

Truly
Called

*Vocation in the
Anglican Church*

Bradly Billings

Truly Called? Vocation in the Anglican Church

Bradly Billings

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Foreword

By The Right Revd Denise Ferguson, The Most Revd Dr Philip Freier, The Right Revd Dr Murray Harvey, The Revd Gary O'Brien and The Revd Dr Raewynne J Whiteley

THE RIGHT REVD DENISE FERGUSON

Discerning a call to ordained ministry is much greater than marking skills or abilities on a matrix. It is the recognition of an ontological call of and by God that sits at the core of ones being. It is a highly complex, private and public journey, that must be examined and affirmed by the wider Church. It is a lifelong journey of formation, being shaped and moulded to grow into the person God has created.

In this book, *Truly Called? Vocation in the Anglican Church* Brad explores the complexities of call and vocation for ordained leadership in the Anglican Church of Australia for both the enquirer, and those who might be privileged to accompany a person on this journey.

Brad specifically addresses an often overlooked, but essential aspect of this discipline. Knowledge of God, and deep, honest knowledge of self, or of one's own personhood. When we truly love God then we can begin the interior journey of exploration of self, a journey that helps us to understand and recognise our calling, which may or may not lead to ordained leadership. However, it will lead to the revelation of which part

of the divine dance of discipleship a person has been called to embrace.

The Right Revd Denise Ferguson is Assistant Bishop of the Diocese of Adelaide and Chair St Barnabas College Council.

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THE MOST REVD DR PHILIP FREIER

It has been a great joy to ordain many men and women during the course of my ministry as a Bishop in God's church. Over the past several years I have worked closely in this area with Bishop Brad Billings, who has overseen a program of discernment and selection in this diocese for those who have sensed a calling to the ordained ministry.

This helpful volume arises out of Bishop Brad's extensive experience in this area. It is written for those who believe they may be experiencing a call to ordained ministry in the context of the Anglican Church of Australia. What has been produced is a much needed resource that can be placed into the hands of those contemplating the call of God on their lives, to both inform and educate, and to foster careful and prayerful reflection on these important matters.

I commend this new book as a valuable and timely gift to our Church, as we seek to encourage and nurture the next generation of ordained leaders.

The Most Revd Dr Philip Freier is the Archbishop of Melbourne.

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THE RIGHT REVD DR MURRAY HARVEY

There has been a need for a book like this in the Anglican Church of Australia for a long time. For those sensing a call to the ordained ministry and for those accompanying them, starting out on a journey of

discernment can be a daunting task. Those of us who have journeyed with people exploring their call and vocation have, until now, been guided by excellent resources from the Church of England and other places. From his experience and wisdom on this topic Bradly Billings now offers this book to the Australian church. Billings has a deep knowledge and understanding of call and vocation to the ordained ministry, developed from his considerable experience of working in this field as a priest and more recently as a bishop.

As the author rightly reminds us, vocational discernment is not only the work of the person who senses a call to ordained ministry, it is also the church's work – in fact one of the most important tasks of the church. He sees this task as fundamentally missional in nature, as well as being grounded in, and responsive to, the ordinal. Through careful attention to discernment, selection and formation, the church is raising up gifted leaders for tomorrow's church.

The book will be helpful both to those who are exploring a call and to those in the church who are responsible for selection and discernment. While focused on the Australian Anglican context, the key elements and questions identified by Billings for this journey of vocational discernment will also be useful to a wider audience.

The Right Revd Dr Murray Harvey is the Bishop of Grafton NSW.

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THE REVD GARY O'BRIEN

We find ourselves, as Christians today, in a society that is moving rapidly away from its connections with the church. Increasingly, we are on the margins in public discourse. Yet, the gospel message of Jesus needs to be shared and lived, for it is still the “good news”, our only hope. To help us in our mission in the world we need leaders, men and women of sound gospel convictions, godly character and solid competencies.

In *Truly called? Vocation in the Anglican Church*, Brad focuses attention on the high calling that ordained ministry is, especially in an Anglican context, and provides assistance and support for men and women under God in thinking through whether this leadership is right for them.

The Revd Gary O'Brien is the Director, Ministry Training & Development of the Anglican Diocese of Sydney.

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THE REVD DR RAEWYNNE J WHITELEY

“Follow me, and I will make you fishers of people.” (Mark 1:17) When Jesus spoke those words to Simon and Andrew they set the pattern for all Christians from that day forward: called to follow Christ and to serve him in ministry. For the vast majority of Christians, that service will be expressed in the midst of their everyday lives; for some, however, it will be a particular call to leadership in the church through ordained ministry.

Discerning a call to ordained ministry is not something we do alone. While our own sense of call may develop through prayerful and obedient listening to God, it is up to the Church to recognize and affirm that call.

Speaking from a distinctively Australian perspective, Brad Billings offers a useful exploration of vocation and calling, and a guide to those wondering if they might be called to ordination in the Anglican tradition.

The Revd Dr Raewynne J Whiteley is the Warden, Wollaston Theological College, University of Divinity.

Dedication

Writing about calling, vocation and ministry inevitably recalls the circumstances of my own life. It reminds, in the first instance, of the magnitude of what it means to be called by God into the ordained ministry of his Church. This is gathered up in the solemn words from The Ordinal, spoken by the ordaining bishop to those who come to be ordained as priests – “we exhort you, in the Name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that you have in remembrance, into how high a dignity, and to how weighty an office and charge ye are called.”

A life spent in service to God and his Church is always a life lived in community, in fellowship with God and with others. I have been especially fortunate to share that life of fellowship with my partner Karen, to whom I have been married for over thirty years now. We experienced the call to ministry together. We entered the path of discernment together, and walked it together, to the point of selection. Together we journeyed through the hard years of sacrifice, of study, formation and preparation. Together we served in the early years of two curacies, and then together led two different parishes, as co-workers and fellow labourers for the gospel. We continue to serve together today in the Diocese of Melbourne – me as a Bishop, and Karen as part of the diocesan Registry team.

Looking back over the years, and thinking about my own call and vocation in God’s church, I know with gratitude that I have been immensely and extraordinarily blessed to be able to share all of this – the joys and the sorrows, the triumphs and the despairs – with Karen, to whom I dedicate this book. I would not have achieved whatever I have achieved, nor done the things I have done, both in ministry and in life, without her love, partnership and support.

Introduction

There is something intangible about the notion of “a call,” and, it follows, there is something intangible about how a call is to be discerned, identified and understood. Further, the notion of a vocation, to which the concept of “a call” is often linked, is a term used widely in a number of different ways and contexts. Whilst they do go together in many ways, and are sometimes used interchangeably, there is a good case for distinguishing between the concepts of “call” and “vocation” in the context of Christian ministry. The call is primary, and has its source in the divine. It describes the prior act of God that gives rise to a vocation, and to how and in what circumstances that vocation is to be lived out. This is true of all Christian ministry, for all the baptised are called by God to live out their discipleship in a vocational way.

Of course, it is quite possible that a call may not be realised or acted on. It might not be recognised by the one to whom it comes, or by those entrusted with its discernment. It is quite possible also to claim, or experience, and in some cases even to live out, a vocation, without having ever been called. This can be further complicated in respect to the particular vocation of ordained ministry by the nexus between call and vocation on the one hand, and education and training (or what we might collectively describe as “formation”) on the other hand. Traditionally, the discernment of, and subsequent affirmation of, a call to ordained ministry, preceded the requisite training and formation; but it is now common for this to be concurrent, or for the discernment of a call to take place after, and sometimes well after, a course of theological education and of training and formation in ministry has been undertaken and completed.

The intersection of vocation and call, and the associated movement toward professionalisation of the ordained ministry, introduces further complexity. To put it somewhat crudely, it is quite possible to educate and to train a person to do almost anything – to play a musical instrument, to learn a new language, to preach a sermon... It follows that it is possible to train a person to be a minister in the church of God, or at least to impart the academic and intellectual knowledge necessary, and to teach the skills required, to fulfil the duties of a Christian minister. But that, in itself, is never enough. It confers only an education and the requisite skills, knowledge and experience, together with an academic award. But this does not equate to a calling and a vocation. Only when the requisite intellectual knowledge, skills and experience are acquired in the context of the prior call of God, and only where the church in a corporate way recognises and endorses that the call is to ministry in an ordained capacity, is it possible that a person can be said to have both “a call” and “a vocation” to ordained ministry.

Articulating a call to ministry is no easy task. For good reason, an extensive piece of research in the Church of England found that “almost all people who had experienced a vocation to ministry struggled to describe it.”¹ Rightly discerning a call to, and recognising a vocation in, Christian ministry in an ordained capacity, is even harder and will always be, to some extent, problematic. This is because it involves looking, very deeply, into the “heart” of a person, in the sense of the “heart” being a metaphor for the locus and essence of personhood; something only God can see with perfect and absolute clarity. It follows that this is no easy task for fallible humans, to the extent that there is a very real sense in which “the whole discernment process is about trying to put that which is inexpressible and seemingly unutterable into words.”²

And yet, this process of discerning a call, and of recognising a vocation, is

1 Sally Myers, ‘New directions in voicing a vocation,’ *Theology* 122 (2019), p. 179.

2 Jonathan Lawson & Gordon Mursell, *Hearing the call: stories of young vocation* (London: SPCK, 2014), p. 12.

now, and has always been, both fundamental and critical in the context of the ordained ministry of the church. The importance of correctly discerning the will of God in these matters, insofar as that is humanly possible, is absolutely integral to the mission, health and sustaining of God's church, for "when it comes to the growth and life, or the decline and death, of the Church, the clergy are the key people."³ This observation, grounded as it is in a careful study of church growth and decline in the Church of England, points to the reality that the quality of the ordained leadership is very often the critical (although not the only) factor, influencing church growth and decline.

The call to the vocation of ordained ministry continues, then, to be mission-critical, for in every generation the cry of the church is for leaders to inspire, encourage and equip the people of God to go out into their mission fields and to make known in word and in deed the good news about Jesus.

Then Jesus went about all the cities and villages, teaching in their synagogues, and proclaiming the good news of the kingdom, and curing every disease and every sickness. When he saw the crowds, he had compassion for them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd. Then he said to his disciples, 'The harvest is plentiful, but the labourers are few; therefore ask the Lord of the harvest to send out labourers into his harvest.' (Matthew 9.35-38).

The purpose of this book is to provide guidance, and resources, for those who may be sensing that Jesus that is calling them to participate in the harvest by offering themselves to be labourers for the gospel in an ordained capacity. In one sense, much of what follows is general in nature, in that it will concern the possibility of a calling and of a vocation to ordained ministry, how such a call and vocation may arise, and how it might be discerned and examined, both individually and corporately. The first part, consisting of

3 Bob Jackson, *Hope for the church: contemporary strategies for growth* (London: Church House Publishing, 2002), p. 157.

the first four chapters, examines these matters. The second part of this book is more specific, in that it examines the particularities of what it means to be called to the specific vocation of ordained ministry in the distinct context of the Anglican Church of Australia. In this, the two respective parts of this book are reflective of the critical, and very first, question put to every person who comes to be ordained as a deacon, and as a priest, in the Anglican Church of Australia. That critical question is twofold:

Do you believe that you are truly called to this order and ministry of deacons/priests, being moved by the Holy Spirit to serve God and build up his people, according to the will of our Lord Jesus Christ **and** the order of this Anglican Church of Australia?⁴

Charles Sherlock in his *Australian Anglicans Worship*, identifies this question as the first of what he describes as the two “hurdle questions” asked of every candidate during the ordination service:

For each ‘order’ there are two hurdle questions, which must receive positive responses before other questions about how candidates intend to exercise their ministry are put. The first concerns each candidate’s acceptance of God’s call... So deacons-elect are asked whether they be “moved by the Holy Spirit”... while they and priests-elect are asked if they are called “to this order and ministry according to the will of our Lord Jesus Christ and the order of this Anglican Church of Australia.” The double condition is significant: acceptance of the Lord’s will and the particularity of this Church stand together... The second ‘hurdle’ question concerns acceptance of the canonical Scriptures as the basic resource for Christian ministry and key criteria for Christian faith and life.⁵

4 APBA pp. 786, 794 – emphasis added.

5 *Australian Anglicans worship: performing APBA* (Broughton, 2020), p. 412.