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Pamphlet

MEN AND WOMEN READERS

By

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I.

It must be understood that the following suggestions are not put forward with the idea of substituting a lay Office for women for their admission to the threefold ministry. But the revival of the ancient Office of Reader in the Church, open to men and women alike on a basis of academic qualifications, might be of permanent value in providing scope for the "lay" expression of theology which is one of the pressing needs of modern church life. At the same time, it would be only indirectly related to the larger question of Holy Orders; and it would avoid the error which, in my judgment, has been mainly responsible for the failure of the Order of Deaconesses—the creation of an Order for women. The inclusion of women in the historic diaconate would have recognised the fundamentally Christian principle of the equality of the sexes, even if only in the lowest grade of the ecclesiastical hierarchy. "Deacon"—man or woman—would have conformed to the practice of non-differentiation in other professions—doctor, lawyer, member of Parliament, and so on—but "deaconess" is indicative of sex. The Order is a "women only"

institution of a non-professional kind and, for this reason, few women of maturity of mind and character have entered it. It is my conviction that its association with an outworn standard of sex distinction is so strong that there is no likelihood of women of greater ability being attracted into its ranks in the future.

In what follows, I use the term "Reader" advisedly. "Lay Reader" has come to denote, as a rule, the man of rather poor qualifications who is employed as a makeshift when no clergyman is available. Such a mis-use of the office, however, does not preclude a better use of it; much good work has been done when it has been exercised by men of higher abilities. One outcome of the establishment of men and women Readers might be the raising of the whole standard of Readership—a reform which is urgently required. A good deal of harm has been done by well-meaning but ill-informed men in this capacity, both by the giving of poor instruction to the ignorant, and by the alienation of the better educated from the public worship of the Church.

Another outcome might reasonably be looked for. Many of the most thoughtful, younger men hesitate to seek a lifelong, religious calling until they are fully convinced of their own vocation to it; at the same time they have often a sincere desire to serve their fellows in some specialised way. The Reader's office might provide real scope for such as these, and, since the truest stimulus to ministry is to minister, it might even lead in some cases to better candidates for Ordination. This would no doubt apply equally to women in similar circumstances.

A high standard of character and attainments is essential to the success of the scheme, and, normally, a degree or diploma in theology should be required of all applicants for the Readership. There is ample material among women, corresponding to that among men, from which to select honorary Readers—retired members of the professions, university lecturers, and others who, while occupied elsewhere during the week,

would be able and willing to give some help on Sunday when required. The services of such women would be of great value; but it should be borne in mind that—as with most laymen who give voluntary help—their contribution would generally be that of the older generation. It is to stipendiary and full-time Readers that we must look for the supply of younger thought, and for the more strenuous activities of parochial life.

With the ordained ministry open to them on such easy terms, it is unlikely that many of the younger men would apply for a stipendiary Readership at first. But there are a good many men in middle life whose wide experience in other spheres would be of immense value to the Church. When the Lambeth Diploma in Theology has been thrown open to both sexes, such men will be enabled to qualify for the work without the often prohibitive cost or difficulty of graduating at a University. As regards women, if the ordained ministry were in question, it would not be difficult, even in these days, to find a number of suitable candidates during the next few years. It is less easy to speak with assurance in the case of lay work, but a sufficient number should be available for an experiment on a small scale to begin with. Honorary Readers could be tried all over the country—and overseas. It might be wise to restrict the experimental use of stipendiary Readers to a few dioceses for a given period of time, and to base further expansion and development upon the observed results.

Women Readers must not be confused with Licensed Lay Workers. Like men Readers they should only be responsible to the Bishop, the incumbent of a parish, and a properly constituted Readers' Board, upon which qualified women should be represented. Their Licence must be identical with that received by men of similar standing; they must receive the same stipend; and they must wear the same garb, i.e. cassock and surplice, when taking services. It is to be hoped that most of them would be entitled to an academic hood as well. The addition of a cap should be optional; in some cases it

might be desirable in the interests of tidiness, but it must be recognised that it is not a necessary accompaniment to a woman's appearance in church. There might be some surprise at first when women took the statutory services allowed to Readers, and preached from the pulpit, but my own experience and the experience of women in other professions, leads me to believe that the ordinary congregation would soon become accustomed to their exercise of these functions, in addition to the pastoral work which it already accepts without question. The necessary elements of success are the authority of an accepted commission; the goodwill of the parish priest; and the tact, the ability and the courage of the women themselves.

II.

The following points would need to be tested by local conditions, but they might be a basis for discussion and experiment. They refer mainly to stipendiary Readers, for it is with them that any practical problems are most likely to arise.

A diocese should be selected which affords a great variety in conditions of work. It should contain the large town and the small country town; the new building estate; the large village and the small one, especially villages of the kind which are included in the "united benefice." It might be helpful to appoint a very small committee of experienced parish priests and women with real pastoral experience to make some preliminary investigations into practical possibilities before the scheme was launched; but a great deal of discussion in advance would be likely to spoil its freshness and appeal. A list could be made of incumbents willing, or able—with or without assistance from diocesan funds—to employ a Reader, man or woman, of the kind proposed. (It is possible that applications for posts would be almost entirely confined to women at first, but

it should be made clear from the outset that a "women only" scheme was not contemplated.) These clergy should be given to understand that they would be expected to give reasonable opportunities to Readers for preaching, and for conducting those statutory services which it is lawful for them to take, as well as for "special services" and ordinary parochial work. It appears to me that, in general, such opportunities could most easily be found in parishes where there is a daughter church, or a mission church; or in the single-handed "united benefice." In the latter, an urgent pastoral need could be met by the Reader living in a different part of the parish to the incumbent—though an interchange of churches would be necessary, as well as desirable, in order to provide for the administration of the Sacraments. The chief difficulty in the way of such an arrangement would lie in the need, at any rate on occasion, of extra clerical help in this respect, with the consequent financial burden upon the parish, or the lowering of the Reader's stipend. It is here that diocesan help in men or money could often be most usefully given.

In bringing the scheme to the notice of those whom it is designed to attract, it might be well to emphasise its experimental character though, at the same time, some kind of assurance should be given of a reasonably long period of employment. Stipends could not be very high, and consequently some worldly sacrifice would be involved; but they must be sufficient to ensure a proper standard of living. To secure suitable candidates, University Employment Agencies for both men and women could be notified, and also Heads of Colleges, and those responsible for the Lambeth Diploma.

All applicants should have some pastoral training in addition to their theological qualifications. This could be obtained in a variety of ways, but perhaps the most satisfactory would be to have some small centre in the diocese through which they could pass. Such a house would also provide a meeting place for those engaged

in the work, both men and women, and the Principal should be available for help or counsel at any time, when required. A useful departure from custom might be made here by the appointment of an older woman as Principal, with a younger man as Vice-Principal, and this arrangement would give breadth and variety to the training.

The scheme requires a small body of able, devoted people, disciplined, yet flexible in mind and method, and ready for experiment. Its members should belong to various schools of churchmanship; and if a practical interest in Christian Unity could be encouraged it would be of much value. The greatest freedom and opportunity for initiative should be allowed, compatible with a right maintenance of the incumbent's authority, and there should be close connection with the Bishop of the diocese. It appears to me very desirable that, with rare exceptions, stipendiary Readers should hold parochial licences. They should, in fact, be lay ministers, able to carry out all the work of a parish which is not reserved specifically for the ordained ministry. More than enough "special speakers" are being sent out to the parishes from diocesan organisations, and the crying need is for pastoral work. Most isolated addresses are soon forgotten; the steady, continuous teaching of people, whose needs are personally known to the teacher, has a lasting value, which is quite incalculable.

It should, of course, be taken for granted that women Readers would not use their official position as a platform for propaganda for Holy Orders; but it should also be understood that any views which they might hold upon the subject must not be treated as a cause for victimisation or disqualification. A time will come when it will be generally recognised that women, like men, have a contribution to make to each aspect of the ministerial trilogy; Word and Sacrament and Pastoral Care. In the meantime, these suggestions are offered in the hope that they may help to bring more lay men

and women of ability and devotion into the service of the Church; and to restore the essential connection between its teaching and worship and its cure of souls.

APPENDIX.

This paper was written before the War and it is therefore concerned with the work of the Church in normal times. It is, however, equally applicable to war-time conditions, for the opportunities for competent lay work in the parishes remain and are likely to increase; while the need for well qualified women is becoming even more urgent in the extra-parochial sphere. In camps and hospitals, and in civil defence, men and women are working together with mutual respect and advantage; the women's auxiliary forces, disciplined and efficient, mingle with the men's fighting services. Never have the opportunities for co-operation between the sexes in spiritual things been greater, or the conditions more favourable; never have the dangers of neglected opportunities, or static traditions, been more pressing. The *need* is for both men and women chaplains; but since the present emergency has found the Church unprepared in this respect, much could be done towards supplying the lack by women Readers of the type which has been indicated in the foregoing pages. They should be appointed by the Chaplains' Department of each of the Services; and they should work with the chaplains in camps, units, or hospitals, as they would work in civil life with the incumbents of parishes. Much of their work would naturally be among women but, as in parochial life, it should never be on a "women only" footing; while it is essential to wholesome conditions that the services they conduct should be open to men and women alike.

Every refusal of Holy Orders to women has been accompanied by earnest appeals for their help in a lay capacity: their admission to the Readership would involve no question of Church Order; and it has already been recommended by the Archbishops' Commission on the Ministry of Women. It may be true that a time of emergency and upheaval is not the right moment for so far-reaching a step as the admission of women to the threefold ministry; it is, at least, equally true that it is the right moment to open to them every other opportunity of service. In nearly every department of national life the work of qualified women is sought and welcomed: it will be nothing short of a spiritual disaster if the Church should continue to reject the trained service which is being rendered wholeheartedly to the State.

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