

Paper H2

Ministries committee

Understanding call and
its practical implications

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Basic Information

Contact name and email address	The Revd Paul Whittle moderator@urceastern.org.uk
Action required	Decision
Draft resolution(s)	To be formulated during group discussion

Summary of Content

Subject and aim(s)	To explore the question of call as it relates to the practice of ministry and, in particular, how we call Ministers of Word and Sacraments to particular roles
Main points	This paper asks whether it is time to change the way we define the locus of call, especially with respect to stipendiary Ministers of Word and Sacraments serving in pastorates
Previous relevant documents	There are no documents of direct immediate relevance, though many that contribute to thinking on this matter
Consultation has taken place with...	The synod moderators

Summary of Impact

Financial	None
External (e.g. ecumenical)	None

Understanding Call and its Practical Implications

1. Being called is fundamental to any understanding of discipleship. If we see the church, at every level, as a community of disciples, then we need to consider how we are called and what a call may require of us. Clearly there are many things we may say about being part of the church, but this is essential and recognised in our talk of the 'priesthood of all believers' or the 'ministry of the baptised'.
2. However, we also need to take account of those specific calls that come to some. At induction services, and sometimes on other occasions, we normally say some variation of: *"Christians share, through their baptism, in the ministry of Christ, and all Christians are called to be ministers of God's love. God calls some to be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, some to be pastors and teachers, to equip the Church for the work of ministry and to build up the body of Christ."*
3. We may see a call as something that can happen on the journey of faith. God has a role for each one of us. Recognising a call will be part of an ongoing discernment as to where God is taking us.
4. Biblically there are many stories that engage with the question of responding to God's call. To take just two examples of the many that would be possible, though involving fourteen people:
5. **Elizabeth and Mary:** The difference that God's call makes is reinforced in the stories of Elizabeth and Mary (Luke 1). Mary's response to Elizabeth's blessing is to sing the Magnificat with its clear message of reversal, change and justice. Although the best manuscripts attribute the song to Mary, as has the church traditionally, some suggest the song may be Elizabeth's and that ought to be considered possible. The form and content of the Magnificat closely resemble Hannah's song (1 Samuel 2:1-10) with its implications for Samuel's call and it is Elizabeth's story that parallels that of Hannah. The Magnificat is a radical reflection of the call to which both women responded, despite potential damage to their status, in view of Elizabeth's age and Mary's singleness. Their specific call is to motherhood, but it has wide-ranging implications. As Sharon Ringe points out, in her commentary on Luke, this song could "never be confused with a calming lullaby being rehearsed by two pregnant women ... God's faithfulness to God's promises, and to those people or peoples with whom God is joined in covenant, is at the heart of Luke's theology." This then raises the question of the link between call and covenant.
6. **Jesus' Call to Discipleship:** When we consider the call of Jesus to the twelve disciples we see that the original call is to the whole, unqualified, task of discipleship, but authenticated in terms of specific calls to specific tasks. This is well demonstrated in the passages recording the call to discipleship. In Mark 1:16-20, 2:13-17, 3:13-19 (and parallels) the general call to discipleship is made, but is subsequently particularised in various ways, for example in the sending out, recorded in 6:7-13. The original call is to commitment. As Ched Myers, in his commentary on Mark states: "The call of Jesus is absolute, disrupting the lives of potential recruits, promising them only a 'school' from which there is no graduation." The first call to discipleship in Mark is an urgent, uncompromising invitation to "break with business as usual." The call to specific tasks is the means of practising the general call to discipleship, but offers the possibility of variety in response whilst the general call requires only an affirmative commitment. The call described in Mark 6 is different from that in the

earlier passages which we have mentioned in its particularity. As Edwin Broadhead says in his commentary on *Mark*, referring to this section of chapter 6: “Their mission and message stands, in essence, in the place of Jesus ... The Twelve have thus been elevated to a decisive role in the arrival of God’s Kingdom; through their ministry the work of Jesus is multiplied and is broadcast to the villages of the Galilee.”

7. Many other examples could be cited, and the normal pattern, as in these ones, is of a broad view of call as a basis, then focussed in the particular.

8. URC practice with respect to the call to ministry fits this pattern. There are normally four partners in any call, these being God, the individual being called, and two conciliar confirmations. Most often the individual is called by the Church Meeting (or Meetings) and that is confirmed by the concurrence of the synod (often delegated to its pastoral, or equivalent, committee.) However, there are several variations which are recognised as entirely appropriate and valid. Any who occupy those Assembly posts that must be held by a minister – Synod Moderators, Secretary for Ministries, General Secretary – are ‘called’ via an appointing group and an Assembly resolution (sometimes delegated). Appointments in some Special Category Ministry (SCM) posts, chaplaincies etc are made by an appointment group and this is then concurred by synod. Non-stipendiary (NSM) post-holders are appointed by the synod though, in practice, in those situations where an NSM is being appointed to a pastorate the synod will often encourage the local congregation to go through a calling process. That effectively amounts to the synod issuing the call and seeking concurrence from the local Church Meeting – though that language will not normally be used.

9. We need to distinguish between the ‘call’ to the ministry within the church as a whole and the ‘call’ to a particular task. Additionally, we need to recognise that for most ministers the call will not come as part of the ‘one church, one minister model’, which provides the basis for current practice. A significant majority of ministers have pastoral oversight of two or more churches and a small, but not insignificant, number of ministers are being inducted to posts other than as minister of a church. Therefore, we need to recognise the possibility of moving the “locus” of the “commissioning” (i.e. the “call” to specific work).

10. This raises questions both of practice and theology. If calling is purely a cosmetic exercise, it is not worth doing. It also raises questions about how we understand God’s call. If what we want to suggest does not fit our theology of call, it should not be considered. However, if a change in how we arrange the calling process is both theologically appropriate and practically helpful, we should consider whether that is what God is now saying to the church.

11. In our conciliar structure it is important to ensure the appropriate role for each of the Church’s councils. We should not seek to achieve flexibility of ministry, however desirable that may seem, by disregarding the significant role of the local congregation. However, it is worth considering whether this can be sustained by other means.

12. We are disciples together. This theme of call relates to questions of collaboration. My call is a response to God and to a particular calling (or appointing) body. Call is for the moment, until needs change. Congregations are also collectively responding to the call of God. Would it make things easier (more appropriately flexible) for both ministers and congregations – and also perhaps for synods who have the role of overseeing the deployment of ministers – if the “normal” view of call were reversed, so that the call came from the synod and the local congregation or congregations were invited to concur, with the option of that concurrence being moved to a different pastoral configuration should that be needed and agreed in the light of changing circumstances?

13. This paper suggests that such a possibility is worthy of consideration. We recognise that such a change could be seen as nothing more than re-arranging the deckchairs on the

Titanic. However, we want to affirm that the intention is far more profound than that. Such a change in thinking, if taken seriously, could facilitate different models of ministry and allow us to get on more easily with many of the things that General Assembly has been saying over the past 25 years or so. Indeed, it might be the catalyst that really challenged us to do just that. Probably the two prime examples of such things are the impossibility of continuing to put stipendiary ministry in absolutely every congregation and the need to establish local leadership in every congregation.

14. At least five reasons may be posed in support of such a suggestion.

15. First, the general understanding is that the primary call is to ordination which is validated by a call to a particular task. Ordination and a first induction happen on the same occasion, but it is clear that the ordination precedes the induction. A minister is then inducted to subsequent pieces of work. Ordination is once, but inductions may be several. To focus the prime “locus” on call at a grouping wider than the current pastorate could be the logical implication of this understanding.

16. Second, this could recognise, and be of practical assistance, in coping with the rising variety of combinations of congregations and/or other tasks to which ministers are called. As groups, clusters, teams etc. continue to develop, it may prove necessary to modify certain aspects of the relationship between a minister and a particular congregation.

17. Third, popular thinking that the call is to the local church implies that this is the sphere of the prime relationship. Whilst there is a sense in which this must be so, there is, paradoxically, an ultimate sense in which it is not so. Ministers are responsible to the synod, which has the responsibility “to exercise oversight of all ministers.”

18. Fourth, we live in a society of rapid change and the church needs to change and adapt in response. Placing the prime “locus” of call at a wider level would increase the opportunity of a more rapid response to changing circumstances. This would enable a flexible response to the changing needs of churches and ministers and allow for a proper response to what God is saying to both the minister and the church, which will never be static, but retaining sensitivity to the circumstances of both.

19. Fifth, it might be a helpful way of moving towards a fuller and popular understanding of our (actual, rather than folk) ecclesiology – viz. that we are congregations of the one conciliar United Reformed Church.

20. If it did become the case that the synod issued the call and the local congregation(s) concurred that would involve change in both thought and practice, though it is probable that the initial practical difference would be minimal.

21. However, this could create a number of possibilities. For example, some ministers find the timing of a move is more heavily influenced by family considerations (e.g. spouse’s job, children’s education, elderly parents) than by ministry/church factors. This proposal would make it a lot easier to move to a new post without a geographical relocation for the family and may thus enhance stability in particular parts of a synod.

22. It would have helpful implications for churches in times of vacancy as the synod would need to introduce appropriate arrangements to cope with their vacancy. This ought to happen already though the system of appointing interim moderators, but anecdotal evidence suggests that, in many cases, local congregations are left floundering.

23. It should contribute a sense of cohesion. On the one hand, it is exciting that, in various synods, significant attempts to address questions of mission, ministry and

deployment are being made and we all ought to be ready to learn from each other. On the other hand, it is disturbing that, in a relatively small denomination, we may be heading towards such diversity that the church becomes unrecognisable from one part of the country to another. Policy that permits flexibility, with both creativity and cohesion, seems desirable.

24. Such a move would raise several practical questions. The key question is that of the effect on the process of seeking a new minister. It is already the case that there is a wide variety of forms of co-operation, so the requirement would be to extend this and, in part, simply to recognise the reality already existing. It is probable that synod (through its pastoral (or equivalent) committee) would appoint the church(es) that were part of the pastorate to form the substantial part of the searching process, though with wider representation and consultation.

25. One practical question would be around manses. Practice currently varies as to those synods which operate a manse scheme, those where local churches or pastorates retain full responsibility for manses, and those with a mixed economy. The possible change in the locus of call fits most easily with a wider adoption of the first of these.

26. Another question might be the possibility of still having one church, one minister in places and there is no reason why a one church pastorate would not still be possible. Problems would also arise when linked churches found themselves unable to work together. It is difficult to legislate for such situations which would need tremendous pastoral sensitivity – but it could not be claimed that such would be something new!