

'Do you Believe that God is Calling You to this Ministry?' **Subjective and Objective Factors in Discerning Vocation** **in the Church of England**

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Abstract

The Church of England is seeking to increase the number and diversity of ordinands to meet the challenges of changing patterns of ministry and the retirement of existing clergy. This article contributes to the contemporary conversation by exploring the extent to which a call to ordained ministry should be conceptualised as a personal, interior sense of God's call to the individual, or as the corporate discernment of the church. An evaluation is made of the theological and historical factors which suggest prioritising these different traditions of discernment. The article concludes by commending initiatives being undertaken by the Church of England to encourage a more proactive approach to identifying those called to ordained ministry.

Keywords: calling; discernment; ministry; ordination; subjective; objective

Introduction

In the Ordinal accompanying the *Book of Common Prayer* the first question posed to the candidates to be ordained deacon is: 'Do you trust that you are inwardly moved by the Holy Ghost to take upon you this office and ministrations?'¹ Similarly, those to

be ordained as priests are asked: 'Do you think in your heart that you be truly called [...] to the Order and Ministry of Priesthood?'² In asking such questions it is clear that, at the very least, there is a determination that ordination should not be imposed without the consent and willing participation of those to be ordained. However, these questions exceed this modest aim, asking about the ordinands' own internal sense of being personally called by God to ministry. In this article I will explore the extent to which this internal and personal sense of calling should be required in discerning a call to ordination and will outline the theological and historical influences which contribute to the approach taken by the Church of England.

The importance of this discussion is emphasised by the recognition of changing patterns of ministry in the Church of England and the need to train more priests to replace those who are shortly due to retire.³ To this end a goal was set in 2015 under the *Renewal and Reform* programme to increase the numbers training for ordination by 50 per cent by 2020.⁴ Along with numerical growth, there is also a desire for 'an increase in diversity within the cohort of ordinands [...] in terms of age, gender, and ethnic and social background'.⁵ Although the call to ordained ministry is understood to come from God, the church needs to reflect on the process of discernment by which that call is recognised in order to remove barriers or unhelpful assumptions which would limit or hinder response.⁶

In this article I will identify a need for further theological reflection on the vocational discernment process, specifically the extent to which it should emphasise the development of an interior, individual sense of calling or whether greater emphasis should be placed on the exterior, corporate call of the church. This distinction has often been referred to by comparing 'subjective' and 'objective'

¹ Church of England, *The Book of Common Prayer and Administration of the Sacraments and Other Rites and Ceremonies of the Church According to the Use of The Church of England* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), p. 564.

² Church of England, p. 575.

³ Research and Statistics Unit, Church of England, 'Ministry Statistics 2018' (September 2019), p. 23, <<https://www.churchofengland.org/sites/default/files/2019-08/Ministry%20Statistics%202018%20FINAL%20report.pdf>>, accessed 11 December 2019.

⁴ Church of England, 'Renewal and Reform: Growing Vocations', <https://www.churchofengland.org/about/renewal-reform/growing-vocations-0>, accessed 11 December 2019.

⁵ Ministry Division, 'Ordained Vocations Statistics 1949-2014' (London: Church of England, 2016), 5, <<https://churchsupporthub.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/09/Ordained-Vocations-Statistics.pdf>>, accessed 11 December 2019.

⁶ Ministry Division, 'Ordained Vocations', p. 5.

notions of calling; whereby 'subjective' calling relied on an interiorised process of vocational discernment, whilst 'objective' calling focused on the role of the church in selecting those to be ordained.⁷ In light of the range of initiatives being undertaken by the contemporary church to achieve the stated goal of increasing the number and diversity of ordinands, it is pertinent to revisit debates around the nature and place of subjective and objective vocational discernment.

This article will trace the development of the subjective and objective trajectories of discernment through Christian history. There will be an extended discussion of the contributions made by Ignatius of Loyola and Martin Luther as central figures in the subjective and objective streams respectively. I will evaluate the strengths and weaknesses of placing an emphasis on either interior or exterior calling in vocational discernment. From this it will be possible to evaluate the theological and historical influences on contemporary process and practice in the Church of England.

In tracing the development of these approaches to the discernment of God's call to ordained ministry, it is possible to comment on how today's church can help its members hear, heed and respond to that call. I will suggest that subjective discernment, interpreted within a wider cultural climate of individualism, has become detached from the deep spiritual traditions which sustained the interior sense of God's call. Current Church of England initiatives to encourage the fostering of vocational discernment at a local level will be applauded for recognising the need for the church to play a proactive role in identifying those whom God is calling. This is particularly relevant when considering those for whom the interior sense of call may be distorted or suppressed due to gender, race, class, or disability.

Throughout this article it will be maintained that it is essential that those who are ordained are able to answer in the affirmative the question, 'Do you believe that God is calling you to this ministry?' but that caution should be exercised in over-emphasising a subjective, interior sense of calling.⁸ In commending the prioritisation of the role of the church in discerning those called to ordination, it will be suggested that such an approach may contribute to the goal of increasing the

⁷ Robert Reiss, *The Testing of Vocation* (London: Church House Publishing, 2013), p. 13.

⁸ Church of England, *Common Worship: Services and Prayers for the Church of England. Ordination Services: Study Guide* (London: Church House Publishing, 2007), pp. 11, 33.

numbers and range of people training for ordained ministry in the Church of England.

Vocational Discernment in the 'Subjective' Tradition

It was in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries that the approaches towards vocational discernment began to be classified as either 'subjective' or 'objective'.⁹ Thus, I acknowledge it is anachronistic to treat these traditions as discrete categories. Nevertheless, it is helpful to understand the primary influences which have resulted in some prioritising of an interior sense of call to ordination, whilst others consider the church to be the appropriate locus for this call.

Early Development of the 'Subjective' Tradition

McIntosh helpfully outlines the development of the Christian discernment tradition from its earliest biblical foundations through antiquity and the desert fathers, to the middle ages and modernity.¹⁰ Hahnenberg also traces the history of discernment but focuses his attention on the impact that developments had upon vocational discernment within the Roman Catholic Church.¹¹ I will not attempt to repeat these comprehensive surveys, however attention will be given to aspects which are particularly significant for the question in hand.

As a nascent movement, the church recognised the leadership and influence of the apostles and began to explore the means by which local leaders could be recognised and appointed although the primary focus remained on discipleship and mission, rather than structural organisation.¹² As the early church moved into a period of toleration and eventually into a position of influence and power, it

⁹ Arthur Winnington-Ingram, Upper House of Canterbury Convocation on a report from the Lower House on Supply and Training 8 May 1901, cited in Reiss, *The Testing of Vocation*, p. 13; Richard Price, 'Did the Early Monastic Tradition Have a Concept of Vocation?', in *The Disciples' Call: Theologies of Vocation from Scripture to the Present Day*, ed. Christopher Jamison (London: Bloomsbury, 2014), pp. 29–42 (p. 30); Edward P. Hahnenberg, *Awakening Vocation: A Theology of Christian Call* (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 2010), pp. 86–89.

¹⁰ Mark McIntosh, *Discernment and Truth: The Spirituality and Theology of Knowledge* (New York: Crossroad Publishing, 2004), pp. 23–81.

¹¹ Hahnenberg, *Awakening Vocation*, pp. 3–90.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 6.

organised itself in a more formal manner.¹³ Some of those who were disillusioned with the increasingly close relationship with the Empire fled to the desert.¹⁴ Here they sought to live out their discipleship in an environment which required radical dependence on God, involved extreme asceticism, and provided space for intense religious reflection and prayer.¹⁵ 'Discernment' at this time was seen as the development of spiritual maturity to identify cosmic forces at work in the world through self-discipline and prayerful attentiveness to the Holy Spirit.¹⁶

In light of the influence of these desert fathers and mothers, Augustine of Hippo sought to compare and contrast the life of quiet contemplation with productive activity through two sermons on Mary and Martha. He sought to convey that both service and prayer have value and dignity within an eschatological framework.¹⁷ However, there remained an implicit assumption throughout his work that the life of contemplation was better than the life of activity.¹⁸ This trajectory continued into the Middle Ages where monasticism was held to be the prime example of sanctity such that 'the ideal of the ascetic flight from the world elevated the monk over not just the laity but the cleric as well'.¹⁹

From this brief overview, it is clear that there was a shift in writings on discernment as the church developed from a movement focused on its collective life in the face of persecution through to being firmly established within the political and social life of European society. Over time there was an increasing focus on discernment as personal sanctity, contemplation and prayer. Hahnenberg comments that throughout this period there was 'a new consciousness of a personal calling that comes from God to an individual, moving that individual to abandon everything and become a monk'.²⁰ It is from this stream of thought that the 'subjective' tradition of vocational discernment draws its inspiration with its focus on the individual who,

¹³ Diarmaid MacCulloch, *Christian History: An Introduction to the Western Tradition* (London: SCM Press, 2012), pp. 51-56.

¹⁴ Richard A. Burrige, *Four Ministries, One Jesus: Exploring Your Vocation with the Four Gospels* (London: SPCK, 2017), p. 135.

¹⁵ Hahnenberg, *Awakening Vocation*, p. 7.

¹⁶ McIntosh, *Discernment and Truth*, p. 32.

¹⁷ Augustine of Hippo, *Sermons 53-54*, Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers 1.6.

¹⁸ Hahnenberg, *Awakening Vocation*, p. 8.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 9.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 10.

through personal prayer and reflection, discerns a call to leave their current mode of life.

There was an important development in the twelfth century with the founding of mendicant orders who made religious vows and travelled around preaching, teaching and serving. Hahnenberg comments that this 'added a further layer to this history of inner call' because 'their origins lay not in asceticism but in ministry. Thus they complicated any neat division between cleric and monk.'²¹ Ignatius of Loyola was one of those who established a mendicant order and he has had a significant influence on how discernment is understood and practiced.²²

Ignatius of Loyola and Spiritual Discernment

Simmonds comments on the impact of Ignatius of Loyola on vocational discernment:

As a starting point for a theology of vocation there can be few better places than Ignatius of Loyola's *Spiritual Exercises*. The text maps out an experience of call, desire, response, confusion, and, eventually, clarity. In his own experience, Ignatius found an insight and a method that, down the centuries, would become crucial in the personal journeys of people seeking and finding a direction for lives given over to God.²³

As is apparent from this statement, Ignatius' understanding of discernment was rooted in his own experience. His initial spiritual awakening was prompted by recognising the differing sensations brought about by imagining worldly pleasures compared to pondering the life of Christ and the saints, so it seemed obvious to Ignatius that one could trust emotions as an indicator of God's guidance.²⁴ This confidence was tempered by his recognition that this was not an indiscriminate or passive process in which strong feelings could sway one's choices at any moment, but rather required discernment and a prayerful approach.²⁵ In this Ignatius was also

²¹ Hahnenberg, *Awakening Vocation*, pp. 50-51.

²² *Ibid.*, p. xv.

²³ Gemma Simmonds, 'The Spiritual Exercises of Ignatius of Loyola and Their Contribution to a Theology of Vocation', in *The Disciples' Call: Theologies of Vocation from Scripture to the Present Day*, ed. Christopher Jamison (London: Bloomsbury, 2014), pp. 85-93 (p. 85).

²⁴ Ignatius of Loyola, *The Autobiography of St Ignatius of Loyola*, ed. J.F.X. O'Connor (Potosi, WI: St Athanasius Press, 2014), pp. 16-17.

influenced by the cultural changes which Europe underwent during his lifetime. His *Spiritual Exercises* not only have the human subject at their heart, but also demonstrate 'a typically modern confidence in the ability to systematically reshape life according to a clear method and well-defined goal'.²⁶

Ignatius envisioned the *Spiritual Exercises* as a means by which an individual could recognise God's plan for their life. In his own words, the *Exercises* offered a process of 'preparing and disposing our soul to rid itself of all its disordered affection and then [...] of seeking and finding God's will in the ordering of our life for the salvation of the soul.'²⁷ It was his intention that the *Exercises* be of particular help when seeking vocational direction from God.²⁸ From the First Exercise, the exercitant reflects on their life in light of the work of Jesus by asking themselves, 'What have I done for Christ? What am I doing for Christ? What ought I to do for Christ?'²⁹ Similarly, at the end of the four weeks they pray, 'You, Lord, have given [everything] to me. I now give it back to you, O Lord. All of it is yours. Dispose of it according to your will.'³⁰ The focus throughout is on knowing and being equipped to live out the will of God in concrete terms.

This goal is achieved through a series of exercises and reflections focused on the experience of the exercitant who is accompanied by a Retreat Director. It is worth recognising that for all its focus on the subjective discernment of the individual, the *Spiritual Exercises* were written with the expectation that the exercitant would not be alone in this process of prayerful discernment.³¹ Ignatius also made the assumption that personal discernment would not be free-floating, but rather that it would occur within the context of the church and would be subject to the church's structures of authority and government.³²

²⁵ Hahnenberg, *Awakening Vocation*, p. 57.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 59.

²⁷ Ignatius, *The Spiritual Exercises of Saint Ignatius: A Translation and Commentary*, trans. George E Ganss (St. Louis: Institute of Jesuit Sources, 1992), p. 21.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 25; Hahnenberg, *Awakening Vocation*, p. 55.

²⁹ Ignatius, *Spiritual Exercises*, p. 42.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 95.

³¹ Hahnenberg, *Awakening Vocation*, p. 158.

³² Ignatius, *Spiritual Exercises*, pp. 38, 75; Ignatius of Loyola, *Personal Writings: Reminiscences, Spiritual Diary, Select Letters Including the Text of The Spiritual Exercises*, trans. Joseph A. Munitiz and Philip Endean, Penguin Classics (London; New York: Penguin, 1996), pp. 356-58.

The *Spiritual Exercises* are structured into four sections or 'weeks' through which the exercitant is guided in a progressive and systematic manner such that each 'week' builds on what has preceded it and the content of later 'weeks' is not prematurely revealed.³³ The themes of discernment and choice recur repeatedly with particular attention given to identifying God's will in the 'Second Week'.³⁴ Ignatius introduces this period of reflection stating, 'While continuing our contemplations of [Jesus'] life, we now begin simultaneously to explore and inquire: In which state or way of life does the Divine Majesty wish us to serve him?'³⁵ The reference to 'continuing our contemplations' highlights that, while Ignatius intended the *Spiritual Exercises* to be helpful to those debating the question of vocation, he deliberately did not address this topic directly until after time had been spent recognising one's sin and prayerfully reflecting on the life of Jesus. In this way, Ignatius laid a foundation in which repentance and engagement with the story of Jesus were essential in ensuring emotions could be a reliable guide for discernment.³⁶

There is an expectation that there will be development and a progression in the exercitant's recognition of strong affective experiences through the first two weeks.³⁷ Ignatius identifies the characteristics of 'desolation' with its disquieting effect which leaves 'one without hope and without love [... feeling] separated from our Creator and Lord.'³⁸ The opposite experience he calls 'consolation' which he describes as the experience of 'hope, faith, and charity, and every interior joy which calls and attracts one toward heavenly things and to the salvation of one's soul, by bringing it tranquillity and peace in its Creator and Lord.'³⁹ From these powerful affective experiences Ignatius was keen that exercitants learn to distinguish their origin in the work of evil spirits or the good spirit of God such that they may be used to discern the will and purposes of God.

Having established these foundations, Ignatius provided practical guidance for making a choice about the way of life one should adopt. He called this process,

³³ Ignatius, *Spiritual Exercises*, p. 24.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 99.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 64.

³⁶ Hahnenberg, *Awakening Vocation*, p. 154.

³⁷ Ignatius, *Spiritual Exercises*, pp. 121-28.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 122.

³⁹ *Ibid.*

'Making an Election'.⁴⁰ He outlined three 'Times' in which it is appropriate to make a choice about the state in which to live one's life. The first is through a direct movement of God when the person responds immediately in the manner of the first disciples to Jesus' call.⁴¹ The second is as a result of reflection and prayer on 'consolations' and 'desolations' experienced when contemplating the options.⁴² The third way relies on reason to weigh up the benefits of a choice and its contribution to the life of faith.⁴³ Of these three, the first two are seen to emanate directly from God, but are open to self-deception and misinterpretation.⁴⁴ The third is less likely to fall into these dangers but requires further guidance as to how to proceed so one can be confident it comes from God.⁴⁵

In reviewing the *Spiritual Exercises*, it is apparent that Ignatius built on earlier centuries of reflection on discernment, but that his work was original in offering a systematised approach to this process.⁴⁶ He had a balanced and considered attitude to the place of affective experiences within the process of vocational discernment. It would therefore be a misrepresentation to suggest his system was uncritically subjective for a number of reasons. First, within the *Spiritual Exercises* emotions are subjected to a series of tests and purifications before being used to assist in the discernment process. Second, Ignatius demonstrated a strong commitment to the influence of the church with its hierarchical and formal structures as being authoritative in the outcome of any personal discernment. Third, the expectation that the *Spiritual Exercises* would be undertaken with an experienced guide 'never allow[s] the individual [...] to become an autonomous modern subject, alone with her or his transcendental experience'.⁴⁷

Nevertheless, Ignatius made a particularly influential contribution by moving 'the place of discernment from the external calculation to the interior world of a person's desires', and these themes were built upon by later generations.⁴⁸

⁴⁰ Ignatius, *Spiritual Exercises*, pp. 74–80.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, p. 76.

⁴² *Ibid.*

⁴³ *Ibid.*

⁴⁴ Joseph Bolin, *Paths of Love: The Discernment of Vocation According to the Teaching of Aquinas, Ignatius, and Pope John Paul II* (North Charleston: Createspace Publishing, 2008), p. 25.

⁴⁵ Bolin, *Paths of Love*, pp. 77–79.

⁴⁶ McIntosh, *Discernment and Truth*, p. 95.

⁴⁷ Hahnenberg, *Awakening Vocation*, p. 157.

The Interiorisation of Vocational Discernment

From the middle ages onwards, the Catholic church tended to focus the idea of 'calling' on a narrow definition of vocation referring to the decision to enter the priesthood or the monastery.⁴⁹ Alongside this, there was an increased perception of the call of God as a powerful, affective stirring within the soul of the individual.⁵⁰ Although there was some resistance to the dominance of this approach, these developments lead Hahnenberg to describe an 'interiorisation of vocation [...] within the Catholic tradition in the years stretching from Trent to the Second Vatican Council'.⁵¹

Initially there was a clear distinction between the Catholic Church's understanding of the call to priesthood and the call to the religious life. Whilst priesthood was understood to be within the gift of the church with its structures of hierarchy, power and office, the religious life was focused on prayer and holiness, and therefore placed a greater emphasis on a personal sense of being called to live in this manner.⁵² However, this distinction was challenged in seventeenth century France by a group known as the 'French School'. In a context in which many priests were lax and incompetent, the seminarians of the French School were keen to see the life of the church revitalised through improvements in the quality and personal holiness of clergy.⁵³ For these reasons, 'the French School launches a new trajectory in the theology of vocation by taking the notion of an inner call – to this point the preserve of the religious life – and applying it to the clerical state'.⁵⁴

Emerging from the work of Pierre de Bérulle, the French School placed theological emphasis on participation in the inner life of Christ and of the alignment of human will with the will of the Father through participation in the Son's submission and obedience.⁵⁵ This had an impact on vocational discernment due to seminaries founded by those influenced by Bérullian thought, such as Jean-Jacques

⁴⁸ Christopher Jamison (ed.), *The Disciples' Call: Theologies of Vocation from Scripture to the Present Day* (London: Bloomsbury, 2013), p. 3.

⁴⁹ Hahnenberg, *Awakening Vocation*, pp. 26, 28.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 27.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, p. xv.

⁵² ACCM, *Call to Order: Vocation and Ministry in the Church of England* (London: Ludo Press, 1989), pp. 45–46.

⁵³ Hahnenberg, *Awakening Vocation*, p. 67; Pierre de Bérulle, *Bérulle and the French School: Selected Writings*, ed. William Thompson-Uberuaga (New York: Paulist Press, 1989), p. 57.

⁵⁴ Hahnenberg, *Awakening Vocation*, p. 64.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 65–66.

Olier, which sought to renew the French church.⁵⁶ In a text written by Olier and later incorporated into the *Traité Des Saints Ordres* which was reprinted from 1676 until 1953, a central role is given to the interior sense of being called to priesthood:

The first thing is to test, in the depths of one's soul, the inclination and movement of God towards the ecclesiastical state. This movement is strong, effective, impervious, powerful, carrying the whole soul and guiding it, not in an impulsive, sentimental, or wavering manner, but in a way that is authoritative, consistent, and immovable in its depths.⁵⁷

This had such a pervasive influence that, in the early years of the twentieth century, a debate was sparked by a paper written by Canon Joseph Lahitton.⁵⁸ In *La Vocation Sacerdotale*, Lahitton bemoaned the mediocrity of Catholic priests and suggested this was due to selection processes which prioritised a subjective sense of calling without making any assessment of suitability for the role.⁵⁹ This prompted clarification from Pope Pius X that 'no special interior attraction or invitation from the Holy Spirit is required for ordination'.⁶⁰ More recently, Pope John Paul II identified the problem with an overly-interiorised perspective of vocation as 'a tendency to view the bond between human beings and God in an individualistic and self-centred way, as if God's call reached the individual by a direct route without in any way passing through the community'.⁶¹ Nevertheless, Hahnenberg notes that Catholics today 'continue to talk about vocation in ways that are both overly institutionalised and overly interiorised'.⁶²

This reliance on the subjective discernment of the call to ordination also influenced the Church of England. Dewar notes that 'questions probing the candidate's inner sense of calling do not appear in church ordinals before the sixteenth century'.⁶³ In a book frequently recommended to prospective ordinands,

⁵⁶ Matthew Levering (ed.), *On the Priesthood: Classic and Contemporary Texts* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2003), p. 97.

⁵⁷ Hahnenberg, *Awakening Vocation*, p. 70.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 86–89.

⁵⁹ Joseph Lahitton, *La Vocation Sacerdotale* (Paris: Beauchesne, 1914), pp. 36–38.

⁶⁰ Pius XI, *Acta Apostolicae Sedis IV* (Rome: Polyglottis Vaticanis, 1912), p. 485; Hahnenberg, *Awakening Vocation*, p. 88.

⁶¹ John Paul II, 'Pastores Dabo Vobis' (Rome, 1992), p. 37.

⁶² Hahnenberg, *Awakening Vocation*, p. 90.

⁶³ Francis Dewar, *Called or Collared? An Alternative Approach to Vocation* (London: SPCK, 2000), p. 9.

Ramsey focuses on the experience of the individual as he describes, 'The call of God is to a person, and this involves the heart, the mind, the conscience and the will', whilst acknowledging that 'The Church has its procedures for deciding the acceptance or otherwise of a person for ordination to the priesthood'.⁶⁴ This implies that the call of God is revealed firstly and primarily to the individual and the church's role is limited to ratification of that interior movement. This pattern is reflected in the selection criteria used to identify ordinands. The 'Vocation Criteria' require candidates to have 'an inner sense of call' and 'be able to speak of the development of their inner conviction and the extent to which others have confirmed it'.⁶⁵

From this brief overview of the subjective tradition of vocational discernment, it is apparent that those who played significant roles in the development of this tradition made their contributions motivated by a desire for individuals to grow in faithful discipleship and for the church to be led by people who are responding to God's call. However, there are a number of difficulties with leaning too heavily on a subjective, interior sense of call to ministry.

Critical Appraisal of the 'Subjective' Tradition of Vocational Discernment

The subjective tradition of discernment has developed from a rich stream of Christian tradition through the centuries. However, there are three concerns when an interior sense of call is prioritised in the vocational discernment process; first, the abstraction of 'calling', second, the charge of individualism, and, third, the potential for isolationism.

When subjective discernment is over-emphasised, it is easy for the call of God to be perceived as something abstract and separate from the individual which needs to be either passively received or actively discovered.⁶⁶ When this occurs it is possible to inadvertently distort our understanding of the nature of God as the one

⁶⁴ Michael Ramsey, *The Christian Priest Today*, 2nd ed. (London: SPCK, 2009), p. 101.

⁶⁵ Ministry Division, *Criteria for the Selection for the Ordained Ministry in the Church of England* (London: Church House, 2014), p. 1.

⁶⁶ Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics III/4*, ed. G. W Bromiley and Thomas F Torrance, trans. A.T. Mackay *et al.* (Peabody, MS: Hendrickson, 2010), p. 603; Hahnenberg, *Awakening Vocation*, p. 80.

who calls or of ourselves as disciples. Williams identifies the tendency towards passivity using the analogy of actors anxiously waiting to find out which parts the director has allocated to them in a play.⁶⁷ In this model, God is seen as the creator of 'human ciphers, a pool of cheap labour to whom jobs can be assigned at will'.⁶⁸ Alternatively, when vocation is understood as something to be discovered, the emphasis becomes a particular method of deduction, rather than obedient discipleship. There can be an expectation that vocation is hidden and that an arduous process of discovery is required to reveal it.

A second significant problem with prioritising a subjective approach to vocational discernment is that of individualism. In a cultural climate which emphasises self-discovery, self-knowledge and self-fulfilment, to speak of an interior journey of discernment is easily misunderstood as a Pelagian quest of one's own effort or as solipsism.⁶⁹ Of course, it is also possible within a highly interiorised model of vocation to claim God's call to a role which one perceives as appealing for any number of reasons. Jamison urges caution, describing how easy it is for 'personal instinct, individual attraction, and private revelation [to] become the guiding principles for declaring something to be "my" vocation.'⁷⁰ Recognising this, Ignatius was cautious in his *Spiritual Exercises* to acknowledge that not all emotions are equally helpful in revealing the will of God: 'there are three kinds of thoughts in myself [...] one [...] arises strictly from my own freedom and desire; and the other two come from outside myself, the one from the good spirit and the other from the evil'.⁷¹ It was for this reason he devised his system of guided exercises to purge self-interest and provide a series of checks and balances in discernment.

A related difficulty presented by a highly interiorised perspective of vocational discernment is the potential for isolationism.⁷² Jamison comments that 'modern ideas of autonomy have taken over many people's approach to vocation, with the communal and divine aspects of vocation relegated to the margins'.⁷³ This

⁶⁷ Rowan Williams, *A Ray of Darkness: Sermons and Reflections* (Cambridge: Cowley Publications, 1995), p. 147.

⁶⁸ Williams, *A Ray of Darkness*, p. 149.

⁶⁹ Gary D. Badcock, *The Way of Life: A Theology of Christian Vocation* (Grand Rapids: W.B. Eerdmans, 1998), p. 30.

⁷⁰ Jamison, *The Disciples' Call*, p. 1.

⁷¹ Ignatius, *Spiritual Exercises*, p. 35.

⁷² Williams, *A Ray of Darkness*, p. 167.

has the potential to cause tension, pain and confusion when there is a disparity between the candidate's belief that God is calling him or her to ordained ministry and the outcome of the church selectors' process of testing that calling.⁷⁴ Rather than a dynamic interplay of 'voices in harmony, collaborating and interweaving' to discern God's will, a highly personalised interpretation of calling places the individual over and against the discerning work of the people of God.⁷⁵ This is not only apparent in the way individuals relate to the contemporary church, but also in failing to draw on the historic wisdom of the church. Liebert notes that 'many Christians [...] create their own practices of faithful decision making [...] unaware that a long and varied tradition of discernment exists'.⁷⁶ This can result in a version of fatalism or quasi-superstition in which the interior call of God is 'tested' by self-identified standards. McChlery suggests that offering spiritual direction to those exploring ordination and those tasked with assessing their calling could provide experience of the Ignatian discernment tradition and helpfully inform vocational discernment.⁷⁷ This is one example of how contemporary practice could fruitfully draw on the resources of Christian tradition to counteract the influence of isolationism and individualism in vocational discernment.

Vocational Discernment in the 'Objective' Tradition

In tracing the development of the 'subjective' discernment tradition, it is apparent that this emerged from a laudable desire to respond to the call to discipleship and growing spiritual maturity. The 'objective' tradition, on the other hand, finds its roots in a concern for the well-being of the body of Christ, the church, within which faithful discipleship occurs.

⁷³ Jamison, *The Disciples' Call*, p. 2.

⁷⁴ Peter Madsen Gubi, 'When the Personal Call to Ordained Ministry Is Not Recognised by the Church: Implications for Selection and Pastoral Care' (DMin Thesis, University of Chester, 2019), pp. 132-33.

⁷⁵ Williams, *A Ray of Darkness*, p. 167.

⁷⁶ Elizabeth Liebert, *The Way of Discernment: Spiritual Practices for Decision Making*, 1st edn (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2008), p. ix.

⁷⁷ Lynn McChlery, 'How Might the Theory and Practice of Ignatian Spirituality Inform Vocational Discernment in the Church of Scotland?', *Practical Theology* 8.1 (2015) pp. 2-18 (p. 17).

Early Development of the 'Objective' Tradition

Throughout the New Testament, personal discipleship is understood to be lived out in community. The work of the Holy Spirit is seen in the growth of positive relational characteristics and there is an emphasis on healthy interpersonal relationships which build up the church and reflect the love of God (for example: John 17.20–23; 1 Cor. 1.10–11; Gal. 5.22–6.2; Col. 3.11–17; 1 Peter 3.8; 1 Tim.3.1–13). Klein notes that 'the apostolic and patristic church viewed Christ as primarily active in the group and therefore considered vocational discernment as the concern of the community before it became that of the individual'.⁷⁸

This pattern continued throughout the early centuries of the church's history. Famously, a number of significant figures in the patristic era were initially unwilling and resistant to assume episcopal office, including Ambrose, Martin of Tours, Gregory of Nazianzus, Jerome, and Augustine.⁷⁹ The Orthodox Church incorporates this reticence into their ordination service in which two people hold onto the arms of the ordinand drawing them forward and preventing them from running away.⁸⁰ This reflects the understanding within the Eastern Tradition that 'the church's discernment of God's choice might on occasion even override an individual's own lack of a sense of vocation'.⁸¹

In his *Book of Pastoral Rule*, Gregory the Great reflected on episcopal appointments within the church. He asserted that a position within the church should not be sought for reasons of self-elevation and therefore one who was keen to perform such a role should not be appointed.⁸² However, he also commended those who possessed the necessary gifts and who assumed the office in response to the need of the church: 'if he [has] gifts whereby he may profit others also, he ought, when enjoined to undertake supreme rule, in his heart to flee from it, but against his will to obey'.⁸³ Gregory the Great shared with his contemporaries the assumption, which persisted throughout the patristic period and into the middle ages, that a life of prayer and contemplation was preferable to bearing the responsibilities of priestly

⁷⁸ Terrance Klein, 'Discerning Vocations', *America*, May (1993), pp. 10–11.

⁷⁹ ACCM, *Call to Order*, p. 46.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*

⁸¹ Paul Bradshaw, *Rites of Ordination: Their History and Theology* (London: SPCK, 2014), p. 84.

⁸² Gregory the Great, *Book of Pastoral Rule* 1.3, Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers 2.12.

⁸³ *Ibid.*, 1.5.

office. However, ultimately it was the abuse of both the monastery and the priesthood which prompted Martin Luther's seismic objections.⁸⁴

Martin Luther and Vocation

Gustaf Wingren, in his influential study of Luther's work on vocation, highlights that underlying Luther's theological approach was a scepticism towards over-reliance on the interior discernment of God's call: 'God does not come to man in thoughts and feelings which well up in him when he isolates himself from the world but rather in what happens to man in the external and tangible events which take place around him.'⁸⁵ This approach is apparent throughout Luther's writings on how ministers should be selected. He gives little credence to the individual's sense of calling and places the emphasis on the laity in the appointment process.

Central to Luther's entire corpus of work was his realisation that righteousness before God is only possible through faith and not through religious activity or works.⁸⁶ As he expounded the implications of this insight, Luther vigorously denounced the ways the church had obscured this through its approach to priesthood and the religious life. Luther identified a pervasive reliance on religious activity underpinning the priesthood and monastery.⁸⁷ Not only did this mean that the person who entered this way of life would fruitlessly labour without 'knowing the grace of faith', it also fed arrogance and conceit so that those who remained as laity were 'vile in their eyes'.⁸⁸ This introduced an ungodly distinction within the church where those in ecclesiastical office were exalted above everyone else. They were separated by a sacerdotal interpretation of priesthood and by religious vows, including the vow of celibacy.⁸⁹

⁸⁴ MacCulloch, *Christian History*, pp. 166–67.

⁸⁵ Gustaf Wingren, *Luther on Vocation*, trans. Carl Rasmussen (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2004), p. 117.

⁸⁶ Martin Luther, *Luther's Works Volume 25: Lectures on Romans*, ed. Hilton C. Oswald (Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1972), p. 9; *Luther's Works Volume 26: Lectures on Galatians 1535 Chapters 1–4*, ed. Jaroslav Pelikan (Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1963), pp. 3–12.

⁸⁷ Martin Luther, *Word and Sacrament II*, ed. Helmut T Lehmann and Abdel Ross Wentz, trans. Frederick C Ahrens (Philadelphia: Augsburg Fortress Publishers, 1959), pp. 74–80.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 76, 78.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 27, 75–77.

In his letter *To the Christian Nobility* written in 1520, Luther expressed his hope that the laity might reform the church as ‘the clergy, to whom this task more properly belongs, have grown quite indifferent’.⁹⁰ Drawing on 1 Pet. 2.9, Luther urged his readers to recognise that ‘we are all consecrated priests through baptism’ and share the same relationship to God as those occupying ecclesial office.⁹¹ The implication of this insight for ministry was that, ‘when a bishop consecrates it is nothing else than that in the place and stead of the whole community, all of whom have like power, he takes a person and charges him to exercise this power on behalf of the others’.⁹² For Luther, the authority of a priest lay not in his ordination by a bishop, but in the charge of the laity to serve the church in this role. This was a fundamental shift from the prevailing interpretation of ordination at the time. Luther believed the sacrament of ordination was ‘simply an invention of the church of the pope’ about which ‘there is not a single word [...] in the whole New Testament.’⁹³ He critiqued the understanding that at ordination a new, indelible character was conferred upon the priest as this reinforced the separation between the priesthood and the laity.⁹⁴

Luther did not remain simply a critical voice to existing practices, but also offered a constructive recommendation as to how ministers should be chosen and appointed. Firstly, he redefined priesthood stating, ‘priests, as we call them, are ministers chosen from among us. All that they do is done in our name; the priesthood is nothing but a ministry’.⁹⁵ He shifted the focus away from a sacerdotal function and placed greater emphasis on the preaching role, thus redefining ordination as ‘nothing else than a certain rite by which the church chooses its preachers’.⁹⁶

Due to the significance Luther placed on the choice of the minister by the people, he was dismissive of the idea that an individual could identify themselves as suitable for this role.⁹⁷ The discernment process was a communal act rather than one

⁹⁰ Martin Luther, *The Christian in Society I*, ed. James Atkinson (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1966), p. 123.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 127.

⁹² *Ibid.*, p. 128.

⁹³ *Ibid.*, pp. 106–7, 112.

⁹⁴ Luther, *The Christian in Society I*, p. 129; Luther, *Word and Sacrament II*, p. 117.

⁹⁵ Luther, *Word and Sacrament II*, p. 113.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*

in which a person could 'push himself forward and take [ministry] upon himself, without our consent and election'.⁹⁸ The sole difference between the minister and the people was a temporary and reversible appointment to a role in which the minister was charged with acting on behalf of the people.⁹⁹

Nevertheless, Luther made allowance for some elements of individual discernment. The only situation in which he believed it was healthy to put oneself forward for ministry was when a man 'becomes aware that there is a lack of teachers'.¹⁰⁰ However, it remained the responsibility of the church to consider whether the individual was suited to this role.¹⁰¹ It is in this context that Luther uses the language of 'calling'. For him, appointment to ministry was not found in a personal call from God, but rather in the discernment of the community to whom God gives 'an overwhelming power [...] to preach, to permit preaching, and to call'.¹⁰² Thus, Luther shifts the focus from an interior notion of vocation to one emphasising 'the action by which one rightly enters the office'.¹⁰³

Luther's redefinition of vocation did not only focus on ministry. One of Luther's abiding influences throughout subsequent centuries was his redefinition of the words 'vocation' and 'calling' and his application of this language to describe secular occupations and roles. In his German translation of the Bible, Luther translated the Greek word *klēsis* in 1 Corinthians 7:20 using the German word *Beruf*.¹⁰⁴ *Klēsis* means 'calling' and is used by Paul throughout his letters to refer to God's call to discipleship or to a particular task, such as that of apostle.¹⁰⁵ The word *Beruf* includes a root component (*Ruf*) which means 'call', but in medieval German this was used only to refer to ecclesiastical vocations.¹⁰⁶ Luther's use was radical as the surrounding verses in 1 Corinthians do not speak of ministry but rather how to live as a husband, wife, slave or master.¹⁰⁷ This is apparent in Luther's comment on

⁹⁷ Martin Luther, *Church and Ministry II*, ed. Helmut Lehmann and Conrad Bergendoff (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1958), pp. 384–87.

⁹⁸ Luther, *The Christian in Society I*, p. 129.

⁹⁹ Luther, *Word and Sacrament II*, p. 117.

¹⁰⁰ Martin Luther, *Church and Ministry I*, ed. Eric Gritsch (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1970), p. 310.

¹⁰¹ Luther, *Church and Ministry I*, p. 311.

¹⁰² *Ibid.*

¹⁰³ Wingren, *Luther on Vocation*, p. 1.

¹⁰⁴ Hahnenberg, *Awakening Vocation*, p. 14.

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 15.

the word 'call': 'the social status to which one is called [...] everyone has his calling from God'.¹⁰⁸ The word Luther used here for 'social status' is *Stand* which he used 'interchangeably with *Befuhl* (duty), *Amt* (office), and *Beruf* (calling)'.¹⁰⁹ *Stand* for Luther was the position in life in which God has placed each person by his providence and it was here that the individual was to serve Christ without seeking God's call elsewhere or pursuing another set of outward circumstances.¹¹⁰ He was especially keen to stress that 'calling' was not to be understood as the preserve of priests and monks. Indeed he saw those who left families and neighbours for the monastery as shirking the duty of love God had called them to by placing them in their unique network of relationships and responsibilities.¹¹¹ It is debatable whether Luther's interpretation of *klēsis* is substantiated by careful exegesis of 1 Corinthians 7.¹¹² Nevertheless, in doing so Luther redefined 'vocation' and 'calling' as having applicability outside of ecclesiastical positions.

The Development of the 'Objective' Trajectory

Luther's contribution to a theology of vocation marks the moment that significant differences appeared within the discernment tradition.¹¹³ Within the Catholic Church there continued to be an emphasis on priesthood and the religious life when the language of 'vocation' was used, although in the 1960s Vatican II sought to extend this concept to the laity.¹¹⁴ Meanwhile the focus within the Protestant movement was on employment and social roles rather than on ministry, although there were significant changes in this regard as well, with a greater emphasis on congregational ministerial appointments rather than apostolic succession.¹¹⁵

¹⁰⁷ Hahnenberg, *Awakening Vocation*, p. 15.

¹⁰⁸ Martin Luther, *Commentary on 1 Corinthians 7*, ed. Hilton C. Oswald (Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1973), p. 46.

¹⁰⁹ Hahnenberg, *Awakening Vocation*, p. 237.

¹¹⁰ Wingren, *Luther on Vocation*, pp. 64–65.

¹¹¹ Luther, *Commentary on 1 Corinthians 7*, p. 47.

¹¹² Badcock, *The Way of Life*, pp. 6–8, 39; Barth, *Church Dogmatics III/4*, p. 601.

¹¹³ Hahnenberg, *Awakening Vocation*, pp. 26–27.

¹¹⁴ John Paul II, 'Pastores Dabo Vobis', pp. 19–20; Pope Paul VI, 'Lumen Gentium', p. 31.

¹¹⁵ Hahnenberg, *Awakening Vocation*, pp. 26–27.

Protestant churches differed in their understanding and application of Luther's thoughts about the appointment of ministers. Some Protestant denominations pursued a congregationalist model of ministry and others reverted to an episcopal structure. Even within the Lutheran church, debates continue about how ministers derive their authority and whether ordination is purely functional.¹¹⁶ Braaten suggests this confusion reflects 'the ambiguity inherent in Luther's own statements on ministry' as his views continued to be revised and rethought throughout his life.¹¹⁷

Calvin offered those in the Reformed tradition a variation on a purely congregationalist understanding of ministerial appointment. He considered a call to ministry to come directly from God but its discernment by the individual was insufficient, rather the church needed to assess and confirm that call before someone was ordained.¹¹⁸ In this way, Calvin drew on tenants of classical Catholic teaching on the role and authority of the priest whilst affirming the central role of the church in the process of discernment.¹¹⁹

The Church of England retained the three-fold ministry and did not adopt a congregationalist approach (Article XXIII). The concept of vocation has varied over the years, sometimes emphasising inner calling and, at other times, the role of the church.¹²⁰ This is apparent in Reiss's comprehensive survey of the Church of England's vocational procedures over the twentieth century.¹²¹ During discussions about the introduction of selection conferences and discernment processes some challenged the idea that calling should be subjected to formal assessment, whilst others emphasised the need for the church to thoroughly examine those who were to be trained for ordination.¹²² There was also debate when new wording was approved for Ordination Services as part of *Common Worship*. Initially it was suggested that the Church of England adopt the wording used by the Lutheran Church of America which emphasises the church's role in ministerial selection. This would have

¹¹⁶ Carl Braaten, 'The Special Ministry of the Ordained', in *Marks of the Body of Christ*, ed. Robert Jenson and Carl Braaten (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), pp. 123–36 (p. 124).

¹¹⁷ Braaten, 'Special Ministry', p. 126.

¹¹⁸ Badcock, *The Way of Life*, p. 92; John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion* 4.3.11.

¹¹⁹ Badcock, *The Way of Life*, p. 93.

¹²⁰ ACCM, *Call to Order*, p. 48.

¹²¹ Reiss, *The Testing of Vocation*, pp. 5–23.

¹²² Reiss, *The Testing of Vocation*, pp. 162–70.

rendered the question included in the title as follows: 'Will you take the Church's call as God's call?' This was not approved and instead the service was shaped to ask for the church's assent to the appointment prior to enquiring about the candidates' own sense of calling.¹²³

Critical Appraisal of the 'Objective' Tradition of Vocational Discernment

Having traced the development of the objective trajectory of vocational discernment it is necessary to offer a critical appraisal of this tradition with its focus on the central role of the church in ministerial appointments and its scepticism of subjective modes of calling.

A primary critique of Luther's work on this subject is that it is historically rooted in an era of medieval feudalism in which there was little flexibility around job roles and minimal personal choice. Luther's concept of *Stand* was rooted in medieval ideals of position and societal stability. Hahnenberg comments that, 'contrary to our modern ideals of freedom and social mobility, Luther's view of society was more static, hierarchical, and patriarchal'.¹²⁴ Luther reacted to the Peasants' Revolt in 1525 by declaring that rebellion against existing societal structures was rebellion against God's will because it was God who had placed people in their respective positions of authority and obedience.¹²⁵ He was keen to stress that, while rulers and peasants were equal in God's sight in the spiritual realm, they should maintain their different social positions for the good of society.¹²⁶ This aspect of Luther's work underpins the later Marxist charge that religious faith promotes an unhealthy acceptance of the status quo and a reluctance to challenge inequality and poverty.¹²⁷ The tendency towards maintaining the status quo is reflected in objective approaches to the discernment of the call to ordination. When the emphasis is on the church's role in ministerial appointment, the individual is placed in a passive and responsive

¹²³ Reiss, *The Testing of Vocation*, p. 22.

¹²⁴ Hahnenberg, *Awakening Vocation*, p. 16.

¹²⁵ Martin Luther, *Works of Martin Luther: Volume 4*, trans. Charles Jacobs (Albany: Books for the Ages, 1997), p. 181.

¹²⁶ Wingren, *Luther on Vocation*, pp. 111-14.

¹²⁷ Badcock, *The Way of Life*, p. 45.

position with little scope to identify oneself as suited to a life of ministry, nor for suggesting that one might be called by God to occupy this role.

Furthermore, within this stream of thinking there is a decreased sense of God's direct involvement in the call to ordination because such a call can only be mediated through the church. The focus of objective approaches is on the identification of people who already have the necessary gifts and talents to bring to the task, instead of being open to the possibility that 'God can also call us beyond our abilities'.¹²⁸ The pattern observable within Scripture is that some are called by the church community because an assessment has been made of their suitability for the task, whilst at other times God chooses unlikely candidates to serve him. This is apparent, for example, within three chapters of the book of Acts in which deacons are appointing according to a set of criteria, whilst Paul is chosen as an apostle to his own surprise and the astonishment of the early church (Acts 6.1-8; 9.1-30). As is made clear to the prophet Samuel, 'the Lord does not see as mortals see; they look on the outward appearance, but the Lord looks on the heart' (1 Sam. 16.7b).

A discernment process which prioritises existing abilities is at risk of conceiving of ministry in a purely functional sense and the church as merely a socially-constructed entity. Jenson expresses concern at this tendency, stating: 'The church is not and cannot be an essentially undifferentiated collection of equivalent individuals, who [...] may or may not choose to organise themselves as to create offices with various authorities.'¹²⁹ Within such a functional model, the selection of ministers is based on merit in the same way as any other job appointment which excludes the sense of God's direct involvement in the decision. Ironically, this potentially replaces Luther's original concerns about a two-tiered church hierarchy with its firm distinction between those occupying spiritual roles and those engaged in worldly employment, with a similar distinction between clergy and laity based on education and ability.¹³⁰

¹²⁸ Hahnenberg, *Awakening Vocation*, p. 121.

¹²⁹ Robert Jenson, *Visible Words: The Interpretation and Practice of Christian Sacraments* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2010), p. 188.

¹³⁰ David Hoyle, 'How Did the Reformation Develop the Theology of Vocation?', in *The Disciples' Call: Theologies of Vocation from Scripture to the Present Day*, ed. Christopher Jamison (London: Bloomsbury, 2013), pp. 95-110 (p. 106).

Conclusion

God calls people to ordained ministry through both an interior sense of personal vocation and through the work of his church, in other words through both subjective and objective means of discernment. In this article, I have traced the long and chequered history of both traditions, exploring and evaluating the reasons why some prioritise interior vocational discernment, whilst others place greater emphasis on selection by the church.

The Church of England recognises the need for 'an increase in the numbers coming into ordained ministry: for a hopeful future, for a plentiful harvest'.¹³¹ However, this raises the central issue of agency: 'One cannot place the blame for the vocational shortage upon divine inactivity. If vocations are not forthcoming, something needs to be reformed in the church, not in heaven.'¹³² This poses the question as to what the church should be doing to increase numbers of ordinands whilst recognising that ultimately the call comes from God. The exploration of subjective and objective vocational discernment offers some helpful resources for approaching this issue theologically and pragmatically.

It is first worth stressing the primacy of Jesus' call to discipleship. A call to ministry must always be secondary to Jesus' call to follow him and participate in his mission. If Christian faith is reduced 'to a cultural symbol or a vague code of ethics, or at best a man-made, man-centred idealism, where the supreme goal is not the glory of God, but human fulfilment' then there will be no sense of call at the heart of our gospel message.¹³³ This has ramifications for both objective and subjective vocational discernment. If people perceive their faith as rooted in their own personal choice with little sense of having responded to the call of Christ in their lives, then there will be a diminished framework within which to interpret other external calls, such as the call to ministry. Thus, Ramsey suggests, 'the readiness of members of the Church to respond to particular calls [...] depend[s] upon the depth of their realisation of the supreme call whereon their faith is founded.'¹³⁴ This implies that a shortage of people discerning the call to ordination may relate to a deficit in how the

¹³¹ Ministry Division, 'Ordained Vocations Statistics 1949-2014', p. 2.

¹³² Klein, 'Discerning Vocations', p. 10.

¹³³ Price, 'Did the Early Monastic Tradition Have a Concept of Vocation?', p. 41.

¹³⁴ Ramsey, *The Christian Priest Today*, p. 100.

church teaches about the primary call to discipleship. Thus, the church is reminded of the importance of faithfully teaching about what it means to be called as a disciple of Christ.¹³⁵ It is only in the context of a church body which is following Christ whole-heartedly and without reservation, that the call to serve Him in specific ministries will be received. This is confirmed by research into vocations practice which has found that parishes sending high numbers of ordinands have built a church culture in which calling and active participation are central.¹³⁶ Within such an environment, there will be individuals who would respond to an interior sense of calling to ordination and others whose calling will be discerned and tested through involvement in lay ministry.

This highlights the importance of recognising the influence of cultural climate upon assumptions about how a call to ordination is discerned. As previously noted, individualism is pervasive in contemporary Western societies and in this context subjective discernment may easily be overemphasised.¹³⁷ Furthermore, over recent centuries social mobility has increased, along with the expectation that people can choose their own occupation in accordance with their interests and abilities.¹³⁸ This distances us from the earliest Christians whose life choices were dictated by family, geography and social strata.¹³⁹ Due to these changes, 'choice has become one of our most important ways of framing reality' and this influences our approach to vocational discernment.¹⁴⁰ In this cultural context, the choice to enter ministry is easily conceived as an occupational decision made by the individual alone without reference to the discernment of the church community. In this way, the wider climate quickly skews towards prioritising an interior decision to explore ministry and diminishes the central role of the church. The church needs to meet this challenge by initiating conversations about calling so people recognise the

¹³⁵ Ministry Division, 'Growing Vocations Everywhere: A Good Practice Guide' (July 2017), p. 8, <<https://www.churchofengland.org/sites/default/files/2017-10/Good%20Practice%20Guide.pdf>>, accessed 11 December 2019.

¹³⁶ Sally Myers, 'Good Practice in Encouraging Vocations in Parishes and Dioceses' (Ministry Division, November 2016), pp. 6–7, <https://churchsupporthub.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/12/4.26_Good-practice-in-encouraging-vocations-in-parishes-and-dioceses.pdf>, accessed 11 December 2019.

¹³⁷ Badcock, *The Way of Life*, p. 82.

¹³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 44.

¹³⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 42.

¹⁴⁰ Hahnenberg, *Awakening Vocation*, p. xii.

communal nature of discernment from the earliest stirrings of a vocation and do not feel it is simply a private, personal matter. Recent research points to the importance of incumbents and others 'discerning and "spotting" calling in people, and then actively encouraging and developing them'.¹⁴¹ This has been referred to as 'tapping on shoulders' and is differentiated by its proactive approach from a passive stance in which individuals offer themselves for lay ministry experience or for ordination.¹⁴² It is encouraging to see training and resources being offered to clergy to increase their awareness and confidence in discerning and developing vocations.¹⁴³

Furthermore, deep rooted societal and cultural assumptions can distort the response to a subjective, interior call of God to ordained ministry. Whilst it has been recognised that women expressing a strong personal sense of call to ordination played a part in the Church of England's decision to admit women to holy orders, there are several factors which contribute to ongoing differences in the number and age of female ordinands compared to men.¹⁴⁴ Graveling draws on career theories to suggest this may be attributable to socialisation within a society which has historically held defined gender roles and behavioural expectations for women.¹⁴⁵ The ramification of these pervasive societal messages is that women may not put themselves forward for leadership positions or may ignore the idea that God could be calling them to ministry. Graveling describes how "'opt out" decisions by women are caused by self-perceptions ascribed through socialisation'.¹⁴⁶ Similarly, other disenfranchised or minority groups may hold limited expectations of the possibility that God might call them to ordination. This is apparent from guidelines which recognise that 'under-represented groups are prone to self-select themselves out both before and during the [vocational discernment] process'.¹⁴⁷ It is therefore

¹⁴¹ Myers, 'Good Practice in Encouraging Vocations', p. 6.

¹⁴² Ibid.

¹⁴³ Myers, 'Good Practice in Encouraging Vocations', p. 8; Andrew Watson and Magdalen Smith, *The Great Vocations Conversation: A Year of Inspiration and Challenge for Ministers* (London: Church House Publishing, 2018), p. 6.

¹⁴⁴ ACCM, *Call to Order*, p. 26; Ministry Division, 'Ordained Vocations Statistics 1949-2014', p. 11.

¹⁴⁵ Liz Graveling, 'Women and Leadership in the Church: Insights from Gender and Management Literature' (Ministry Development, August 2015), p. 4, <http://www.ministrydevelopment.org.uk/UserFiles/File/TRIG/Gender_and_management_review.pdf>, accessed 11 December 2019.

¹⁴⁶ Graveling, 'Women and Leadership in the Church', p. 4.

refreshing to identify within recent Church of England publications the determination not to rely on individuals offering themselves for ministry based on a strong interior sense of calling, but rather prioritising objective discernment by encouraging incumbents to be particularly attentive to the call to ordination in women, minority ethnic groups, those with less formal education and from areas of social deprivation.¹⁴⁸

It is apparent that discerning a call to ordained ministry will be experienced differently by different people and that it is impossible to identify a typical or expected route towards ordained ministry. As well as societal pressures, personality, past experience, church tradition and theological approach will influence how individuals hear and respond to the call of God. The Church of England, as a denomination which is both reformed and catholic, is well placed to draw on the resources offered by both the 'subjective' tradition of discernment with its focus on interior sense of call and the emphasis on the role of the church in the 'objective' tradition. Good Practice Guidelines published by Ministry Division should be commended for recognising the diversity of paths to exploring church ministry and for recommending a proactive approach.¹⁴⁹

Throughout this article it has been argued that, whilst both the 'subjective' and 'objective' traditions of vocational discernment have their strengths and weaknesses, the Church of England should place greater emphasis on the 'objective' discernment of the church, rather than on the 'subjective' interior sense of call when selecting those to train for ministry. This aligns with the *Call to Order* report published in 1989 which concluded that 'the language of an inner call is neither the sole nor the most appropriate language to be used in connection with what is essentially a community office or role. In this context it is the community which, under God, calls, appoints and ordains.'¹⁵⁰

Nevertheless, by the end of the vocational discernment process, the individual must have come to the conclusion that he or she is called by God to

¹⁴⁷ Ministry Division, 'Good Practice in Diocesan Formal Discernment Process' (January 2017), p. 6, https://churchsupporthub.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/01/4.27_Good-Practice-in-Formal-Discernment-Processes.pdf, accessed 11 December 2019.

¹⁴⁸ Ministry Division, 'Good Practice in Diocesan Formal Discernment Process', p. 6; Watson and Smith, *The Great Vocations Conversation*, p. 6.

¹⁴⁹ Ministry Division, 'Growing Vocations Everywhere: A Good Practice Guide', pp. 9-10.

¹⁵⁰ ACCM, *Call to Order*, pp. 59-60.

ministry and that the church has discerned and confirmed that call. Both 'subjective' and 'objective' processes are ultimately required in order that the candidate can answer with confidence the question posed at their ordination: 'Do you believe that God is calling you to this ministry?'¹⁵¹

www.theologyandministry.org

¹⁵¹ Church of England, *Ordination Services*, pp. 11, 33.