ministry descriptions/agreements between incumbents and readers.
- Lack of contact with and support by rector.
- New ways of affirming quality and status of reader ministry.
- More appreciation of reader ministry.
- More opportunities for readers to get together for fellowship, support, mutual learning.

3. Deployment issues: [13% of respondents]

- Better spread of Readers in a diocese – too many in some parishes.
- Training of clergy in how to utilise readers in team ministry
- Concern youth leaders may supplant Readers
- Continued development of the distinctiveness of lay ministry
- Development of spiritual direction as a Reader ministry
- Fuller ministry role for Readers
- More Holy Communion by extension
- More involvement of Readers in Holy Communion services
- More pastoral care work
- Reader exchanges between parishes and further afield
- Administrative role for Readers
- Oversight of vacant parishes
- Sensitivity to travel cost issues
- Sensitivity to context when deploying

4. Structural issues: [7% of respondents]

- Clarification/review warden/s role as enabler of reader ministry
- Lay Presidency
- Review of expenses/fees structure
- Relation of clergy and Reader roles
- Readers as permanent Deacons
- Readers as ministers-in-charge (in long vacancies or remote areas)
- Readers taking weddings and funerals
- Readers as administrators.
- Role exchanges between Methodist lay preachers and Readers.
- Some relaxation of rules and regulations needed.

5. Recruitment issues: [5% of respondents]

- More flexible training options
- Encourage reader ministry among young people.
- Give opportunity for greater use of gifts in reader ministry – wider, more varied role.
- More encouragement of reader ministry by clergy.
- Better marketing of reader ministry by Church.

6. Commendations/warnings: [5% of respondents]

- Thank you for opportunity to rant!
- Will be great to see anniversary properly marked
- Pleased interest being taken in readers.
- Concern survey might dictate rather than facilitate.

Final comments and policy implications

This research cannot be a basis for drawing hard conclusions about reader ministry in Ireland because of (1) the low return rate of questionnaires (more than 40% of readers failed to respond at all), and (2) the largely moderate level of statistical association between the factors under consideration. Notwithstanding these qualifications, it can be said that sufficient concerns were registered about training and support measures to suggest steps should be taken to refine and strengthen their impact. Overall, the thing that readers valued most was *personal* support and encouragement in the areas of pre- and post-commissioning training and ministry support, but the results suggest that there is some room for improvement in these areas.

Arguably there also needs to be more ongoing *monitoring* of satisfaction concerning training and support measures as well as overall ministry satisfaction and I believe this study underlines the present plans to institute more quality of control and standardisation of training and support measures. If the survey helps to focus concerns to be addressed at the conference and beyond it will have succeeded in some measure.

I believe that the other major aim of this survey has been achieved: namely, to offer readers a long overdue opportunity to express their views and feelings about their training, vocation, support and practical ministry issues. There were many cries from the heart on the questionnaire forms! I hope the respondents will feel they have been heard and taken seriously, both in this report and its repercussions.

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