

# 12

# a priest- worker ministry

**DAVID WILSON**



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**A  
PRIEST-  
WORKER  
MINISTRY**

by **David  
Wilson**

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## A PRIEST-WORKER MINISTRY

The baking trade is not only one of the oldest crafts in the world, it is also one of the hardest. I am not old enough to remember making dough by hand, but despite modern methods and machinery our firm is still small enough to slip our bread on to the oven bottom. This means loading a long, flat piece of wood about four inches wide with a line of loaves, sliding the whole thing to the back of a twelve-foot oven, and then tilting in such a way that the loaves come off the slip, but stay the right way up. Like a good many other crafts, this type of baking is dying out in this country, but it still produces the best and tastiest loaf.

What has this got to do with the ordained ministry? Simply that although I do not actually make the bread, but rather am responsible for how much is made and various other aspects of a family business, I am at the same time ordained. That is to say I am an ordained priest, but continue in my secular job. For want of a better title such people—and there are more than you might think—are known as priest-workers. The title is a bad one and those of us to whom it applies would all disown it if we could because of the underlying implications of the words. The title has actually been taken over directly from the French situation where the priests in question really were workers. In England the term basically means a priest who earns his living in a secular occupation and receives no stipend from the Church. There is

much more to it than just this and I hope we shall see that there are richer and deeper meanings both for the Church and also for the work-a-day world in which we live.

How did it all begin? St Paul was one of the early Christians to do this. During the two years he spent teaching the young Church at Corinth he made tents for a living during the week and preached to the people on Sundays. There were two reasons why he did this. First of all he did it in order that he should not be a charge on the local church (see 1 Corinthians 9 vs. 9-15). In the second place his example in this respect helped to prove the point that work was an essential and honourable thing in the sight of God. Being Paul he carried the whole idea to drastic conclusions. 'If a man will not work, he shall not eat' he declared (2 Thessalonians 3 v. 10). Certainly in the early Church it would appear that most 'clergy' did, in fact, earn their own living, but by the beginning of the third century priests in some areas were paid a salary in order that they might devote their whole time to prayer and worship and the service of the Church. In practice this meant that the priests had a share of the gifts which were contributed to support the widows, the poor, and later the cost of maintenance of church buildings as they began to be built. There was never any suggestion that priests should receive a fixed income.

As the centuries rolled by and the Church became more firmly established there was an increasing need for the clergy to spend all their time in the work of the ministry, but there must still have been many who had to work in order to live. We know this because at various times regulations were issued with a view to restricting the type of work a priest was allowed to do. Farming was the chief occupation in this country until the industrial revolution and large numbers of clergy

farmed their glebe to supplement their income. They were also permitted to teach, to write and to sell books, but on no account must they give themselves to 'base or servile labour'.

By the time of the industrial revolution the parish system in England was firmly entrenched and the need for clergy to work in secular occupations was gone. However, as the compass of education widened, the clergy still considered teaching to be within the bounds of their ministry and to this day many ordained men spend many years in the teaching profession.

## the situation today

This brief and rather sketchy outline brings us to more modern times. The first man to express strong views about the clergy and the way they should live and work among the people was Roland Allen. After having served as a missionary in China, and then for seven years as a parish priest in Buckinghamshire, the strength of his conviction concerning the restrictions imposed upon the paid clergy forced him in 1907 to resign his living, and for the next forty years he exercised his ministry on a voluntary basis. In 1930 he published *The Case for Voluntary Clergy* in which he argued clearly the need for this kind of ministry.

The scene next moves to France in the year 1943 when large numbers of Frenchmen were being transported to Germany as forced labour. Among them went twenty-five Roman Catholic priests disguised as workers. The

Germans had refused the Frenchmen the right to take priests with them, or to provide any spiritual care. A couple of hundred priests thereupon volunteered to accompany them, and from this number twenty-five became workers and in secret exercised whatever functions of their priesthood that they could. The effect upon the priests having to share the life and work and conditions of forced labour with their lay workmates so altered their attitude to the concept of God's redemption of all mankind, that when the war was over and they returned home the experiment which began as a necessity became the spearhead of a new mission to the working classes, involving complete participation in their lives, their work, their families and their homes.

The 'Mission de Paris' continued in strength until its final suppression in 1959. Gregor Siefer's book, *The Church and Industrial Society* covers in detail the whole story of what took place in France, but it is really only relevant as a background to what is happening in this country.

In England during the post-war years one or two individual priests were feeling the same lack of relevance of their ministry in terms of reaching the working class and, with the consent of their bishop, gave up their parochial appointments and took secular jobs. Over the years their numbers grew to a small handful (at most seven priests) and they, together with their wives, formed a group under the title 'Worker Church Group' with the expressed intention of a ministry of identification with the working classes, very much on the same lines as the French worker priests.

In 1960 the Bishop of Southwark announced a scheme whereby men could be trained and accepted for ordination without leaving their secular employment, and then if they so desired, remain in it after ordination. This was

a completely new departure from the accepted pattern of training for the ministry and seems to have been the result of two separate ideas. The first was the lack of men coming forward to train for the ministry together with the fact that to the Bishop's certain knowledge there were men desirous of ordination who because of family commitments were unable to go to college to be trained. Secondly, in the various discussions that had taken place over the years at Lambeth Conferences, the idea of priests fulfilling their ministry in secular occupations had already been accepted and a conclusion had been reached by the Archbishop of Canterbury (then Archbishop of York) in an article on the subject in which he concludes, 'It remains to remove as soon as ever possible whatever legal and canonical barriers exist and for someone to act upon what he believes to be right'. The 1964 Pastoral Measure amended that of 1838 to remove some of the barriers. This is not the place to describe at length the Southwark Ordination Course, which, as soon as it was launched met with a most ready response. By Michaelmas 1963 the first men to be trained were made deacons and of these, six continued their secular work the following Monday morning as they had done each Monday during their three hard years of training.

So began a new venture of faith, a new way of training for the ministry and a new way of exercising the ministry. Today the S.O.C. continues to provide training for men desirous of remaining in their secular occupation and it now touches many more dioceses than Southwark. As a result of this experiment, other men in other parts of the country have expressed to their bishop similar desires and quite recently a post office worker from the Portsmouth diocese, with two other men, undertook a course of evening classes under the direction of their bishop, were ordained by him, and are continuing at their lay jobs.

## the need

Is there a need for priest-workers? One answer to that question is that there are many inner city parishes too poor ever to afford a curate under existing conditions. This places a burden on both the parish priest and the parish which at times can be quite intolerable. A priest-worker attracted to such a parish may not be in a position to do many of the jobs a full-time curate could do but he is usually free to assist with Sunday services and to share the leadership of the spiritual life of the parish. He is there too to take over in times of illness or at holiday seasons, or during an interregnum and this imparts to his ministry a very real and practical value.

Furthermore the priest-worker can offer a different approach to the various problems which the local clergy discuss together. He is far more likely to know what the man in the pew feels about a certain question because he has joined the discussion 'in the market place'.

This, however, is secondary to the real need for priest-workers. Since the industrial revolution the working classes who emerged as distinct from the working section of the village community, have not been attracted to the Church or to Christianity in the same way as the middle classes. Whatever the social reasons for this may have been in the past, at the present time it has to be acknowledged that in vast areas of industrial England only a handful of factory workers and the like find their way into a church on Sundays and undoubtedly one reason for this is lack of communication. If every postman and every milkman were a priest-worker how different would it be in these areas. This is not to say that the simple answer to the problem is to have large numbers of priest-workers in these areas! The course of history cannot be changed overnight. What the priest-worker is saying is that the Church needs to talk to the factory worker in a

language he can understand and the priest who works alongside these men has not only a distinct advantage, but also a very definite mission. This mission is not an easy one. What he does, what he says, how efficient and honest and trustworthy and reliable he is are more likely to speak to the men he works with than any amount of preaching from the pulpit.

It is difficult to say which need is the greater, and in any case each priest-worker is involved in a different situation, both in terms of work and of parish. The one may see a greater opportunity in assisting within the framework of his parish church, offering a fresh approach; another may see and take the opportunities to be a priest within his work situation.

The comment is often made that a layman can do in a work situation all that a priest can do. This is perfectly true in essence, but every priest-worker holds the belief that God has called him to minister in this particular way and in ones and twos men are continuing to avail themselves of the opportunity the Church has now provided to train for and exercise this particular type of ministry. The question however, still needs answering, what can a priest do in a work situation that a layman cannot? If you read through the articles in *Part-time Priests*\* each writer makes his point on the theory of the idea as he would like to see it. Those in favour of a stronger laity discuss what is now being put into practice in varying forms, the training of the laity, not simply to produce better Christians or a greater knowledge of the Bible, but what the first Christians believed, a way of life which, if lived to the full, affected all who came into contact with them. Those who feel strongly the value of a supplementary ministry emphasise not only all the assets this would provide in terms of the Church but also the fine witness at work and leadership in the church of

\*Edited by Robert Denniston.

elder Christians to whom ordination would seem a natural conclusion if possible.

Having now done the job for three years I am able, on a personal basis, to draw some conclusions. First by ordination I was given authority to do certain functions on behalf of all the Church, but more than this, authority to be a spokesman. I could go to church all my life and people would respect me and accept that my standards were different from theirs, and among my friends, and even some workmates, there would be those who would talk about spiritual matters, but I would be stamped with the label 'churchgoer'. The moment these same people know that I have authority to speak, all sorts of questions are raised, and not only questions, but requests are made for help and guidance in all kinds of personal problems, together with some strong comments against the Church which it is felt can be flung at me without hurt. Some may venture to disagree. I can only say that I am speaking for myself. Since ordination I have represented in people's minds 'The Church' simply because for so long the parson has been, to them, 'The Church'. The phrase 'going into the Church' still holds for anyone seeking ordination, and this is the image we have to work with. It may be a false one, but I believe one way by which it will be seen to be false is when the parson is seen to work alongside his own layman. In time this may well kill two birds with one stone—break the false image of the priests, and show that the layman does possess authority.

Together with authority goes training. A considerable number of people knew I was training for the ordained ministry. At certain times I was absent from my usual round and my relief would say where I was. It was discussed in the shop, in the bakehouse, by my children at school and in the church. Today when education is so important it is taken for granted that with training and qualification you can speak with authority. I cannot say

too often how essential the fullest possible training is. I am often asked to discuss questions covering a wide range of subjects which I could never have understood without the comprehensive training given to me. If the priest-worker is to be of real value to the Church, his training must compare with that of his brother clergy. If he is to be of real value to the working world, his training must enable him to know at least some of the answers to a wide range of problems.

Let me make a third point which I believe to be as important as authority and training. Because I am still working in the same family business in which I have spent the whole of my working life, I can truly be described as 'local'. For me, in a very real sense, the local Christian community has chosen me, had me trained (a modern requirement) and asked the bishop to lay hands on me, not simply so that I can now serve the local Church and the non-Christian community, but also because they have accepted me as fulfilling the terms of ministry outlined by St Paul in his first letter to Timothy, 'Deacons should be men of serious outlook and sincere conviction. They should be temperate and not greedy for money, having one wife, able to control their children and manage their household properly' (I Tim. III 8-13, '*Phillips*'). What St Paul is saying here is that a man who has shown by his life and family and work within the local community what his Christian convictions really are, is the man who, when he receives the authority of the Church will be most respected by everyone. I am sure that the local Christian man who seeks ordination and is put forward by his Church, is as near to the mind of Scripture on this point as it is possible to get. When these conditions obtain there are not likely to be the same barriers of communication which arise when a parish priest comes in from outside and represents a radically different social background.

## the call

What sort of men are becoming priest-workers? In age they range from young men straight from college, to grandfathers. Most have a family and an established position at work. In churchmanship their views range from 'top' to 'bottom'. Although these men are now spread about the country, let us imagine that they are all in one area of London. The man who delivers the bread to your local shop is a priest, the man who pays out your pension is a priest, you catch a bus and the man who checks your ticket is a priest, the bank manager whom you visit in fear and trembling to discuss a loan is a priest, your solicitor is a priest, the man on the next bench in the factory is a priest and when you change your books at the library, the man in charge there is also a priest. Men in all these situations have in fact been trained for the priesthood under the Southwark Ordination Course. They each believe that God has a particular job for them to do in their own situation and have been ordained by their bishop to exercise their ministry in their own particular way.

No two men see their task in the same light, but each believes that, for him, this is the way he must work out his calling. This is one of the most exciting and yet frightening points about the priest-workers in England. In France they are co-ordinated within one group and do similar types of work, but in England each man has the personal responsibility within certain limits, to find out by trial and error, by prayer and fasting, how best he can serve God in the way he believes God has called him.

For myself, as for many others, the training and work I did as a lay reader in a parish in Brixton both showed me the need and provided the call. When the opportunity came to train for ordination without entirely disrupting family and business life, we made the decision to put

God to the test concerning the way forward. Many and varied difficulties had to be overcome, but each one was a test of faith and this marked the venture from the start. As, together with my wife and family, I look back at what was involved, I am grateful that only God could see the end from the beginning and that we had long ago learnt to live one day at a time. Every priest-worker would surely echo these sentiments.

## the training

And so we are brought to the training of the priest-worker. Until 1960 any man who felt called to this type of ministry had first to have either a university or a theological college training, followed in most cases by a full-time curacy after ordination. There were exceptions in individual cases, either where the bishop allowed a man to go direct from ordination into a secular job, or in the case of one or two older men, the period of training was considerably reduced. In every case it was entirely at the discretion of the bishop to determine what was required of a man, according to his circumstances, but the number of priests actually engaged in secular occupations, except perhaps in the teaching profession, was very small.

With the start of the Southwark Ordination Course, a new approach was made not only in the training of men for the ministry, but also in the ministry of priest-workers. Without going into too much detail here it may be said that the essence of the course was that all training for ordination had to be done in a man's spare time. This ensured a continuity of home life and work which was essential to the men. When the scheme was first suggested, it was believed that the response would only be small and



that the men who came forward could be integrated into existing evening classes for the purpose of those examinations that were considered essential. This idea was soon proved a fallacy when it was discovered just how many men were interested and anxious to enrol.

A hasty three-year programme was launched, based on nine subjects for examinations. Two were to be taken each year at the University of London after courses of 24 lectures over the two winter terms. Eight residential weekends (Friday night to Sunday tea-time) were planned annually in order that opportunity might be given to study those subjects not covered by the evening lectures, and also that the students might enjoy to a limited degree what was to become a very precious time of corporate living and worship. Each summer a period of two weeks residence was required for a summer school. This was at first rebelled against by nearly everyone, but came to be a source of great help. Finally, prior to ordination there was a short residential term of one month's duration as a final preparation.

I joined the course in its second year. At that time the course had no settled home so that every weekend away was spent at a different place and involved a great deal of travelling. However, in January 1962 we moved into Wychcroft, a country house in Bletchingley, Surrey, obtained by the Southwark Diocese as a centre for lay training and a home for the course. This enabled the course to settle down to a definite pattern of lectures, examinations, weekends, retreats and summer schools.

As a baker I had particular difficulties in regard to the training weekends, because our trade works a six-day week. I therefore was given special permission to return home on Friday evenings after the lecture and do my first rounds on Saturday morning, providing I did not miss the first lecture at 10.15 a.m. In three years I was late only once, despite fog, snow, rain and breakdowns.

Many of the men worked in jobs where only a fortnight's holiday was the rule, and for three years our families had to go away without the company of father, whose holiday break was given over to further studies. In all fairness it must be said that everything possible was done to meet such difficulties as these, and every man's case had personal attention from all members of the staff.

It is quite impossible to describe the sheer hard work involved in attending lectures, writing essays, sitting examinations and travelling, together with the problems of home life and the demands of everyday work which went to make up those three years. I can honestly say that I was only sustained by a great deal of prayer, a long-suffering wife and family, a first-class principal and staff, and a fresh assurance every time a new difficulty was overcome that God wanted me to go on and would continue to sustain me. And He did.

Numerous discussions have been held by all sorts of people concerning the amount and type of training a priest-worker should have. From the outset the course was training men in their spare time, some of whom upon ordination would embark upon a full-time parochial ministry. It was therefore essential that within the compass of the time available, all the men should do the same subjects and examinations as if they had taken a full-time course at college. This is the policy that has stood from the first. Some older men had difficulty with examinations and were required to do different work, but those of my year who were accepted and ordained agree that all the training we had was absolutely essential and we have proved its worth in practice.

It is required that each priest worker should be licensed to a particular parish or to the cathedral. In many cases he returns to the same parish in which for years he has been a practising layman, but he will now be working more closely, as a colleague, with parochial

clergy and as one who has been trained to certain standards. It is essential therefore that his training should enable him to exercise his ministry on equal terms with his fellow priests. In accepting the role of the priest-worker, the Church as a whole must also accept that his training, although it may differ from recognised patterns, is nevertheless equally valid. As few dioceses can effectively work a scheme on the same lines as Southwark, other bishops are seeking other ways of training men who wish to become priest-workers.

We all acknowledge the limitations of study and corporate spiritual life that this sort of training imposes and do all in our power to rectify this within the bounds allowed by our individual commitments. In one parish the two priest-workers meet the vicar once a week for an early 'working' breakfast where, before going to the office, they read the Epistle and Gospel for the following Sunday, discuss it together and share in a short time of prayer. Others have been able to join or form a local group of clergy who spend an evening a month together in order that the priest-workers may have the fellowship essential to life.

It has been said that 'The distinction between stipendiary and voluntary clergy is not a distinction between men who give their whole time to the service of God and His Church and men who give part of their time to that service, but a distinction between one form of service and another. Both stipendiary and voluntary clergy ought to be serving God and the Church all the time in all they do; but the service which the church needs that each should do for God, and for her, is not the same. The voluntary cleric carries the priesthood into the market place and the office. It is his work not only to minister at the altar or to preach, but to show men how the common work of daily life can be done in the spirit of the priest' (*The Ministry of the Spirit* by R. Alder, p. 149).

The advantage of the S.O.C. method of training is that by doing it in their spare time the students do not cut themselves off from the everyday problems of the world. Consequently they bring to their training a wealth of experience and knowledge gained at first hand in all walks of life and from vastly different backgrounds. For priest-workers this is invaluable. They are aware that to some extent after ordination they will be living two lives. One is the role of an assistant curate, doing the run of the mill jobs of parish life on Sundays and, as time permits, on week-nights too. The other is to begin to work out a ministry in their particular work situation. Here each man is on his own. He has no one else's experience from which to draw. He cannot look to his bishop for direction, nor to his vicar for guidance because only the man himself has a true picture of his own work situation and its opportunities.

Let it also be freely admitted that each priest-worker holds very definite and strong views about his mission and how he sees it working out. For instance, while one holds the view that to be a priest in a factory is in itself a strong enough witness, another will go out of his way to form a group among his workmates and will lose no opportunity to present the claims of Christianity; another by the personal nature of his work is able to offer Christian counsel to many individuals.

## the work

As a member of a family bakery I spend most of my day driving a van from shop to shop. I have been asked if I hand out tracts to every customer, or even put them in

each loaf! In fact there is no need to do either. Without ever wearing a clerical collar at work many people know that I am a priest and speak rapidly of spiritual matters. The truth of the belief that a considerable number of our population who do not go to church are nevertheless looking Godward for an answer to their problems is borne out by the many conversations I have. Over a cup of tea in a factory canteen, while a puncture is being mended, or as a customer lingers over a purchase, a question is asked, 'Why be both a priest and a baker?' 'How can you believe in God?' And in those few minutes the opportunity is given. Even ridicule can be turned to good effect. What is important to the priest-worker is that at every moment he is being watched to see if his actions and words, his manner and method of work, match up to what is expected of a Christian, and even more so, of a priest.

For me the greatest opportunity and also the hardest task is prayer. In the eye of the man in the street a priest's main work, apart from taking services, is to pray. It is therefore the most natural thing for a man or woman with a burden or need to touch my arm and say 'Pray for me'. A note is left in one of our shops, 'Pray for Mary, eight years old, meningitis'. I know Mary and her mother and grandmother. A relative has cancer. The request comes—'Please pray for us all'. Here is a son in trouble. You cannot help, but you can pray. And so the requests come. If the people passed the parish priest in the street it is unlikely that they would have courage enough to stop him and ask for his prayers. The idea of knocking at the vicarage door would never enter their head. Even to go to church themselves is not to pray, but to attend a service. But what the priest symbolises in time of need is prayer—and the man who delivers the bread *is* a priest. He is the one to ask.

Let me make it quite clear that while I thank God for

every contact, every request, and trust that the right word is spoken in season, such a ministry is difficult. Not for me the quiet walk to church at 7.0 a.m. each morning for mattins and meditation. I have to be on the road at twenty-to-six. Not for me the hour's Bible reading after breakfast. When the day's work is done, tea is the first meal we can have together as a family, and must be a priority. Not all priest-workers have the same pressures of course, but each man is faced with the need to work out his ministry to the people who are his contacts and also to work in his ministry in terms of prayer and Bible-reading, study and meditation, in what most working men regard as their spare time.

Can a handful of men spread out over a wide area, make a noticeable impact on the total ministry of the Church? Time alone will tell. The French priest-workers certainly left their mark. Unless God alters my circumstances I view it as a life's work and am content to leave with Him the extent to which my personal ministry may be used as a blessing to other people and a strengthening to the Church. The opportunity for ordination presented itself and was taken. The outcome has been an experiment welcomed by some and scorned by others. In fact, it may well prove to have been a particular requirement for this day and age. On the other hand, large areas of the Church rely on this type of ministry by reason of shortage of funds and manpower, and without the aid of priest-workers in these areas there would be no ordained ministry at all. The present position in France and Belgium where priest-workers are still quietly operating under the new rules laid down by the Pope, suggest that their earlier work had a value.

I believe that the greatest impact of the priest-worker is on the mind of the Church. This is the day of experiment; new liturgy, new roles for the laity, new deals for the clergy, and it is because of this variety of approach that

every opportunity has to be taken to explore all new avenues of thought. Those incumbents who have priest-workers on their staff (sometimes their only staff) are the first to acknowledge that despite the limitations, each man plays an important part in his own sphere. The same can, of course, be said of the faithful army of lay readers without whose services many parishes would have their worship curtailed. The priest-worker asks only that the Church will see his work as part of the total ministry and not an off-shoot of hot-headed revolutionaries as some would label them.

In 1 Corinthians 9 v. 22 St Paul says 'I am made all things to all men that I might by all means save some'. This is the total commission of the Church of both laity and clergy. The priest-worker, as part of the whole, is attempting to rediscover areas of missionary neglect in this country and to open up new fields of service. In England this experiment is very new. It will be possible, no doubt, to view the situation in ten years time and to determine then whether this type of ministry is having an effect. In the meantime all we ask is that people should accept that our call is sincere, our training is sound, and our mission of value.

## prophecy

'Can these dry bones live?'; 'The Church of England is dying'; 'Close more churches'; 'Raise more money'; 'Pray for more men'. The headlines are in bold type and the critics in full voice. Has God deserted us? Large numbers of our population are said to be heathen; only a few Christian outposts are left. How long can we hold out?

Turn the coin over. Here is a house-group meeting for prayer in one street; a dozen or so faithful people maintain a Christian witness in that down-town church; a group of young people visits a hospital ward; an open-air meeting is being held in the square of a block of flats; in another place a procession of witness is being held round the parish. All bear evidence to the fact that these 'old bones' are in fact very much alive.

What of the ministry? There are those who hold that by force of economy half the clergy in England will be in secular jobs in twenty-five years time. Group ministries and the amalgamation of parishes solve some problems, but what assistance could be given by increasing numbers of priest workers! This alone however, is not the way forward. Let us never lose sight of the value of the parish priest who is able to give his whole time to the work of the ministry, but at the same time let us also continue to experiment, let us gain from the lessons learned by more down-to-earth training, the withholding of ordination until a man has established real convictions and the opportunities to minister within specialised groups that have less emphasis on church buildings.

The day may also come when we experiment with a parish run entirely by priest-workers. This has in fact been done by one man, but I hold the view that in fairness to wives and families, and in justice to their employers, five, or six men would be needed. Against this let us also remember that the priest who is not restricted by the clock, as the priest-worker is, is able to meet at depth the real needs of people who nevertheless may make their first contact with Christianity through the witness and service of a priest-worker. The power and the value of both types of ministry lie in their ability to work together in the parishes and in the particular situations to which they are sent.

## A NOTE ABOUT THIS SERIES

This pamphlet is one of a series about different forms of ministry for which ordained men are needed today.

The names of other titles are given on the back cover.

The first pamphlet, about the ordained ministry as such, is the key to the whole series.

Those beginning to think of ordination will find many people ready to help and advise them—parish priests, headmasters, school, college and other chaplains.

Information and further advice about selection and training for ordination can be obtained from the Director of Ordinands in your diocese, or by writing to the Secretary.

Advisory Council for the Church's Ministry,  
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