

“Sense of Call” Discussion Paper

Produced by Synod Selection Committee

Purpose of the Paper: to resource discernment of call to the ordained ministries.

Background to the Paper: During 2020 and 2021, the Synod Selection Committee (SSC) has been reflecting on the language of ‘call’ as it is used in the selection processes that occur in congregational, presbytery and synod contexts. A concern emerged that the use of the language was under developed and too tied to ordained ministry. Potentially this has the triple effect of: diminishing the call to ministry placed on all the baptised; inflating the call to ordained ministry; and obscuring the particularities of the ministries to which the UCA ordains people. SSC believed it would be helpful to develop a compact resource which could be used by applicants for the ordained ministries as well as by those making decisions in the selection process. It would be oriented to helping all parties think about what exactly is entailed in being called to those ministries.

Sense of Call

The notion of a ‘sense of call’ is always located in a context. What is meant by the phrase and what experience or ‘sense’ it refers to is never constant. It is shaped by particular traditions of piety, different understandings of how God calls, and what sorts of ministries a church believes God is calling it to. Within the Uniting Church, despite much effort to make it otherwise, this language retains a privileged place in the church’s processes and rhetoric about the vocation to ordained ministry. This generates two difficulties: (1) it obscures the fact that all are called to particular ministries by virtue of their baptism; and (2) by linking ‘call’ to ordination, it obscures the fact that the ordained are not simply called but that they are called to particular ministries. This short paper suggests ways these difficulties can be addressed by those exploring ordination and by those responsible for the church’s discernment of who should be ordained.

First, however, it is worth noting how the issues of call and ordination has previously been addressed in this synod. In 1996, the synod produced a document *Called and Chosen: Becoming an Ordained Minister in the Uniting Church in Australia*. More recently, in 2007, the work of the Task Group on Ministerial Candidates produced a report, *Developing a Culture of Call*. The 1996 document former sets out an understanding of ordained ministry for those considering it. It was also offered as a resource for those “involved in the guidance and assessment of prospective applicants for candidature.” The 2007 document addresses some of the presenting issues at that time, especially the declining number of candidates for ministry. It affirmed the need for the whole church to be obedient to the call of God and the distinction and relationships between lay and ordained ministry. It also made various practical proposals for “increasing the number of candidates for ordained ministry.”

Despite the more nuanced language of call developed in the 2007 document, and the explicit intentions of the Period of Discernment, the culture of the church – including the language of candidates and ministers – still reflects the problems outlined in the first paragraph above.

Against this background, some new features frame the context for our use of the language of call. Rather than linking the discussion of call to increasing the number of candidates, we have an opportunity to more deeply understand the processes of discernment, the relationship between individual and corporate senses of call, and the relationship of demonstrated gifts for the call to particular ministries. We are also coming to a deeper recognition of the way ideas of call are shaped by different cultural and language groups within the UCA. The ways the dominant ecclesial culture has shaped (for good and ill) our understanding of call need to be brought into conversation with the traditions of call in the church's minority cultures. Current discussions about call are also being shaped by a recognition that the church's discernment of those called to ordained ministries must take into account applicants' demonstrated giftedness to grasp and respond to the various 'signs of the times' which locate the church politically, socially and culturally in contemporary Australia.

This latter point invites particular attention from those considering application as candidates and by those responsible for discerning whether to accept them as candidates. Whilst the church continues to ordain ministers to the general role of nurturing the church in its tradition, theology and mission, there are particular challenges of attending to those tasks in the present context. These require close attention in the discernment process, from the very beginning when an application is first made and received. For the sake of both the applicants and the church, these issues cannot be sidestepped.

Some strands of the Christian tradition, reinforced by the individualism of Western culture, also connect the language of a 'a sense of call' with an internal and potentially privatized understanding of call which implicitly diminishes the church's collective discernment. When that understanding of call is then reinforced in the very process of discernment, the ordained person's understanding of ordination will also be shaped by it.

The language around the call to ordained ministry is also shaped by different understandings of ordination itself inherited from both the Uniting Church's pre-union traditions and the understandings of ordination in other traditions. Some of the latter, especially that of the Anglican and Catholic churches, are often assumed to be *the* understanding of ordination operative in the Uniting Church. To avoid confusion about what a call to ordained ministry in the UCA is, the UCA's own understanding of ordination warrants being part of the exploration and discernment from the earliest stages of the selection process.

Challenges thus exist to fine-tune this language in the cultures of the UCA in order that the ordained ministry is not a privileged place of call, but is a particular calling. To help bring these issues to the surface in any process of discernment, the following points of reflection could be considered by all parties involved in considering an application for candidature – alongside other questions of faith and discipleship:

For reflection by the applicants:

- How have you practiced your baptismal calling prior to making this application?
- What gifts do you have for the particular ministry for which you are applying?
- What have you learnt during this process about how to discern God's call?

For reflection by those considering the application:

- Is the application to ordained ministry continuous with the applicant's response to their baptismal calling?
- Is the applicant's 'sense of call' matched by the demonstration of at least some of the gifts required for the particular ministry in our current context?
- How is the applicant navigating their way between their private sense of call and the church's collective discernment?

Approved by Theological and Ministerial Education Committee (TMEC), September 2021.