

THE SELECTION OF CANDIDATES

By JOHN GOODALL

THE SELECTION OF candidates for ordained ministry in the Church of England is the responsibility of the Advisory Council for the Church's Ministry: ACCM as it is commonly known. ACCM is authorized by the forty-three diocesan bishops to organize selection conferences on their behalf. At these conferences, the bishop's selectors carefully assess the candidates who have been sent by their bishop, following sponsorship by their own diocesan selection procedure. It is the task of the bishop's selectors to determine whether a candidate should be recommended for training for ordination. The final decision about a particular candidate always rests with the diocesan bishop. It is rare for a bishop to decide *not* to send a candidate for training if a selection conference recommends him; less rare for a bishop to send a candidate for training although not recommended by the selectors. In this case, the candidate is often sent for training on a non-residential training course, since the implications for withdrawal from training during the course are not as far-reaching as when a candidate is in residential training.

The selection procedure is selection for training: the final decision regarding ordination rests with the bishop following satisfactory reports from the training institution and a commendation for ordination half-way through the candidate's course. It is, however, rare for a candidate who is recommended by the selectors for training and who then embarks upon a training course, either residentially at a theological college or part-time with one of the non-residential training schemes, to be found unsuitable during training. That is not to say it never happens—the assessment procedures during training are realistic and thorough. In most cases however, the selectors 'get it right' at the selection conference. And it is important that they do, for there are often far-reaching implications, especially at a time of such high unemployment, for candidates who have given up a career, often sold their house and together with their family moved to embark upon training residentially, if they should be told after one or possibly two years that they are not suitable for ordination.

Of course such a decision is always traumatic, although not

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quite so traumatic for the candidate who has come to the conclusion himself that ordination is not an appropriate way forward, and less so again for those in non-residential training. They continue to live in their own home and do not give up their secular employment during training, since those training for non-stipendiary ministry may well see their place of work as the place for the primary focus of their ministry after ordination.

I want to look at the criteria which bishops' selectors use when assessing candidates at an ACCM selection conference, to look then at the criteria for training which lie behind one non-residential training course, SDMTS¹, which primarily trains candidates for non-stipendiary ministry, and finally to say something about the assessment procedures on such a course prior to a recommendation to the bishop for ordination.

Criteria for selection

The criteria on which the bishop's selectors make their judgements about particular candidates are set out in an ACCM occasional paper.² The working party who produced this paper point out that they were unable to define a neat list of criteria with objective standards by which a potential candidate may be assessed. Nor is it possible or desirable to draw up a blue-print of the ideal candidate. Rather the task of selection requires the building up of a picture of the candidate, first in broad sweeps, then with more and more detail. The result of this ought to make it possible for experienced selectors by a process of intuition and subjective but informed judgement, to come to a common mind about a candidate. There is thus a recognition from the outset that the selection of candidates for ordination will be problematical, subject as it is to the vicissitudes of human judgement.

The first criterion the paper refers to relates to the special place the Church of England holds in the life of the nation. Since it is an established Church, and has a well-defined hierarchic structure of which the ordained minister is a part, the ability to work harmoniously if not uncritically within these constraints is necessary.

The paper moves on to identify six particular areas to which attention needs to be paid, viz. vocation, faith, spirituality, personality and character, relationships, quality of mind.

Vocation

Vocation is not readily defined since it takes a multiplicity of forms and expression. Nevertheless vocation may be identified as a persistent longing to serve and witness to God. At the same time

this inner urge must be complemented by the necessary gifts for ministry. A sense of vocation by itself is insufficient—nor is it safe since it must be distinguished from neurosis. That may be done by judging what effect on the life of the candidate this sense of vocation has already had: in relation to prayer, in relation to pastoral awareness, in relation to devotion within the life of the local congregation.

Faith

The faith of the candidate must be a major consideration for every selector: faith understood both as the substance of belief and a commitment to living according to that substance. Candidates with firm and tested conviction are required who at the same time understand and have come to terms with the honest doubt involved in seeking God in truth. Thus openness and flexibility and a 'divine discontent' to grow in knowledge of God are vitally important. So too is the ability to communicate the faith, both by word and action, to believers and non-believers alike. The minister of the gospel commends the faith to others as much by who he is and what he does as by what is said. Thus the selectors will want to be assured that the faith is authenticated in the candidate's own life: they will also want to assure themselves that he is able to articulate his faith with clarity in a manner which can be readily understood by those with whom he comes into contact.

Spirituality

Each individual Christian has a different pattern of prayer and each will be at a different point in the pilgrimage; each will require help to grow in prayer. A candidate must be showing evidence that he has a desire and willingness to take his need for prayer seriously, discerning the way that is best at present and making some disciplined offering of time for quietness. Personal prayer must also be nourished in the context of the corporate worship of the Church. Selectors will want to be assured therefore that a candidate is regular in public worship as well as in private prayer.

Maturity

Although maturity is notoriously difficult to assess, and age is not necessarily a reliable guide, certain pointers are elucidated. The candidate will have some awareness of his own strengths and weaknesses and the ability to accept himself as he is, with humour and not complacency. He will have a proper blend of idealism and realism about what can be achieved; he will be a person who is able both to be under authority and to exercise authority; he

will be able to work in teams and groups but aware of his own distinctive contribution. He will have inner resources which he will generously spend for the sake of others, but he will be able to receive from others too.

Stability

A candidate will be able to recognize his own emotions honestly and able to handle them constructively and sensibly. He will be able to empathize deeply with the other yet at the same time exercise professional detachment; able to cope with the stress of trauma in his own life as well as in the lives of those close to him. He will be self-reliant and flexible enough to be open to many kinds of change.

Integrity

Integrity points to the wholeness of the individual, and thus is never completely achieved. It includes a number of different elements all of which are important: honesty, consistency, proper stewardship of time, energy, money and possessions, and moral courage shown in the willingness to stand up for what is right.

Relationships

Since much of ministry is engagement with other people, the minister is expected to be a representative of Christ able to relate without embarrassment to all his people in a spirit of love and reconciliation, but able to lead with conviction, compassion and good humour.

Quality of mind

Although minimum educational requirements are stipulated for candidates under 25 years of age,³ no such absolute qualifications are laid down for those over 25 years. However, the selectors are to assure themselves that a candidate has the potential for future intellectual development. Candidates must be capable of doing theology in the strict sense of thinking about God. Thus they will require the capacity to think in abstract concepts, and to do this clarity of mind, powers of analysis and criticism, and the imagination to transcend the limitations of their own experience are essential.

The qualities and criteria examined so far are those which are sought in any candidate for authorized ministry. Indeed although we have only referred so far to male candidates for ordination to the priesthood, the task of the ACCM selectors is more wide-ranging than that. Selection conferences⁴ include candidates

offering themselves for the following ministries: ordained stipendiary, ordained non-stipendiary, ordained local non-stipendiary, stipendiary deaconess⁵, non-stipendiary deaconess, stipendiary lay worker and non-stipendiary lay worker. Special qualities are defined for each of these categories of ministry.

Non-stipendiary candidates, for example, need to be able to cope with conflicting priorities upon their time and energies. Those whose ministry is primarily work-focussed need to be able to reflect perceptively upon the secular world in which they are employed and to draw out and articulate the theological consequences of their reflections. They need to be able to cope with the loneliness and stress of straddling boundaries—and able to face squarely the conflict that this straddling of boundaries sometimes causes for them.

The criteria we have so far considered are those which the bishop's selectors are expected to keep in mind when seeking to come to a common mind about whether or not to recommend a candidate for training for ordination. Of course it has to be recognized that for every candidate, an assessment is being made not only about how he is now, but also about his potential for change and growth. It is the selectors' task to ask themselves 'has this candidate the potential to become one who is able to exercise a satisfactory priestly ministry?'

Training

It is the task of the staff of colleges and courses to ensure that, as far as in us lies, the potential of each candidate who comes to us for training⁶ is realized as fully as possible, and that the candidate is pointed along the path of future growth.

SDMTS is a three year part-time course, training men and women for authorized ministry in the Church—primarily for non-stipendiary ministry in the Church of England, although we also train a few stipendiary candidates and candidates for both the Methodist Church and the United Reformed Church. We are based at Salisbury and Wells Theological College and the two institutions are regarded as complementary to one another.⁷

We identify four areas of training, viz. academic, spirituality, pastoral/liturgical, personal formation.

Academic

The academic work is primarily covered by students working with a local tutor through open-university style units prepared by staff of the course and college. Students expect to work for about fifteen hours per week for forty-four weeks per academic year. Each

unit contains guided reading, resource material and assignments for the student to complete. It is the task of the local tutor to assess these assignments in order to ensure that the student is maintaining a consistently acceptable standard—about first year degree level. External assessment is by six major essays of five thousand words each in Old Testament, New Testament, doctrine, liturgy, ethics and pastoral theology. Failure in any one of these essays requires the student to re-submit another on a different topic.

These General Ministerial Examination Essays (or their equivalent in those training schemes devised in conjunction with a local university) are assessed centrally and all ministerial candidates over the age of thirty years write them: standards are thus maintained nationally.

Spirituality

Each student is additionally expected to work with a spiritual director/soul friend through a further unit, 'The Community at Prayer', for the whole of the three years alongside the formal academic study units. In this the student is directed to look at his own prayer, as well as the nature of prayer more generally, prayer in the tradition of the Church both East and West, and contemporary forms of prayer.

Pastoral theology

Pastoral theology is both theory and practice: the theory covered in the study units and during some of the residential periods,⁸ practice being gained both during residential periods, at work and in the local parish. Each student also goes on a three month placement in the middle of the course, which is assessed by an external assessor.

Personal growth

Personal growth and maturity are not readily arranged or organized since they are dependent as much upon the interior disposition of the person as upon an environment which makes the sort of demands upon the individual which enable personal growth and maturity to proceed.

A three year part-time training scheme is itself an experience which will lead to growth in maturity of the student if his interior disposition will allow and encourage that. Group work and personal assessment give students the opportunity to face honestly and come to terms with their own strengths and weaknesses.

Assessment in training

Since ordination is dependent upon a satisfactory report from

the training institution at the end of the second year of training, the assessment of candidates at this stage is clearly crucial and great pains are taken over it.

Half-way through the second year, reports are asked for from the local tutor and incumbent of each candidate: they are free to write what they want in the reports, but are asked to discuss the content of their report with the student. The student is independently asked to write a self-assessment. He is free to write what he wishes, but we suggest that students might attempt to summarize their feelings about themselves, their vocation, their theology and prayer, and their strengths and weaknesses as they understand them at this stage of training. This document becomes the basis of an assessment of each candidate at a residential weekend by a small group of their peers and the staff consultant who has been attached to this group from the beginning of training. The student re-writes his self-assessment in the light of this peer-group assessment.

This final self-assessment, together with the reports from the local tutor and incumbent, becomes the basis of an assessment of the candidate in a formal mid-term assessment meeting attended by the student, his local tutor and incumbent, an SDMTS staff-member and the diocesan director of ordinands. Following the meeting, the SDMTS staff-member prepares a report for the bishop, which is discussed with the student before being sent. The report will either commend the student to the bishop for ordination in twelve months time, express reservations about the candidate's suitability in one or more areas, or indicate why we are unable to commend this candidate for ordination. The vast majority of reports belong to the first category, a few (say no more than one or two per year) belong to the second, and very occasionally (less than one per year) one belongs to the third.

The grounds on which we withhold recommendation for ordination completely are almost always difficult to specify in precise terms. It is never as simple, for example, as academic failure: this *may* indicate some deeper problem but is not a reliable indicator, and of course the most brilliant academic achievement is not sufficient of itself to commend a student for ordination. A judgement has to be made in the light of the way the candidate is viewed by the wide range of people involved in the assessment process, and in the light of the candidates' own self-understanding and level of maturity. Most often it is a matter of fine balance and subtle distinctions.

It may be called guidance by the Holy Spirit!

NOTES

¹ The Southern Dioceses Ministerial Training Scheme—one of the sixteen part-time training schemes in the Church of England.

² ACCM Occasional Paper No 12 June 1983, 'Selection for Ministry: A report on criterion'.

³ Five passes in academic subjects in GCE one of which must be English language and two at 'A' level or equivalent qualifications—from 'The Bishop's Regulations for selection and training candidates for stipendiary and non-stipendiary ordained ministry and for accredited lay ministry'.

⁴ Eighteen candidates attend for three days.

⁵ The Order of Deaconess is a lay order for women. Legislation is being prepared which will allow women to be ordained to the diaconate at the end of 1986 or the beginning of 1987.

⁶ A total of one hundred and forty-seven at Salisbury: eighty-three full-time residential, sixty-four part-time non-residential.

⁷ The staff of each institution collaborate closely together. Most of the SDMTS residential periods are held at Salisbury and Wells Theological College.

⁸ Five residential weekends and one summer school in each year of training.