Discerning God in the Process: An Empirical and Theological Analysis of Vocational Discernment towards Ordained Ministry in the Church of England

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Abstract

From its earliest days, the Church has carefully discerned those called to roles of public leadership and responsibility. This thesis offers a theological analysis of the Shared Discernment Process (SDP) used by the Church of England to discern vocations to ordained ministry. Introduced in 2021, the SDP was a significant revision of previous processes, designed to reflect contemporary changes in ministry and promote greater diversity among candidates.

Through empirical research with Diocesan Directors of Ordinands (DDOs) and candidates, this study examines how the SDP is experienced as a means of discerning God's call, rather than merely a pragmatic selection process. I analyse the theology of the vocational discernment process and engage with three key themes.

First, I explore the role of personal narrative in discernment, drawing on Stanley Hauerwas's narrative theology to argue that storytelling should move beyond psychological theories of storied personal identity and emphasise the church community's role in discerning vocation. Second, I examine how candidates articulate their calling in formal interviews, engaging with Wesley Vander Lugt's theatrical theology to reflect on authenticity and formation in these moments of performance. Third, I address the asymmetrical power dynamics involved in these encounters, using a recent blog post by Mike Higton on power in the Church of England to highlight the need for accountability and transparency in ecclesial discernment processes.

As one of the first practical theological studies on the SDP, this thesis offers a unique contribution by analysing the lived experiences of those engaging in this process. Theologically, it advances contemporary discussion on vocation and ecclesiology. Practically, it proposes recommendations for improving the work of DDOs and others involved in vocational discernment. These insights will be valuable for theologians, church leaders, DDOs, and candidates exploring a call to ordained ministry.

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Abbreviations

Abbreviations are cited in full at their first usage.

The following abbreviations are used throughout the thesis:

BAP	Bishops' Advisory Panel
DD	Diocesan Document
DDO	Diocesan Director of Ordinands
Min Div	Ministry Division
NMT	National Ministry Team
SDP	Shared Discernment Process

Statement of Copyright

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Introduction

The Preface to the Ordinal in the Book of Common Prayer emphasises the Church of England's longstanding commitment to a rigorous process of vocational discernment for ordination. It states that '...no man might presume to execute [ordained ministry as Bishop, Priest, or Deacon] except he were first called, tried, examined, and known to have such qualities as are requisite...'[1] This insistence on the thorough testing of vocation raises important questions: How should the Church identify those whom God is calling to ministry? What is it like to undergo such a process of examination as a candidate? How is God understood to be active within the process, guiding or directing the outcome? This thesis explores how the Church of England discerns those called to ordained ministry. Its focus is not simply on the vocational discernment process as a pragmatic mechanism of ministerial selection, but rather on how those involved in the process experience and interpret it theologically as a means by which individuals and the Church together seek to discern God's call.

In this introductory chapter, I begin by tracing historical developments in the Church of England's approach to vocational discernment, culminating in the design and implementation of the Shared Discernment Process (SDP). I identify a gap in theological literature and empirical research concerning how vocational discernment is experienced and understood. This leads into a discussion of the aims, relevance, and significance of the present study. I also introduce myself as the researcher, reflecting briefly on the perspective I bring as an ordained priest with a background in theological education, vocational discernment, and healthcare research. Finally, I outline the overall shape and argument of the thesis, along with the central research questions it addresses.

Vocational Discernment in the Church of England

Reflecting the Preface to the Ordinal, the Canons of the Church of England stipulate that, 'No bishop shall admit any person into holy orders, except…on careful and diligent

[1] Church of England, *The Book of Common Prayer and Administration of the Sacraments and Other Rites and Ceremonies of the Church According to the Use of The Church of England* (Cambridge University Press, 2004), 79.

examination'.[2] This is clarified by a short clause emphasising that it is advisable for the bishop to seek the counsel of others in thoroughly assessing ordinands' suitability for ministry.[3] In the contemporary context, the involvement of others in advising the bishop seems so patently sensible that, 'it can come as a surprise to learn that the concept of formal selection and theological education for ordained clergy in the Church of England is a relatively new one.'[4] Robert Reiss's survey of vocational discernment in the twentieth century highlights the varied approaches used to identify those called to ordained ministry, and traces the impassioned debates which have shaped the design and continual revision of formal ecclesial discernment processes.[5]

Reiss begins his historical survey in the early 1900s, when a young man would typically approach a bishop requesting ordination having already completed theological training and secured a Title Post.[6] At the time, the Church's chief concerns were the quality and number of clergy, and the financial barriers which limited access to higher education for working class ordinands.[7] These challenges were compounded by the losses of two world wars and rapid social changes in the interwar period.

Despite some disquiet about increasing central control and national homogeneity,[8] there was a gradual shift towards greater objectivity and central oversight in the selection process, aiming to prevent candidates from simply moving around the country seeking a bishop willing to ordain them.[9] The late 1930s and early 1940s saw the establishment of national selection conferences, where candidates were not only interviewed, but also observed to assess their suitability.[10] With minor adjustments, national selection panels have remained a feature of the vocational discernment process since the first was held in 1944.

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[2] Church of England, 'Canons of the Church of England', 7th edition, January 2017, https://www.churchofengland.org/more/policy-and-thinking/canons-church-england/section-c, Canon C7.
[3] Church of England, 'Canons', C7.
[4] Christopher Lowson, 'Foreward', in *The Testing of Vocation*, by Robert Reiss (Church House Publishing, 2013), ix.
[5] Robert Reiss, *The Testing of Vocation: 100 Years of Ministry Selection in the Church of England* (Church House Publishing, 2013).
[6] Reiss, 26.
[7] Reiss, 27, 31 and 47.
[8] Reiss, 102 and 134.
[9] Reiss, 110.
[10] Reiss, 154.

Alongside the introduction of selection conferences came a need for agreement about what was being looked for when candidates were assessed. For many years there was heated debate about whether it was possible to have a list of objective criteria for vocation, and these were finally introduced in 1983.[11] The Data Protection Act (1998), gave candidates access to their reports, further reinforcing the need for recommendations to be backed up by clear evidence and reasoning.[12]

Over the twentieth century, the system of vocational discernment developed in a piecemeal manner, shaped by perceived best practice, financial concerns, and declining ordinand numbers.[13] Demographic shifts also occurred, with greater ethnic, gender, educational, and age diversity among candidates. Yet from the early 1980s to 2021, the discernment process remained largely unchanged. Candidates were prepared locally by a Diocesan Director of Ordinands (DDO), before attending a residential selection conference known by various names, but referred to by the end of this period as a 'Bishops' Advisory Panel' or 'BAP'. During the BAP, candidates were assessed against nine criteria through one-to-one interviews and a group exercise, after which advisors produced a report with a recommendation for the bishop.

Although this process functioned effectively for nearly forty years, offering a 'rigorous system of selection...at a remarkably low cost,'[14] by 2016 there was growing consensus that the process needed to be reimagined to meet the needs of the contemporary church.[15] This was driven by several concerns: the changing nature of ministry and mission; a desire to broaden access and reduce exclusion; and the need to respond to safeguarding failures by ensuring candidates were psychologically prepared for ministry.[16] In designing a new process to reflect these priorities, Ministry Division sought to 'recognise the interplay of science (knowledge and evidence), intuition (insight) and politics (the needs of the church) in the art of discernment,' aiming to create a process that was 'simple, clear, trusted, flexible and welcoming' for all candidates.[17] Initial proposals made in 2017 and 2018 were

[11] Reiss, 245, 251, 252, 355–56.
[12] Reiss, 255.
[13] Reiss, 282.
[14] Reiss, 284–85.
[15] Ministry Division, 'DDO Training in New Discernment Process' (National DDO Training, December 2019), Slide 3.
[16] Ministry Division, Slide 4 and Slide 6.
[17] Ministry Division, Slide 5.

rejected by the College of Bishops who sought 'a more radical direction'.[18] Eventually, a new process was agreed in 2019, with training for DDOs commencing the same year and an intended launch in 2020.[19]

The new Shared Discernment Process (SDP) offered a revised structural framework for discernment alongside a new set of 'Qualities' to guide the identification of those called to ordained ministry. The three-day BAP was replaced by a two-stage national process designed to be more dynamic and formational. Stage One involves six short online 'Carousel Conversations' between candidate and assessors, offering a snapshot of their experience and knowledge of ministry, and identifying areas for development. Candidates then attend a residential Stage Two Panel which includes a group exercise, written reflection, and two interviews with pairs of advisors. A report is submitted to the bishop providing evidence of whether the candidate demonstrates the necessary qualities for ordained ministry and summarising the panel's recommendations.[20] Preparation for these national panels includes regular conversations with a DDO and a psychotherapy assessment. DDOs also explore sensitive areas of the candidate's background using 'Traffic Light Questions' covering issues such as addiction, debt, and intimate relationships.[21]

At both a national and diocesan level, candidates are assessed using the new 'Qualities,' which replace the previous 'Criteria'. This change in terminology is intended to emphasise that candidates are not expected to be fully equipped for ordained ministry at the outset, but demonstrate the potential to develop the necessary character and skills through training. The Qualities are set out in a grid which explores inhabitation of the six Qualities across four Domains – Christ, the Church, the World, and the Self.[22] These Qualities serve as the reference point for all aspects of the SDP.

Originally intended to launch in 2020, the introduction of the SDP was delayed by a year due to the Covid-19 pandemic. Subsequently, the empirical phase of my research was also

[18] Ministry Division, Slide 5.
[19] Ministry Division, Slide 5.
[20] Further details: Church of England, 'Understanding Discernment' https://www.churchofengland.org/life-events/vocations/preparing-ordained-ministry/understanding-discernment.
[21] National Ministry Team, 'Traffic Lights Document: Guidelines for Using the Traffic Lights Document in the Discernment Process' (Church of England, May 2021).
[22] National Ministry Team, 'Qualities for Discernment: Priest and Distinctive Deacon' (Church of England, January 2020).

delayed. My research, conducted in 2021 during the first year of the SDP, is one of the first studies to explore the new discernment process.

Having outlined the historical development of vocational discernment in the Church of England which culminated in the introduction of the SDP, I now turn to the wider landscape of theological and empirical literature where reflection on the discernment of ordained vocation remains notably limited.

Theological and Empirical Research into Vocational Discernment

Although Reiss's survey of vocational discernment practices in the Church of England throughout the twentieth century provides valuable historical context for recent developments, it offers limited engagement with the experiences of those who participate in these processes, and minimal theological reflection on how they are designed and implemented.[23] Indeed, there are very few studies which examine vocational discernment in empirical and theological depth.

Numerous books have been written about ordained ministry exploring the theology and ecclesiology of ordination and the distinctive role of the priest in the contemporary church.[24] Candidates are often recommended to read and reflect on books about priesthood as they prayerfully consider whether God is calling them to this ministry.[25] There have also been some recent empirical studies carried out into the lived realities of ordained ministry, most notably the ongoing longitudinal study *Living Ministry* being carried out by the National Ministry Team.[26] The focus of all of these books and studies is on the purpose, function, and

[23] Reiss, *The Testing of Vocation*, 2013.
[24] For example: Christopher Cocksworth and Rosalind Brown, *Being a Priest Today: Exploring Priestly Identity*, (Canterbury Press, 2006); Simon Cuff, *Priesthood of All Believers: Clericalism and How to Avoid It* (SCM Press, 2022); David Hoyle, *The Pattern of Our Calling: Ministry Yesterday, Today and Tomorrow* (SCM Press, 2016); Martyn Percy, *Clergy: The Origin of Species* (Continuum, 2006); Michael Ramsey, *The Christian Priest Today*, (SPCK, 2009).
[25] Those mentioned by candidates in this study include: Stephen Cottrell, *On Priesthood: Servants, Shepherds, Messengers, Sentinels and Stewards* (Hodder & Stoughton, 2020); John-Francis Friendship, *Enfolded in Christ: The Inner Life of a Priest* (Canterbury Press, 2018); Graham Tomlin, *The Widening Circle: Priesthood as God's Way of Blessing the World* (SPCK, 2014).
[26] Church of England, 'Living Ministry Research', https://www.churchofengland.org/resources/diocesan-resources/ministry-development/formation/living-ministry/living-ministry-research; Other empirical studies into clergy experiences of ministry include: Nigel Peyton and Caroline Gatrell, *Managing Clergy Lives: Obedience, Sacrifice, Intimacy* (Bloomsbury, 2013); Yvonne Warren, *The Cracked Pot: The State of Today's Anglican Parish Clergy* (Kevin Mayhew, 2002).

character of ordained ministry, with minimal consideration given to understanding the process of discerning vocation.

While most texts focus on the nature of ordained ministry, there have been some contributions to understanding the experiences of ordinands during their training. The *Living Ministry* project asked ordinands about training and their early days in ordained ministry, while Eve Parker recently published a journal article and book reflecting theologically on empirical research carried out with ordinands about their experiences in training.[27] Although ordinands in these studies occasionally reflected briefly on the discernment process, the main research focus was on their experiences during training.

It appears that one of the few studies conducted with a primary concern for the process of vocational discernment is the recently published doctoral research from Lynn McChlery.[28] This explores how vocational assessors from various denominations use intuition in the discernment process. While McChlery's study takes an empirical and theological approach, she acknowledges that its focus is restricted to those tasked with discerning vocation on behalf of others and does not consider candidates' perspectives.[29]

Clearly, although there has been some theological and empirical work exploring the nature of ordained ministry and the training of ordinands, little attention has been paid to the process of vocational discernment. This is surprising given the time, effort, and thought which has been invested recently in the design and implementation of the SDP. My research will seek to address this gap by reflecting theologically on the experiences of participants in the vocational discernment process. Given the paucity of previous theological and empirical work in this area, an efficacy-based evaluation would have been insufficient and would not accurately reflect the SDP as an ecclesial process established with the expressed intention of discerning God's call. Instead, my approach will engage with the lived experience of participants in the SDP and will explore the theological questions raised by these experiences. John Swinton and Harriet Mowat describe this as a process of

[27] Church of England, 'Living Ministry Research'; Eve Parker, 'Bleeding Women in Sacred Spaces: Negotiating Theological Belonging in the "Pathway" to Priesthood', *Feminist Theology* 30, no. 2 (2021): 129–42; Eve Parker, *Trust in Theological Education: Deconstructing 'trustworthiness' for a Pedagogy of Liberation* (SCM Press, 2022).
[28] Lynn McChlery, *How Do You Know It's God?: The Theology and Practice of Discerning a Call to Ministry* (SCM Press, 2021).
[29] McChlery, 234.

'complexification' in which it is recognised that 'situations are complex, multifaceted entities which need to be examined with care, rigour and discernment' to bring lived experience into conversation with theological resources.[30] I have adopted a dialogical practical theological approach[31] throughout this thesis in which there is a dynamic interplay between theory, experience, and praxis to explore the complexity of the SDP as an ecclesial and theological process of vocational discernment.

In light of the limited previous attention this area has received, particularly in terms of theological engagement with lived experience, it is important to reflect on the standpoint from which this study is undertaken. I will now briefly introduce my perspective as a researcher, shaped by both personal experience and ministerial practice.

Introducing the Researcher

My interest in researching the theology of ordained ministry and vocation began during my own discernment process in 2013. For me, it was a broadly positive time of anticipation, expectation, and trust. Subsequently, while training for ordination at St Mellitus College (2015-2018), I felt a persistent call to focus on vocational discernment in my ministry. I discussed this with a tutor who encouraged me to pursue this as she observed that people from my theological tradition (charismatic-evangelical) and my demographic background (a woman training full-time with young children and part of a clergy couple) were underrepresented in the discernment process. Since then, my academic work has focused primarily on the theology of vocation and the ecclesiology of ordained ministry in the Church of England, and I remain passionate about the need for thoughtful theological reflection on this subject.

During training, I took a Master's module on Practical Theology where I was intrigued by methodological questions about the role social science research methods could play in theological research. Before ordained ministry, I was an Occupational Therapist with experience conducting empirical healthcare research, and I was excited to discover that Practical Theology is a theological discipline which takes seriously the challenge of exploring

[30] John Swinton and Harriet Mowat, *Practical Theology and Qualitative Research*, Second edition (SCM Press, 2016), 15.
[31] Mark J Cartledge, *Practical Theology: Charismatic and Empirical Perspectives* (Wipf & Stock, 2003), 28–30.

contemporary experience in conversation with theology, asking how the living God is at work today.

After ordination in 2015, I served a self-supporting curacy while working as a Lecturer and Tutor at St Mellitus College training ordinands for ministry. During five years in this role, I heard many stories about ordinands' experiences of vocational discernment, including instances of discouragement, discrimination, and hurt. These stories reinforced my conviction that this aspect of church life warrants research. I also became module lead for a Master's module in Practical Theology which further deepened my commitment to theological methodological approaches that listen attentively and systematically to contemporary lived experience.

In June 2023, I moved into a new role as Director of Ministry for Kensington Area in the Diocese of London. This includes responsibility for the vocational discernment process, and overseeing the training of ordinands and curates. This has given me a more detailed understanding of how the Shared Discernment Process operates, and I have been conscious of a two-way reflective process during the write-up phase of this thesis as I have implemented changes to local practices in light of my research.

These personal, pastoral, and academic experiences have informed the shape and direction of this research. In the final section of this introductory chapter, I outline the purpose of the thesis, its guiding research question and aims, and the structure by which the argument will unfold.

Thesis Purpose and Structure

As outlined previously, my study critically analyses the SDP through undertaking empirical research to hear from participants about their experiences, bringing these voices into conversation with interdisciplinary and theological sources. The central research question for this study is: *What empirical and theological analysis might be made of the vocational discernment process towards ordained ministry in the Church of England?* There will be three aims by which this question will be addressed. First, I will provide a thick description of the SDP focusing on participants' experiences and understanding of the process. Second, I will explore how aspects of the SDP can be interpreted theologically, and how this expands, deepens or challenges existing theological approaches. Third, arising from the thick

description and theological reflection on the process, I will make some practical recommendations for best practice in vocational discernment in the Church of England.

The thesis is structured in four parts:

In Part One, I argue that exploring vocation involves engaging with a complex theological landscape, characterised by theological tensions which must be navigated. I begin, in Chapter One, by identifying a lack of precision in use of the terms 'vocation' and 'calling,' which reflects an inherent tension between recognising the general call of Jesus to follow him as a disciple and the specific call to individuals to serve in particular roles within the Church. In Chapter Two, I consider what it means to speak of 'the will of God' in determining God's plan for the individual within the broader context of his purposes for the Church. This discussion is further developed in Chapter Three, where I explore the potential tension between human freedom and obedience in responding to God's call. Having outlined the theological complexities underlying vocational discernment, I conclude Part One by justifying why both empirical and theological analysis of the Shared Discernment Process is necessary, highlighting that this research will seek to constructively advance both theological approaches to vocation and faithful praxis in vocational discernment.

In Part Two (Chapter Four), I explore how these twin objectives will be achieved through a detailed discussion about the methodological assumptions of practical theology and the forms of knowledge and interpretation which are appropriate for theological research into lived experience. I outline the methods used in the empirical component of this project, including subject recruitment, qualitative interviews, data analysis, and research ethics.

Part Three presents a 'thick description' of the SDP outlining data analysis from interviews with DDOs and candidates. In Chapters Five, Six and Seven, I engage in the process of complexification described earlier by examining how DDOs and candidates hear, discern, and test God's call to ordained ministry. At the end of Part Three, I identify key themes from the data which merit further theological reflection.

I reflect in depth on these theological themes in Part Four. In Chapter Eight, I explore the role that storytelling plays in vocational discernment, and engage with the narrative theology of Stanley Hauerwas to provide a theological perspective on this aspect of the process. In Chapter Nine, I examine the requirement for authenticity in the SDP, focusing on

the need for those tasked with discerning a call to 'see the real person.' I describe how candidates feel compelled to perform as they externalise their sense of vocation for testing by others, and I discuss these performative aspects of the SDP through the lens of Wesley Vander Lugt's theatrical theology. Finally, in Chapter Ten, I identify a challenging power dynamic inherent in the SDP as a process which seeks to both nurture and test vocation. I consider how these power dynamics can be handled appropriately, drawing on insights from Mike Higton's recent blog post about 'Power in the Church of England.'

The thesis concludes by identifying the constructive contribution made to both theology and praxis by this study. I reflect on how engaging with the lived experiences of participants in the SDP has identified and contributed to previously underdeveloped aspects of theological approaches to vocation. Additionally, I offer several recommendations for changing praxis to guide both the Church and candidates as together they seek to discern those God is calling to ordained ministry.

PART 1

THE THEOLOGICAL DYNAMICS OF VOCATION

Part 1: Introduction

The pragmatic need to identify suitable individuals to fulfil specific roles or tasks within the Church can easily become the dominant driving force in vocational discernment. This tendency is evident in the brief historical survey of the development of vocational discernment processes in the Church of England previously outlined. Procedural changes have frequently been introduced in response to societal shifts or practical necessity, rather than from sustained theological reflection on ordained ministry or what it means to respond to God's call.[32] This pattern is not unique to the Church of England. Recent empirical research into ministerial selection across several denominations suggests that, in the absence of a robust theological framework for exploring vocation, churches are prone to default unreflectively to secular recruitment strategies in identifying future ministers.[33]

In this thesis, I argue that it is insufficient to focus solely on the practical mechanisms of ecclesial discernment processes. Deeper theological analysis and empirical research are necessary to understand more fully what it means to discern a call to ordained ministry. Across the three chapters of Part One, I begin to examine the complex and interrelated theological and doctrinal dynamics that shape understandings of vocation, and consider the challenges these may pose for those seeking to discern God's call to ordained ministry. I argue that these theological dynamics are underexplored in the vocational discernment process, and that further theological and empirical research is necessary.

Since 'a theology of vocation begins with the God who calls,'[34] any exploration of this subject must grapple with what it means to speak of God's purposes, plans and providence. At the same time, because vocational discernment also involves human response to God's call, it inevitably raises questions about the nature of the Church, human agency and prayer. This is what makes a theological study of vocational discernment so interesting – it focuses on the intersection between God's activity and human response, whilst navigating the challenges of holding in dynamic tension a range of theological concepts and understandings. Rowan Williams, former Archbishop of Canterbury, highlights that to speak of vocation requires an

[32] Reiss, *The Testing of Vocation*, 286.
[33] McChlery, *How Do You Know It's God?*, 222.
[34] Edward Hahnenberg, *Awakening Vocation: A Theology of Christian Call* (Liturgical Press, 2010), 93.

appreciation of the 'inescapable and horribly complex [theological] matters' it encompasses, remarking that 'we can't think usefully about vocation without some thinking about these wider things.'[35] It is striking, therefore, that 'for all its potential, the category of vocation has been overlooked by theologians and not well understood by Christians.'[36] This study contributes to this underexplored aspect of theological inquiry by offering fresh perspective on theological approaches to vocation through analysis of an ecclesial process of vocational discernment.

In Part One, I consider the challenge of speaking about vocation in the contemporary Western context and the theological tensions involved in reflecting on what it means to discern the call of God in an individual's life. I identify three interconnected aspects that frequently recur in both theological discourse and personal accounts of vocation. Chapter One focuses on God's call, Chapter Two discusses God's will, and Chapter Three reflects on God's command. Attending to these dynamics highlights the complexity of the relationship between divine calling and human agency, underscoring the need for further theological reflection on how discernment processes are designed and experienced. These chapters raise theological questions which will be explored in the empirical component of this study.

Each chapter in Part One begins by considering the challenges presented to theologies of vocation by the contemporary socio-historical context. In Chapter One, I identify a linguistic challenge in speaking of the 'call of God' whereby differing secular and theological interpretations of vocation are confused and muddled to render 'calling' an ambiguous and diminished theological notion. In Chapter Two, I identify the challenge of referring to 'the will of God' in a cultural context which prioritises individual purpose rather than adopting a wider perspective. In Chapter Three, I recognise that contemporary suspicion about authority presents a challenge to presentations of vocation which emphasise obedient response to 'the command of God'.

Having identified the challenges posed by the contemporary situation, I then consider the lively theological tensions between differing perspectives on vocation. In exploring God's call in Chapter One, I highlight that calling encompasses both the general call to discipleship and the call to particular tasks or roles. In considering God's will in Chapter Two, I

[35] Rowan Williams, *A Ray of Darkness: Sermons and Reflections* (Cowley Publications, 1995), 149.
[36] Hahnenberg, *Awakening Vocation*, xii.

emphasise that God's plan for the individual needs to be understood with reference to God's plan for the church. In addressing God's command in Chapter Three, I outline the scope of human freedom in response to the divine imperative.

Finally, at the end of each chapter, I identify the questions raised by this theological exploration of vocation in relation to the process of discernment towards ordained ministry in the Church of England. These questions will inform the theological analysis of this process in the empirical components of my research. Since Part One considers vocation in its broadest theological sense, I focus on the particular call to ordained ministry in the Church of England only in this concluding section of each chapter. Throughout the rest of Part One, I draw on scripture and theological perspectives from various Christian traditions. This approach aligns with Anglicanism's recognition that it does not hold a monopoly on truth and its identity as a tradition that is both catholic and reformed. Consequently, Anglican theological study intentionally engages with a diverse range of sources, shaped by scripture, tradition, and reason.[37] In keeping with this, I incorporate insights from Lutheran, Catholic, Reformed, and Orthodox traditions as I explore vocation in its broadest theological sense, before identifying the questions raised for the Shared Discernment Process (SDP) as a specific example of an ecclesial process of vocational discernment.

[37] For discussions about Anglican 'comprehensiveness' and approaches to engaging with a range of theological traditions and sources, see: Scott MacDougall, *The Shape of Anglican Theology: Faith Seeking Wisdom* (Brill, 2022); Ralph McMichael, 'What Does Canterbury Have to Do with Jerusalem? The Vocation of Anglican Theology', in *Vocation of Anglican Theology: Sources and Essays* (Hymns Ancient & Modern, 2014), 1–34; Stephen Sykes, *The Integrity of Anglicanism* (Mowbrays, 1978).

Chapter 1
God's Call: General and Specific

1.1 Introduction

In this chapter, I explore some of the theological challenges of speaking about calling. I begin by tracing how understandings of calling have evolved over time in response to shifting religious priorities and changing cultural contexts. I frame this as a 'linguistic challenge,' highlighting how words and phrases related to vocation have acquired multiple meanings and interpretations. Building on this, I argue that this complexity is evident in the dual use of the term 'call' – both to describe the fundamental call to follow Jesus, and also the specific roles or tasks through which individuals are called to live out that discipleship. Finally, I briefly consider the implications of these distinctions for those discerning a call to ordained ministry, identifying the questions raised for the discernment process.

1.2 The Linguistic Challenge of Vocation and Calling

Theological and cultural understandings of vocation have developed over time, meaning that the contemporary notion of calling can appear multi-layered, complex, and sometimes ambiguous. In his edited collection of Christian writings on vocation, William Placher identifies four distinct periods in Christian history, each characterised by a fundamentally different understanding of calling: the Early Church, the Middle Ages, the Reformation, and the Post-Christian Era.[38] Each period's theological emphasis was shaped by different cultural and social pressures, with shifts in the language used to refer to 'calling' reflecting these changes.[39] Since these historical developments continue to inform contemporary discussions on vocation, I will briefly outline the significant aspects of the four eras identified by Placher and their impact on the theological interpretation and understanding of calling.

The call which gave the Hebrew people their sense of identity and distinctiveness as God's chosen people was fundamentally communal, rather than individual.[40] While the Old

[38] William Placher, 'Introduction', in *Callings: Twenty Centuries of Christian Wisdom on Vocation*, ed. William Placher (Eerdmans, 2005), 6–9.
[39] Placher, 6.
[40] Edward Breuer, 'Vocation and Call as Individual and Communal Imperatives: Some Reflections on Judaism', in *Revisiting the Idea of Vocation: Theological Explorations*, ed. John C. Haughey (Catholic University of

Testament scriptures include instances of God calling individuals for a particular purpose, such as the call stories of the patriarchs and prophets, the emphasis remains on the role they fulfilled within the wider covenantal narrative of Israel.[41] A subtle shift in the interpretation of calling emerged with the experience of Jesus' first disciples and, subsequently, the early church, as they responded to Jesus' call to follow him.[42] This call to discipleship required whole-hearted commitment, willingness to leave behind a former way of life, and readiness to endure poverty, exclusion, persecution – even death.[43] It was both a personal call, requiring an individual response to Jesus, and a call into a new 'supra-national community'[44] in which familial relationships were formed with other disciples.[45] Hence, 'calling' in the New Testament (*kaleō* or *klēsis* in Greek) took on a soteriological meaning alongside classical interpretations of naming, inviting, summoning, and choosing.[46]

This soteriological interpretation of calling was later challenged when, from the fourth century onwards, being a Christian was no longer dangerous and could even confer social advantage.[47] In response, some individuals withdrew to the desert, seeking 'their calling in lives of radical self-denial that preserved the dramatic challenge of Christianity.'[48] This marked the beginning of a shift towards viewing 'calling' as a distinct category of Christian life, applicable only to a select few, rather than all disciples of Jesus. During the Middle Ages, this perspective was further reinforced as the concept of calling became increasingly associated with the monastic or priestly vocation – a life set apart from the rest of Christian society. In this context, the Latin term *vocatio* came to refer exclusively to the call to the monastery, and 'to have a vocation' was to enter a religious order or the priesthood.[49]

America Press, 2004), 42; A. J. Conyers, *The Listening Heart: Vocation and the Crisis of Modern Culture* (Spence Pub. Co, 2006), 21.

[41] Breuer, 'Vocation and Call as Individual and Communal Imperatives: Some Reflections on Judaism', 42; Gary D. Badcock, *The Way of Life: A Theology of Christian Vocation* (Eerdmans, 1998), 3–4.

[42] Stanley Samuel Harakas, 'Vocation and Ethics', in *Christ at Work: Orthodox Christian Perspectives on Vocation*, ed. Ann Mitsakos Bezzerides (Holy Cross Orthodox Press, 2006), 179.

[43] Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship*, SCM Classics (SCM, 1959), 35; Placher, 'Introduction', 6.

[44] Conyers, *The Listening Heart*, 22.

[45] Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship*, 54.

[46] Ian Hussey, 'The Soteriological Use of "Call" in the New Testament: An Undervalued Category?', *Biblical Theology Bulletin* 46, no. 3 (2016): 133–34.

[47] Placher, 'Introduction', 6.

[48] Placher, 6.

[49] Hahnenberg, *Awakening Vocation*, 10; Placher, 'Introduction', 6.

It was in this historical, cultural and religious context that Martin Luther made his seminal contribution to theological concepts of vocation.[50] A key concern for Luther was the way the Church had intertwined spiritual life with hierarchical distinctions and social status. He criticised the Church for maintaining its own authority and self-interest by elevating ecclesial office above temporal power.[51] Luther linked this two-tiered structure to the use of the words *Beruf* and *vocatio*, which, at the time, applied solely to priestly and monastic roles, excluding ordinary laypeople.[52] In his German translation of the Bible, he rendered the Greek *klēsis* in 1 Corinthians 7:20 as *Beruf*, thereby associating God's call with the everyday practice of Christian discipleship.[53] While scholars continue to debate the exegetical precision of this choice, Luther's reframing of vocation has had a lasting impact.[54] Although Protestantism never directly equated vocation with secular employment,[55] the term increasingly took on that meaning in society, so by the eighteenth century, 'vocation' was widely used to refer to professional occupations outside of the Church.[56]

In more recent times, while 'vocation' in English-speaking countries (along with *Beruf* in German) is often used as synonymous with employment, there has been growing interest in the psychological interpretation of 'calling' in secular contexts.[57] Research suggests that 'calling' has largely detached from its Christian roots and now commonly refers to a career which enables self-expression or a feeling of purpose and fulfilment.[58] In response to this secularisation, many Christians have sought to reclaim vocation by emphasising that God's is not for personal gain, but rather a summons to live counter-culturally as a follower of Jesus Christ.[59]

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[50] I explore Luther's contribution to vocational discernment in greater depth here: Cara Lovell, '"Do You Believe That God Is Calling You to This Ministry?" Subjective and Objective Factors in Discerning Vocation in the Church of England', *Theology and Ministry*, no. 6 (2020): 77–80.
[51] Martin Luther, *The Christian in Society I*, ed. James Atkinson (Fortress Press, 1966), 123.
[52] Hahnenberg, *Awakening Vocation*, 15.
[53] Martin Luther, *Commentary on 1 Corinthians 7*, ed. Hilton C. Oswald (Concordia Publishing House, 1973), 46.
[54] Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics III.4: The Doctrine of Creation*, ed. G. W Bromiley and Thomas F Torrance, trans. A.T. Mackay et al. (T&T Clark, 2009), 601; Badcock, *The Way of Life*, 6–8 and 39.
[55] Badcock, *The Way of Life*, 88.
[56] Reiss, *The Testing of Vocation*, 2013, 4.
[57] Marco Rotman, 'Vocation in Theology and Psychology: Conflicting Approaches?', *Christian Higher Education* 16, no. 1–2 (2017): 24.
[58] Ryan Duffy et al., 'Does the Source of a Calling Matter? External Summons, Destiny, and Perfect Fit', *Journal of Career Assessment* 22, no. 4 (2014): 564.
[59] Placher, 'Introduction', 9.

As this brief historical overview illustrates, theological understandings of 'vocation' and 'calling' have evolved over time. Consequently, some theologians seek to define these terms with precision to clarify their meaning. For example, Barth distinguishes between the two terms, suggesting that 'vocation' refers to the social, personal, and historical context in which an individual experiences 'calling' as a summons from God.[60] However, since the words 'vocation' and 'calling' are linguistically interconnected (the Latin *vocare* means 'to call'), making such distinctions can unnecessarily complicate and confuse.[61] Therefore, in line with Dietrich Bonhoeffer's view that 'vocation [should be] understood simultaneously in all its dimensions,'[62] this thesis will use 'vocation', 'calling' and other related terms interchangeably, while acknowledging their multifaceted and contextual nature.

1.3 The Double Meaning of 'Calling'

Although making precise linguistic distinctions can complicate discussions about vocation, it is helpful to clarify that the 'call of God' is widely understood to encompass two elements: firstly, the call to follow Jesus as a disciple, and, secondly, the call to actively participate in his mission through specific tasks or particular roles. This dual meaning recurs throughout scripture. In creation, all things are called into existence, and humanity's vocation is to live in loving dependence on God, fulfilling the God-given task of stewarding the earth's resources (Genesis 1-2).[63] The Israelites are then called into a unique relationship with God, which is to be lived out in covenantal distinctiveness in order to bless the world (Exodus 19:3-6).[64] Subsequently, Jesus' early interactions with the first disciples involve him calling them and sending them out to speak in his name and act on his behalf (for example: Matthew 9:9; Mark 1:16-18; Luke10:1-20; John 20:21).[65] This pattern of calling continues in the life of the church, as 'the Spirit calls people to faith, sanctifies them through many gifts,

[60] Barth, *Church Dogmatics III.4: The Doctrine of Creation*, 598.
[61] Badcock, *The Way of Life*, 3; Kathleen Cahalan, *Introducing the Practice of Ministry* (Liturgical Press, 2010), 27; Sally Myers, 'New Directions in Voicing a Vocation', *Theology* 122, no. 3 (May 2019): 175.
[62] Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, ed. Clifford Green, trans. Reinhard Krauss, Charles West, and Douglas Stott (Fortress Press, 2005), 292.
[63] Camilla Burns, 'The Call of Creation', in *Revisiting the Idea of Vocation: Theological Explorations*, ed. John C. Haughey (Catholic University of America Press, 2004), 24–25; Williams, *A Ray of Darkness*, 149.
[64] Tomlin, *The Widening Circle*, 94–95.
[65] Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship*, 19–20; John Hemer, 'What Theologies of Vocation Are to Be Found in the Bible?', in *The Disciples' Call: Theologies of Vocation from Scripture to the Present Day*, ed. Christopher Jamison (Bloomsbury, 2014), 22–25; John Swinton, *Becoming Friends of Time: Disability, Timefullness, and Gentle Discipleship* (Baylor University Press, 2018), 117.

gives them strength to witness to the Gospel, and empowers them to serve in hope and love.'[66] These two elements – the call to live as Christ's disciple and to embody that calling through particular activities or roles – appear to be inseparable, and both are necessary components of vocation.

These dual aspects of vocation were recognised by Luther, who used *vocatio spiritualis* to indicate the call to discipleship, contrasting this with *vocatio externa*, which referred to the places and situations in which a person is called to serve God and care for others.[67] The Puritans developed this idea by distinguishing between the 'general' call of God to salvation, and the 'particular' callings through which a person lives out their Christian life by undertaking specific tasks or roles.[68] This is further expanded by Jürgen Moltmann, who builds on Luther's distinction to differentiate between the words 'call' and 'callings':

> 'The *call* according to the New Testament is once for all, irrevocable and immutable, and has its eschatological goal in the hope to which God calls us. Our *callings*, however, are historic, changing, changeable, temporally limited, and therefore are to be shaped in the process of call, of hope and of love.'[69]

Moltmann subsequently comments that 'callings' to particular tasks or occupations can no longer be conceived, as Luther did, as fixed and unchanging stations in life. Instead, they must reflect a society in which there is more personal choice and greater mobility in paid work.[70]

Moltmann's reflections, alongside the broader historical survey, make it clear that social and cultural factors shape how vocation is understood. This presents a challenge when discussing the concept in the current context. It is tempting to speak of 'God's call' as through the meaning of this phrase was self-evident and uncontested. However, such an approach risks overlooking the tension recognised by Luther and others between the dual

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[66] World Council of Churches, 'Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry: Faith and Order Paper No. 111' (Geneva, 1982), 16.
[67] Martin Luther, *Martin Luthers Werke*, 2nd edition (Hermann Böhlaus Rachfolger, 1908), 300; Miroslav Volf, *Work in the Spirit: Toward a Theology of Work* (Wipf and Stock, 2001), 105–6; Hahnenberg, *Awakening Vocation*, 15.
[68] Hahnenberg, *Awakening Vocation*, 20; Douglas James Schuurman, *Vocation: Discerning Our Callings in Life* (Eerdmans, 2004), 17.
[69] Jürgen Moltmann, *Theology of Hope: On the Ground and the Implications of a Christian Eschatology* (SCM Press, 2002), 316.
[70] Moltmann, 317; These societal changes to work are further explored in: Volf, *Work in the Spirit*, 25–45.

aspects of calling: the general call to follow Jesus as his disciple, and the specific call to engage in particular tasks or roles. A comprehensive understanding of vocation must take both dimensions into account. I now explore each in turn before considering the questions this dynamic tension raises for those discerning a call to ordained ministry.

1.3.1 General Call: Vocation as Discipleship

One particular Gospel story is often taken as a prime example of the call to discipleship.[71] As Jesus walks by the Sea of Galilee, he calls Simon and Andrew, and later James and John, to follow him, indicating the unique role they will later play as apostles: 'Follow me and I will make you fish for people' (Mark 1:17b). Luke's Gospel expands on this account (Luke 5:1-11), focusing on Simon Peter's interaction with Jesus and his response in leaving his former way of life to follow him.[72] The story of the first disciples' calling serves as a paradigm for later followers, who are likewise challenged to offer their whole lives in faithful response to Jesus' call.[73] This pattern of call and response is evident throughout the biblical accounts of Jesus' life and the early church, most notably in the dramatic call, conversion, and commissioning of Saul (Paul) in Acts.[74]

Throughout the New Testament, the Greek word *kaleō* ('to call') and its derivatives primarily refer to the call to live as a disciple of Christ. In a general sense, *kaleō* expresses a summons or invitation, drawing the individual closer 'either physically or in a personal relationship.'[75] This is evident with reference to salvation, where the individual is called out of the world, reconciled with God, and incorporated into the church community as the Body of Christ (1 Cor. 1:9; Col. 3:15; Ro. 1:6).[76] The term also conveys an ethical dimension, emphasising a life of holiness and witness to others (Eph. 4:1; 1 Thess. 4:7, 5:24; Gal. 5:13), as well as an eschatological aspect, pointing to the heavenly hope that sustains believers in the present

[71] For example: Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship*, 19–20; Stuart Buchanan, *On Call: Exploring God's Leading to Christian Service* (Bible Reading Fellowship, 2001), 28–30; Hemer, 'What Theologies of Vocation Are to Be Found in the Bible?', 22–25.
[72] Chad Hartsock, 'The Call Stories in Luke: The Use of Type-Scene for Lucan Meaning', *Review and Expositor* 112, no. 4 (2015): 586–88; Cara Lovell, 'Surprise, Hope and Gift: A Pneumatological Account of the Unexpected Nature of Vocation', *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 26, no. 1 (January 2024): 96–97.
[73] Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship*, 19–20.
[74] Barth, *Church Dogmatics III.4: The Doctrine of Creation*, 603–5.
[75] L Coenen, 'Call', in *The New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology*, ed. Colin Brown, vol. 1 (Zondervan, 1975), 271.
[76] Rotman, 'Vocation in Theology and Psychology: Conflicting Approaches?', 27.

(Eph. 1:18; Phil. 3:14; Heb. 9:15; 1 Tim. 6:12).[77] While God's call is presented as personal, it is never individualistic; rather it draws the called person into a new relationship with God and the wider community.[78] Hence, it is significant that Paul uses *kaleō* only twice to describe his own apostolic calling, and in both instances, immediately broadens the focus to include all believers as those who are called into fellowship with Christ (Ro. 1:1 and 1 Cor. 1:1).[79] Thus, while Scripture contains examples of individuals being commissioned for specific roles, its primary interpretive framework emphasises the more general call to discipleship.

Notably, *kaleō* is never used to refer directly to work or particular forms of employment,[80] and many theologians have expressed concern over the ways in which the concept of 'vocation' has evolved in ways foreign to its biblical usage.[81] Karl Barth, for instance, argues that the concept of 'vocation' has been 'obscured and darkened past recognition' by its association with employment, and instead emphasises its soteriological significance.[82] Similarly, Emil Brunner laments the reduction of 'vocation' to occupation, asserting that, in its scriptural usage it is, 'so full of force and so pregnant with meaning, it gathers up so clearly the final meaning of God's acts of grace…that to renounce this expression would mean losing a central part of the Christian message.'[83] More recently, Miroslav Volf also critiqued the shift in focus from the biblical use of 'calling', rejecting the Lutheran re-interpretation of 'vocation' as offering an insufficient theological framework for employed work.[84] Likewise, Gary Badcock highlights the divergence between contemporary understandings of vocation and the biblical portrayal of calling. While he acknowledges that Luther's elevation of secular work as 'vocation' was a necessary correction at the time, he argues that it diminishes the call to all disciples to play an active role in the church.[85]

Recent theological engagement has helpfully redirected attention away from vocation as employment and toward God's call in Christ to the life of discipleship. However, there is a

[77] Rotman, 27.
[78] Coenen, 'Call', 275.
[79] Coenen, 274; Rotman, 'Vocation in Theology and Psychology: Conflicting Approaches?', 28.
[80] Badcock, *The Way of Life*, 6; Coenen, 'Call', 275; Rotman, 'Vocation in Theology and Psychology: Conflicting Approaches?', 28.
[81] Schuurman, *Vocation*, 17.
[82] Barth, *Church Dogmatics III.4: The Doctrine of Creation*, 602.
[83] Emil Brunner, *The Divine Imperative: A Study in Christian Ethics* (Lutterworth Press, 1937), 207–8.
[84] Volf, *Work in the Spirit*, 110.
[85] Badcock, *The Way of Life*, 83.

risk that this shift does not fully account for the potential for the second dimension of vocation – an individual's call to a particular task or role, which I now consider.

1.3.2 Particular Callings: Vocation in Specific Roles or Tasks

Although the use of the word *kaleō* to denote a calling to a specific task or role is relatively uncommon in the Bible, instances can be traced throughout both the Old and New Testaments where God's call is framed in this way.[86] Alongside dramatic call narratives, scripture also depicts the Spirit granting gifts that exceed individuals' natural abilities, equipping them for the tasks to which they are called. For example, in Exodus 31:1, Bezalel is endowed with artistic skill for the construction of the tabernacle, while in Acts 6:3-6, those chosen to serve at tables in the early church, including Stephen, are described as 'full of the Spirit and wisdom' and deemed suitable for the role on this basis.[87]

As outlined previously, Paul infrequently refers to himself as 'called' to the role of an apostle (Ro.1:1), but he does describe apostleship as a 'gift' (Eph. 4:11).[88] His interchangeable use of these terms suggests a close relationship between gifting and calling – those called to a particular office or role are also gifted for it, and those exercising their God-given gifts to bless others and build up the community are likewise called to that ministry.[89] This 'particular calling' is distinct from the general call to follow Christ as a disciple, but serves as both an extension and an expression of it.[90] Furthermore, Paul distinguishes between the 'fruit' of the Spirit (Gal. 5:22-23) and the 'gifts' of the Spirit (Ro. 12:3-8; 1 Cor. 12:4-11; Eph. 4:11-16).[91] While the fruit of the Spirit are the general character attributes cultivated in all Christians, the gifts (*charisms*) of the Spirit are specific abilities given to individuals for the purpose of building up the church in unity and service.[92] Again, this distinction between the fruit and gifts of the Spirit demonstrates the close connection between the general call to grow as a disciple in the likeness of Christ, and the particular call to live out that discipleship within the church community.[93]

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[86] Schuurman, *Vocation*, 29–41.
[87] Schuurman, 31 and 37.
[88] Schuurman, 30; Acknowledging the disputed authorship of Ephesians, for a defence of Pauline authorship see: Peter O'Brien, *The Letter to the Ephesians* (Eerdmans, 2009), 4-47.
[89] Schuurman, *Vocation*, 30.
[90] Schuurman, 30.
[91] Cahalan, *Introducing the Practice of Ministry*, 31.
[92] Cahalan, 31; Volf, *Work in the Spirit*, 111.
[93] Cahalan, *Introducing the Practice of Ministry*, 28.

The close connection between calling and gifting in Paul's letters highlights that every believer is called to active participation in the church community and gifted for their role by the Spirit.[94] As Paul asserts, 'To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good' (1 Cor. 12:6-7), while Peter urges, 'serve one another with whatever gift each of you has received' (1 Pet. 4:10). The church flourishes when every member exercises their spiritual gifts. Paul's metaphor of the church as a body reinforces the idea that diverse gifts serve a unifying purpose.[95] As he describes in Ephesians, 'the whole body, joined and knitted together by every ligament with which it is equipped, as each part is working properly, promotes the body's growth in building itself up in love' (Eph. 4:16). The analogy of the 'body of Christ' closely follows a list of church offices whose purpose is to build up the body as a whole.[96] Since the Spirit's gifts are distributed among all believers, there is no hierarchy in calling; no gift or role should be elevated above another. Paul warns against arrogance and pride, emphasising that every member is essential to the body's functioning (Rom. 12:3; 1 Cor. 12:4-26). While some roles are more visible, all gifts contribute to the unity and diversity of the church.[97] Spiritual gifts are neither individual achievements nor for personal gain, but are to be used in collaboration with others to build up the body of Christ.[98]

While the Spirit's gifts unite and equip the church, there is a tendency to separate these gifts from the natural talents individuals possess.[99] However, this distinction can be misleading, as both ultimately come from God and serve God's purposes. Charisms are sometimes regarded as extraordinary, supernatural 'addition[s]' that enable individuals to surpass their natural abilities.[100] Yet, framing them this way creates an artificial divide between the talents that God bestows at birth and the gifts that emerge and develop over time.[101] Recognising this continuity suggests a more holistic understanding of vocation, in which God's call and gifts unfold through experience, adaptation, and the needs of the

[94] Volf, *Work in the Spirit*, 112.
[95] Gordon D. Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians* (Eerdmans, 2010), 589; Douglas J. Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans* (Eerdmans, 1996), 762.
[96] O'Brien, *The Letter to the Ephesians*, 304.
[97] Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 762–64; Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, 610–16.
[98] Cahalan, *Introducing the Practice of Ministry*, 33.
[99] Cahalan, 36–37; Volf, *Work in the Spirit*, 116–17.
[100] Volf, *Work in the Spirit*, 112.
[101] Volf, 112.

context.[102] Discerning vocation will consider both innate talents and spiritual gifts, as together these equip individuals to serve the church in particular ways.[103]

Having established that God's call encompasses both the general call to discipleship and particular calls to serve within the church, I will now briefly discuss the theological tensions inherent in this duality in the context of discerning a call to ordained ministry.

1.4 God's Call and Vocational Discernment for Ordained Ministry

In his influential book on priesthood in the Church of England, former Archbishop of Canterbury Michael Ramsey observes that, 'the readiness of members of the Church to respond to particular calls [depends] upon the depth of their realisation of the supreme call whereon their faith is founded.'[104] Ramsey emphasises that the call to ordained ministry is rooted in the broader call to discipleship, highlighting the theological tension in discerning vocation. This tension arises from the dynamic interplay between God's general call to all believers and God's particular call to specific roles within the church. While all are called to follow Jesus as disciples and must discern their unique calling within the church, only some are called to ordained ministry. An unhelpful clericalism can elevate the apparent status of this role above the shared priesthood of all the people of God, but can be challenged by recognising the particularity of the call to priestly ministry in word and sacrament.[105] Ordained ministers are called to a specific role within the church, and are tasked with walking with others as they discern their own particular callings as disciples of Christ.[106]

Recognising the dynamic theological tension between God's call as both general and particular raises important theological and practical questions about how those called to ordained ministry are identified and their vocation recognised. Focusing on calling as 'gift' prompts us to ask: Is ordination simply the acknowledgement of an individual's existing talents, gifts, and abilities to fulfil the role, or is the charism for ordained ministry bestowed

[102] Cahalan, *Introducing the Practice of Ministry*, 36–37; Volf, *Work in the Spirit*, 116–17.
[103] I explore the connection between natural talents and spiritual gifts in more detail here: Lovell, 'Surprise, Hope and Gift'.
[104] Ramsey, *The Christian Priest Today*, 100.
[105] Cuff, *Priesthood for All Believers*, 70–71.
[106] Church of England, *Common Worship: Ordination Services - Study Guide: Services and Prayers for the Church of England* (Church House Publishing, 2007), 37.

at ordination?[107] What expectations does the church have for those entering ordained ministry, and what prior experience is required to demonstrate that they are called and gifted by the Spirit for this role? Additionally, having acknowledged the potential for ordained ministers to be seen as having a more elevated status and calling than other Christians, we need to consider: Are there are some people whose vocation is overlooked or disregarded, and whose gifts are not nurtured because of their background or context?

1.5 Conclusion

In this chapter, I have examined how the concept of 'God's call' has been shaped by evolving interpretative frameworks and theological understandings throughout Christian history. While some theologians emphasise vocation primarily as the call to follow Jesus in discipleship, I have argued that it is more helpful to recognise a dual meaning: the general call to discipleship and the particular call to a specific task, role, or ministry. In exploring this second dimension, I have highlighted the close relationship between particular callings and the gifts of the Holy Spirit which equip individuals to contribute to the life and mission of the church. The biblical image of the church as a unified yet diverse body underscores the necessity of different roles for its proper functioning. This understanding of particular calling not only informs vocational discernment, but also raises significant theological questions for the discernment process, particularly around how to identify those who have the necessary gifts or qualities for ordained ministry.

[107] This is implied by Jenson, who describes ordination as 'a rite which bestows a charism.' Robert Jenson, *Visible Words: The Interpretation and Practice of Christian Sacraments* (Fortress Press, 2010), 190.

Chapter 2
God's Will: Individual and Communal

2.1 Introduction

In the previous chapter, I traced the evolving understanding of vocation over Christian history and examined the challenge of holding in tension two aspects of calling: the general call to discipleship and the particular call to specific roles. Recognising God as the source of both general and particular vocation inevitably links vocation to the will of God, since to speak of God as caller is to imply that calling conveys purposeful intent within God's economy. In this chapter, I explore how theological reflection on vocation requires engagement with questions about the nature, scope and specificity of God's will for individuals, as well as broader consideration of God's will for the church across time and place. I begin by addressing the challenges posed by a contemporary social context which often interprets calling either as deterministic destiny or in highly individualistic terms. I examine the tension within theological conceptions of God's will, first by considering the nature and scope of individual calling, and then by situating this within a wider understanding of God's will for the church. I argue that in the contemporary Western cultural context, there is a risk of overemphasising the need to discover the unique or specific plans God has for the individual, rather than identifying how these relate to God's more general will for the church. Finally, I briefly consider the questions this raises for a vocational discernment process which seeks to discern God's will for individual candidates for roles of public responsibility and leadership in the church.

2.2 The Conceptual Challenge of Vocation and God's Will

Several theologians have highlighted a tendency among contemporary Christians to conceive of God's will in overly simplistic and deterministic terms. David Lonsdale, in his work on Ignatian discernment, describes how many view providence as a 'blueprint of what God wants to happen in the world,'[108] while John Swinton, writing on time, vocation, and disability, comments that God does not '[predetermine] every human movement as if life

[108] David Lonsdale, *Eyes to See, Ears to Hear: An Introduction to Ignatian Spirituality* (Orbis Books, 2000), 91.

occurred on [a] giant transcendent chessboard.'[109] Rowan Williams illustrates this conceptual tendency with the analogy of a theatrical production, where human beings are cast with parts to play in God's grand script without auditions, which can leave individuals feeling unsuited, ill-equipped or overqualified for their assigned roles.[110] Williams challenges the notion of an arbitrary or inscrutable divine will, emphasising that 'God does not create human ciphers, a pool of cheap labour to whom jobs can be assigned at will.'[111] His critique underscores the need to recognise how different understandings of God's will shape both the conceptual and emotional experience of discerning vocation.

A potential tension exists between conceptions of God's will which focus primarily on the individual and those which emphasise God's wider purposes for creation, the church, and the cosmos. Douglas Schuurman, in developing a Reformed theology of vocation for the contemporary context, highlights this tension, stating, 'Vocation includes the belief that God's providence governs our lives in general and in detail.'[112] While a full exploration of providence is beyond the scope of this thesis, I will now examine how this tension might manifest in vocational discernment, particularly in navigating the relationship between God's will for the individual and for the wider church.

2.2.1 God's Will for the Individual

There is a rich seam of material throughout the scriptural narrative in which individuals are called to enact, embody and fulfil the will of God, who chooses to act through people to achieve his purposes.[113] Devotional reading of biblical call stories can shape an expectation that God's will is communicated unambiguously to an individual and that an affirmative response is necessary for its fulfilment. For example, the story of Isaiah's call (Isaiah 6:1-8) is frequently interpreted without reference to the following verses (vv. 9-13), which focus on the specific message entrusted to him.[114] As a result, Isaiah's experience is often treated simply as 'an instructive account of God's call,'[115] rather than as a narrative tied to a

[109] Swinton, *Becoming Friends of Time*, 116.
[110] Williams, *A Ray of Darkness*, 147.
[111] Williams, 149.
[112] Schuurman, *Vocation*, 46.
[113] Hemer, 'What Theologies of Vocation Are to Be Found in the Bible?', 9.
[114] John Goldingay, *Isaiah* (Hendrickson Publishers, 2001), 60.
[115] Goldingay, 60.

particular prophetic task.[116] Furthermore, the contemporary use of Isaiah's response – 'Here I am, send me' – as a general expression of willingness to be used by God divorces it from its original context.[117] Rather than being framed as a response to God's holy initiative, it is often presented as a proactive offer of an individual's availability to be chosen and used by God.

A similar pattern emerges in readings of Mary's response at the Annunciation (Luke 1:26-38), where devotional emphasis is placed on her willing assent. Worshippers are encouraged to offer their own unconditional 'yes' in anticipation of God's call, reflecting an active posture of readiness.[118] Writing from the Orthodox tradition, Deborah Belonick offers a nuanced account of how Mary's unique role can inspire contemporary Christians to discern their vocation, arguing that 'through our own assent to God's call and obedience to him, we also enter into a new life in Christ, and we discover our vocation within his body.'[119] Her analysis distinguishes between aspects of Mary's calling which were unique to her and those that can inform Christian experience more broadly. This demonstrates that prayerful reflection on biblical call narratives can be both spiritually enriching and theologically responsible. However, hermeneutical care is required, as these stories shape contemporary expectations and conceptual frameworks regarding how God's will is communicated and enacted through individuals today.

Part of this hermeneutical challenge arises from the individualism and subjectivism that characterise contemporary Western culture, which would have been inconceivable to those whose stories of calling are recorded in scripture.[120] Charles Taylor describes this era as one marked by a widespread prioritisation of individual self-expression.[121] When personal choice and self-fulfilment become primary lenses for decision-making, vocation risks being

[116] Barth emphasises that details of Isaiah's call narrative, in particular the use of a refining coal on his lips, are intended 'to make him free to render this service in distinction from the other members of his community and people.' Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics IV.3.2*, ed. G. W Bromiley and Thomas F Torrance, trans. G. W Bromiley (Hendrickson Publishers, 2010), 580.
[117] For example: Church of England, 'No Ordinary Ministry', https://www.churchofengland.org/life-events/vocations/no-ordinary-ministry; Darlene Zschech, 'Here I Am Send Me (Official Lyric Video)', 25 February 2017, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5ELgpKldCgY.
[118] For example, the presentation of the Shrine of Walsingham as 'the Holy House where we celebrate Mary's "yes" to God' 'The Shrine of Our Lady of Walsingham (Visit)', https://www.walsinghamanglican.org.uk.
[119] Deborah Malacky Belonick, 'The Call of the Virgin Mary', in *Christ at Work: Orthodox Christian Perspectives on Vocation*, ed. Ann Mitsakos Bezzerides (Holy Cross Orthodox Press, 2006), 169.
[120] Badcock, *The Way of Life*, 82–83; Khaled Anatolios, 'Considering Vocation: The Witness of the Fathers', in *Christ at Work: Orthodox Christian Perspectives on Vocation*, ed. Ann Mitsakos Bezzerides (Holy Cross Orthodox Press, 2006), 107.
[121] Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Harvard University Press, 2007), 473–504.

understood as something discovered internally rather than received externally as a call from God.[122] This approach neglects the warning in Jeremiah 17:9: 'The heart is devious above all else; it is perverse – who can understand it?' Psychologists also highlight how easily inner convictions can be shaped by personal desires, social expectations, or distorted self-perception.[123] While personal reflection and self-awareness are valuable, they do not provide an adequate foundation for discerning one's direction in line with God's will.[124] A sense of calling may even be framed in religious terms and attributed to divine guidance while remaining fundamentally egocentric.[125] Recognising the complexity of these motives in discernment, Ignatius of Loyola emphasised the necessity of 'preparing and disposing our soul to rid itself of all its disordered affection...[before] seeking and finding God's will.'[126] His insight underscores the importance of recognising that vocation may be costly and may require self-denial and faithful obedience, rather than being shaped by self-interest.[127]

The potential for personal ambition to underlie vocational discernment prompted Martin Luther to suggest that someone who seeks a calling above or beyond their providential situation in life was shirking their God-given responsibilities to love God and serve their neighbour.[128] However, Barth critiqued and developed this Lutheran tradition to suggest that, while life circumstances, such as age, aptitudes, and context, may frame vocation, they are not determinative or constitutive of God's will and calling.[129] Rather, God can make known his 'special intention' for the individual and this 'calling is certainly a new thing in contrast to [a person's] existing being in the limits set for him by God as his Creator and Lord.'[130] Barth introduces elements of choice, freedom, and personalisation into his theology of vocation which were absent from Luther's presentation. In so doing, he offers a more

[122] Lovell, 'Surprise, Hope and Gift', 103.
[123] John Neafsey, 'Psychological Dimensions of the Discernment of Vocation', in *Revisiting the Idea of Vocation: Theological Explorations*, ed. John Haughey (Catholic University of America Press, 2004), 191.
[124] Lovell, 103.
[125] Robert W. Jenson, *America's Theologian: A Recommendation of Jonathan Edwards* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 83; Mark McIntosh, *Discernment and Truth: The Spirituality and Theology of Knowledge* (Crossroad Publishing, 2004), 80.
[126] Ignatius, *The Spiritual Exercises of Saint Ignatius: A Translation and Commentary*, trans. George Ganss (Institute of Jesuit Sources, 1992), 21; Hahnenberg, *Awakening Vocation*, 159.
[127] Lovell, 'Surprise, Hope and Gift', 103–4; Swinton, *Becoming Friends of Time*, 120.
[128] Martin Luther, *Luther's Church Postil*, trans. John Nicholas Lenker (Lutherans in All Lands Company, 2022), 227–30; Volf, *Work in the Spirit*, 106; Gustaf Wingren, *Luther on Vocation*, trans. Carl Rasmussen (Wipf & Stock, 2004), 248.
[129] Barth, *Church Dogmatics III.4: The Doctrine of Creation*, 595–98.
[130] Barth, 595–96.

nuanced account of what it means for Christians, to remain open to the particular, unique and surprising will of God for them.[131]

Helpfully, by locating the individual in their relational and social context, the Lutheran tradition highlights that they are not a disconnected figure who needs to seek and determine God's will in isolation. Rather, God's will for the individual is tied to God's purposes for the church and, through the church, to God's will for the whole of creation.

2.2.2 God's Will and the Church

Earlier, I highlighted the hermeneutical challenges of devotional readings of biblical call narratives, particularly the tendency to individualise them and overlook their original context. This inclination is also evident in the way certain verses about God's will for his people are applied. For example, Jeremiah 29:11 – 'For I know the plans I have for you,' declares the Lord, 'plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future' – is often cited to assure individuals of God's personal concern and direction for their lives.[132] However, the original context makes clear that the 'you' in this passage is plural, referring to the collective destiny of the Israelite community, and the timescales extend beyond a single lifetime.[133] When quoted in isolation, the verse appears to promise that God's will for each individual is good and that everything that happens to them will ultimately be for their personal benefit. Kathleen Calahan critiques this misreading in her book on vocational exploration, noting that 'God is speaking to and about the whole community – not one individual. God's plan is the same for all of us: to live and work for the sake of God's mission in the world.'[134] In an individualistic social context, it is necessary to remind those discerning vocation that their personal calling is part of God's broader purposes and plans.

Throughout the New Testament and the Patristic era, vocational discernment was primarily undertaken by the church community and it was only within this communal context that individuals came to understand and respond to God's will for their lives.[135] Edward

[131] Lovell, 'Surprise, Hope and Gift', 94–95 and 102.
[132] Kathleen Cahalan, *The Stories We Live: Finding God's Calling All around Us* (Eerdmans, 2017), 4.
[133] John Thompson, *The Book of Jeremiah* (Eerdmans, 2007), 547.
[134] Cahalan, *The Stories We Live*, 4–5.
[135] Terrance Klein, 'Discerning Vocations', *America*, no. May (1993): 10–11; Lovell, 'Discerning Vocation in the Church', 76.

Hahnenberg argues that this necessitates 'an *ecclesiology* of vocation...in which the faithful are trained to be open to others, so that, slowly we might grow more and more open to *the* Other: the God who calls'.[136] This openness to others broadens the focus beyond individual concerns, reorienting vocation toward a collective participation in God's purposes, and offers a helpful corrective to over-individualised interpretations of calling, particularly in Western contemporary contexts.[137] In this way, God's will for the individual is neither dismissed nor the sole focus, but is instead located within a wider perspective of God's will for the world and the church.

However, emphasising the cosmic scale of God's will risks making it seem abstract or remote, leaving individuals unsure how their actions contribute to God's purposes and plans. Stanley Hauerwas addresses this concern writing on Christian ethics, arguing that, 'the first words about the Christian life are about a life together, not about the individual.'[138] A person is not an isolated being who discovers their identity through introspection or makes life choices without reference to others. Rather, 'our individuality is possible only because we are first of all social beings.'[139] Thus, the question of how we are to live and what we are called to do is not solely a private matter but one that involves the wider community. The discernment of God's will is a shared task in which all members of the church participate.

It is striking how frequently discussions on the nature and purpose of the church employ the language of 'vocation' and 'calling'. The World Council of Churches, for example, describes the church as 'called into being by the Father…of its very nature it is missionary, called and sent to serve...as a witness to the Kingdom of God.'[140] This linguistic connection is evident even in the term *ekklēsia,* derived from *ekkaleō* (to call or summon out from). Historically, this word referred to the people of God called out from the nations to witness to God's

[136] Hahnenberg, *Awakening Vocation*, 161.
[137] Hahnenberg, 161.
[138] Stanley Hauerwas, *The Peaceable Kingdom: A Primer in Christian Ethics* (University of Notre Dame Press, 1983), 97.
[139] Hauerwas, 97.
[140] World Council of Churches, 'The Nature and Mission of the Church: A Stage on the Way to a Common Statement (Faith and Order Paper 198)', December 2005, https://www.oikoumene.org/sites/default/files/Document/FO2005_198_en.pdf.

holiness, but in the early Christian community, it was repurposed to describe the assembly of Christ's disciples who were called as followers and sent as witnesses.[141]

Recognising that God's will for individuals contributes to the collective fulfilment of God's purposes provides an essential perspective for vocational discernment. The church community is the primary context in which individuals discern and respond to God's call. In this chapter so far, I have argued that the cultural emphasis on self-expression and self-fulfilment in Western societies often leads to an overly individualistic view of vocation where 'God's will' is reduced to a personalised plan. I have suggested that this is an incomplete picture and that a more theologically robust framework for vocation is needed – one that enables individuals to discern their specific callings within the life and fellowship of the church community. I now turn to the particular call to ordained ministry and consider how this communal perspective might raise questions for the vocational discernment process.

2.3 God's Will and Vocational Discernment for Ordained Ministry

The *Guidelines for the Professional Conduct of the Clergy* describe the relationship between God's will and the discernment of a call to ministry stating that, 'it is axiomatic that ordained ministry is first and foremost a calling that originates with the purposes of God, is intuited by the individual and is then discerned by the Church.'[142] It is notable that vocation is presented here in such strong terms ('axiomatic') as proceeding in a defined sequential manner: the call originates in God's will, is perceived by the individual, and subsequently recognised by the church. A similar assumption about the pattern of vocational discernment is apparent in Michael Ramsey's influential book on priesthood when he comments that, 'The call of God is to a person, and this involves the heart, the mind, the conscience and the will,' before recognising that this interior and personal sense of call requires that the Church has 'procedures for deciding the acceptance or otherwise of a person for ordination to the priesthood.'[143] Likewise, Rowan Williams describes the role of those tasked with discerning

[141] R. T. France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, The New International Commentary on the New Testament (Eerdmans, 2007), 624; Brutus Green, 'Being Called Out: Vocation as a Model of Anglican Ministerial Training and Priesthood', *Theology* CXIII, no. 872 (April 2010): 114.
[142] Convocations of Canterbury and York, *Guidelines for the Professional Conduct of the Clergy* (Church House Publishing, 2015), 25.
[143] Ramsey, *The Christian Priest Today*, 101.

vocation on behalf of the Church as 'no more than an attempt' to explore and challenge the authenticity and coherence of an individual's sense of calling.[144] These presentations of vocational discernment suggest a model in which God's will for a person to be ordained is first communicated to the individual and only later ratified by the Church.

In an article published in *Theology and Ministry*, I have previously examined the historical development of this individualised and subjective understanding of vocational discernment, tracing its evolution through Christian history to the present day.[145] I concluded that, 'discerning a call to ordained ministry will be experienced differently by different people and…it is impossible to identify a typical or expected route towards ordained ministry'[146] and recommended that the Church of England draw on the resources of its Reformed and Catholic heritage to facilitate both individual and communal vocational discernment.[147] This aligns with the recommendation of the ACCM (Advisory Council for the Church's Ministry) Working Group report *Call to Order* in 1989, which argued that 'the language of an inner call is neither the sole nor the most appropriate language to be used in connection with what is essentially a community office or role...it is the community which, under God, calls, appoints and ordains.'[148] However, Reiss's survey of the Church of England's selection processes demonstrates that the prioritisation of individual over communal discernment remained an ongoing theological debate throughout the twentieth century and was not decisively resolved by the recommendation in *Call to Order*.[149]

In this chapter exploring the tensions between God's will for the individual and the wider church, I have argued that God's will is primarily directed toward the flourishing of the church and, within this broader framework, individuals locate their own developing life stories. This perspective resonates with Bishop Graham Tomlin's presentation of priesthood, in which he describes ministers as those who enable the church to bless the world and to 'become what [the church] is intended to be in the divine plan.'[150] Accordingly, the responsibility for identifying, exploring, and confirming a person's call to ordained ministry

[144] Williams, *A Ray of Darkness*, 151.
[145] Lovell, 'Discerning Vocation in the Church', 65–83.
[146] Lovell, 87.
[147] Lovell, 87.
[148] ACCM, *Call to Order: Vocation and Ministry in the Church of England* (Ludo Press, 1989), 59–60.
[149] Reiss, *The Testing of Vocation*, 2013, 7–23.
[150] Tomlin, *The Widening Circle*, 113.

does not rest primarily with the individual, but with the church community who seek to discern whether it is God's will that a particular person is called to this priestly task.

This raises important theological questions about how the Church of England discerns God's will in identifying a call to ordained ministry. How proactively does the Church seek to recognise and respond to God's call to ordained ministry in the lives of individuals, particularly those from historically underrepresented backgrounds, and what theological assumptions shape that responsiveness? How clearly does the discernment process communicate that vocation is not solely a matter of individual conviction, but a shared act through which the church corporately seeks to discern God's will? How are candidates invited to interpret the provisionality of this process theologically – especially when their personal sense of calling appears to conflict with the church's corporate discernment? These questions go to the heart of what it means for vocational discernment to be an ecclesial and theological process: one that holds in tension personal intuition and communal recognition, and seeks to be attuned to the purposes of God.

2.4 Conclusion

In the previous chapter, I argued for a dual interpretation of calling, emphasising that an individual's primary vocation is to discipleship, with the call to specific roles or tasks emerging as an expression of this foundational call. In this chapter, I have examined another key tension in vocational discernment: the relationship between God's will for the individual and for the church. I have argued that the highly individualistic and subjective approach to personal choice in contemporary society risks distorting vocational discernment by overemphasising God's plan for the individual. In response, I have highlighted the need for a corrective that places greater emphasis on communal discernment. Finally, I have identified the theological and practical questions this raises for the Church of England, particularly regarding how vocational discernment is framed and communicated as a shared process – one in which both the church and individuals seek God's will in identifying those called to serve as ordained ministers to lead and resource the church in its mission.

Chapter 3
God's Command: Obedience and Freedom

3.1 Introduction

In previous chapters, I have examined the challenges of exploring vocation in the current cultural context. I have highlighted the theological tensions inherent in recognising that God's call is both general and specific, and God's will as both individual and communal. So far, I have primarily focused on how God's purposes and plans are communicated and discerned. However, vocation is not only divine initiative; it also requires willing human response.[151] This raises important questions about the extent to which God's call conveys God's will with an authoritative and commanding force, compelling both individuals and church to act in line with God's direction. In this chapter, I explore the complexities of speaking about obedience to God's call in a cultural context that values individual autonomy and is often sceptical of authority. I examine the theological tension between obedience and freedom in vocational discernment, before considering the implications of this tension for the Church of England's discernment process towards ordained ministry.

3.2 The Cultural Challenge of Vocation and God's Command

Barth highlights the close connection between calling, choice and decision stating, 'As God in His special command imperatively makes known to man His choice of the special and therefore limited thing which He will have of him, God "calls" him.'[152] Barth's understanding of personal calling suggests that God's communication of God's will demands an obedient and decisive response, excluding other possibilities and options. This limitation and direction of personal choice is something which is both desired and resisted in the contemporary socio-historical context. Thomas Merton, writing in the mid-twentieth century, observed a deep yearning for clarity and certainty in identifying purpose and meaning in life, interpreting this as an indication of humanity's creation for eternity in which

[151] Badcock, *The Way of Life*, 44.
[152] Barth, *Church Dogmatics III.4: The Doctrine of Creation*, 595.

all of life is offered to God in worship.[153] While many today reject the suggestion that there is a theological foundation to this desire, there remains widespread interest in discovering personal purpose in life, closely tied to the contemporary concern for self-expression.[154]

This longing for direction may also underlie 'blueprint' conceptions of God's plan in which divine guidance is viewed as governing every detail of an individual's life. While such a perspective constrains personal autonomy, it also provides reassurance, allowing individuals to attribute perceived failures or frustrations to God's overarching will or a vague sense of 'destiny'.[155] Yet, despite indications that a strongly directive view of divine will may be appealing in times of uncertainty, the dominant interpretative frameworks for individual purpose today emphasise personal freedom and choice.[156] Autonomy, independence and self-reliance are highly valued, while concepts such as duty, sacrifice and obedience are often viewed as restrictive and oppressive.[157]

Underlying the emphasis on personal agency is the assumption that individual choice is neutral and concerns only the person making the choice. This perspective diminishes the significance of communal discernment and assumes that individuals possess full insight into their own decision making. Such notions of autonomy are challenged by Lutheran theologian Robert Jenson, who argues that there is an assumption 'that our wills are antecedent to themselves, that we not only choose but choose what to choose.'[158] Instead he suggests that what appears to be free choice is actually 'an empty parody of freedom' in which humanity remains enslaved under the power of sin.[159] This develops the work of Martin Luther who presents the life, death, and resurrection of Christ as enacting a transfer of loyalties: God overcomes Satan and claims humanity as 'His servants and captives (which is the royal liberty) that we may desire and do, willingly, what He wills.'[160] In this way,

[153] Thomas Merton, 'No Man Is an Island', in *Callings: Twenty Centuries of Christian Wisdom on Vocation*, ed. William Placher (Eerdmans, 2005), 423.
[154] Duffy et al., 'Does the Source of a Calling Matter? External Summons, Destiny, and Perfect Fit', 564.
[155] Badcock, *The Way of Life*, 127.
[156] Hahnenberg, *Awakening Vocation*, xii.
[157] Christopher Jamison, 'Introduction', in *The Disciples' Call: Theologies of Vocation from Scripture to the Present Day*, ed. Christopher Jamison (Bloomsbury, 2014), 1–2.
[158] Robert W. Jenson, *Systematic Theology Vol 2: The Works of God* (Oxford University Press, 2001), 106.
[159] Jenson, 107.
[160] Martin Luther, *The Bondage of the Will*, trans. Henry Cole (Watchmaker Publishing, 2010), 48.

freedom and choice are reframed within a Christological framework, emphasising that true human freedom is found not in individual decision-making, but in service to God.

Shaped by his historical and cultural context, Luther's contribution draws on imagery of all-powerful kings and captive slaves to illustrate the supreme authority of God and the necessity of obedience from those who serve Him.[161] Despite societal changes, these kinds of analogies continue to shape certain understandings of vocation. As Schuurman observes, 'mainline Protestant traditions seem extraordinarily preoccupied with power and conflict.'[162] This emphasis has been critiqued by feminist and Black theologians, who argue that describing God as king, commander, or slave-owner risks reinforcing oppressive structures, and presents calling as necessitating unquestioning obedience to an authoritative potentate.[163] They highlight how human systems of authority have historically marginalised women and other oppressed groups, making such imagery problematic when uncritically applied to vocation.[164]

Hence, it appears that there is a potential tension between conceptualisations of vocation which stress obedience to God's authoritative call and those which emphasise human freedom and choice within a reciprocal relationship marked by God's grace. In the following section, I explore these differing perspectives on responding to God's call, and examine the limits of human obedience and freedom in vocational discernment.

3.2.1 God's Command and Human Obedience

Throughout John's Gospel, Jesus repeatedly speaks and acts in ways that emphasise his complete obedience to the Father's will (John 4:34; 5:30; 6:38-40; 7:17; 8:39-47; 9:31).[165] When questioned about his authority, he asserts his identity as an emissary declaring, 'I have come down from heaven, not to do my own will, but the will of him who sent me' (John 6:38).[166] Everything Jesus does is as one who is sent and whose mission is fulfilment of

[161] Schuurman, *Vocation*, 7 and 103–4.
[162] Schuurman, 107.
[163] Willie James Jennings, *After Whiteness: An Education in Belonging, Theological Education between the Times* (Eerdmans, 2020), 31 and 88.
[164] Schuurman, *Vocation*, 107–9.
[165] Urban von Wahlde, '"My Food Is to Do the Will of the One Who Sent Me" (John 4:34): Jesus as Model of Vocation in the Gospel of John', in *Revisiting the Idea of Vocation: Theological Explorations*, ed. John Haughey (Catholic University of America Press, 2004), 64.
[166] von Wahlde, 61–62 and 64.

the plan of 'the Father who sent me' (John 12:49).[167] His posture of obedience is epitomised in the hymn of the early church recorded in Philippians which describes him as one who 'emptied himself, taking the form of a slave…he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death' (Philippians 2:7-8).[168] Obedience to the Father's will was a defining characteristic of Jesus' life and ministry.

Jesus' obedience provided a paradigmatic model for his disciples.[169] It is Jesus who instigates their call as disciples: 'You did not choose me but I chose you. And I appointed you to go and bear fruit' (John 15:16). As Arthur Drodge observes, this highlights the need for an obedient response, arguing that 'for the call to succeed, the initiative must come from Jesus himself and the prospective disciple must respond immediately and unconditionally. When either of these components is missing, the story inevitably ends in failure.'[170] The call to follow Jesus demands wholehearted commitment, requiring individuals to surrender their entire selves to the worship and obedient service of God.[171]

Furthermore, the disciples were explicitly commissioned to continue Jesus' ministry after his death and resurrection, empowered by the Holy Spirit and sent just as Jesus himself was sent (John 17:18).[172] Later, Paul, reflecting on his own apostolic calling, describes himself as compelled to fulfil the task entrusted to him: 'An obligation is laid on me, and woe betide me if I do not proclaim the gospel!...not of my own will, I am entrusted with a commission" (1 Cor. 9:16-17). Paul does not perceive his ministry as self-selected or chosen, but as a divinely appointed mission that he is bound to fulfil in accordance with God's will.[173] Indeed, Paul's phrasing ('woe betide me…') suggests that there are consequences to refusing God's commanding call.[174]

Whole-hearted discipleship is not merely an abstract intention, but requires the disciple to be available and willing to be used by God in active service in God's ongoing mission to the world.[175] As previously discussed, this has led to the use of various analogies drawn from

[167] von Wahlde, 61–62.
[168] Gordon Fee, *Paul's Letter to the Philippians* (Eerdmans, 1995), 216.
[169] Fee, 199; von Wahlde, 'Jesus as a Model of Vocation in the Gospel of John', 73–76.
[170] A J Drodge, 'Call Stories', in *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, ed. David Noel Freedman, 1992, 822.
[171] Barth, *Church Dogmatics III.4: The Doctrine of Creation*, 625.
[172] von Wahlde, 'Jesus as a Model of Vocation in the Gospel of John', 74–75.
[173] Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, 418–19.
[174] Fee, 418–19.
[175] Brunner, *The Divine Imperative: A Study in Christian Ethics*, 116–17.

human societal structures to describe God as the one who determines and directs the disciple's steps. For example, Ignatius of Loyola used medieval kingship imagery to encourage prayerful reflection on the obedient service owed to God.[176] Similarly, Luther equated divine authority with the earthly sovereignty of princes and feudal lords, describing the Christian's freedom as that of 'a servant acting under the power of the Lord.'[177] Centuries later, Barth also emphasised the necessity of obedient response to God's command, referring to God as 'Commander…Creator and Lord.'[178] Likewise, Brunner asserted that, 'even in His love He remains our Master and Lord.'[179] These descriptions, drawing on human structures of authority and power, attribute to God the right to command the obedient action of His subjects as their duty and responsibility. However, both Barth and Brunner, keen to distinguish divine authority from the authoritarian regimes of the mid-twentieth century, also emphasise God's role as Creator alongside that of Commander. Richard Mouw, writing from a Calvinist perspective, further articulates the rationale for recognising God as the one who 'possesses the absolute authority to tell us what to do.'[180] Yet, like Barth and Brunner, he is careful to differentiate divine authority from human systems of dictatorship and oppression.[181] This distinction highlights the challenge of affirming divine sovereignty while avoiding problematic associations with coercion and domination.

The element of compulsion may be necessary if an individual is called to a task that is arduous, dangerous, or against societal expectations.[182] In such cases, discerning God's call may evoke fear or conflict with an individual's own sense of self and their personal desires.[183] This kind of calling may require '[letting] go of our own will or wishes in order to submit or surrender to the will of an authority or power greater than our own ego – potentially at considerable personal cost.'[184] This kind of obedient surrender is exemplified

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[176] Ignatius, *The Spiritual Exercises of Saint Ignatius*, 53–55.
[177] Martin Luther, *De Servo Arbitrio: The Bondage of the Will*, ed. Henry Atherton, trans. Henry Cole, 1823, 50, https://www.apuritansmind.com/wp-content/uploads/FREEEBOOKS/TheBondageoftheWill-MartinLuther.pdf.
[178] Barth, *Church Dogmatics III.4: The Doctrine of Creation*, 568.
[179] Brunner, *The Divine Imperative: A Study in Christian Ethics*, 117.
[180] Richard J. Mouw, *The God Who Commands* (University of Notre Dame Press, 1990), 19.
[181] Mouw, 106.
[182] Neafsey, 'Psychological Dimensions of the Discernment of Vocation', 177; Mary Elsbernd, 'Listening for a Life's Work: Contemporary Callings to Ministry', in *Revisiting the Idea of Vocation: Theological Explorations*, ed. John Haughey (Catholic University of America Press, 2004), 201.
[183] Barth, *Church Dogmatics III.4: The Doctrine of Creation*, 606.
[184] Neafsey, 'Psychological Dimensions of the Discernment of Vocation', 179.

in Jesus' prayer in the Garden of Gethsemane on the night before his death, 'Father, if you are willing, remove this cup from me; yet, not my will but yours be done' (Luke 22: 42; Matthew 26:39; Mark 14:36).[185] This anguished prayer acknowledges the difficulty and suffering of the task ahead, yet also expresses willing submission to the will of a known and loving Father.[186] This contrasts with reasoned personal choice, the dominant paradigm for decision-making in contemporary Western societies.[187]

However, when God's call is to a specific role or countercultural task, there is a risk that obedience itself may become the individual's primary focus – whether in the form of a concrete vocation or as an abstract principle.[188] Here, Brunner's caution is instructive, emphasising that obedience should not be understood as a singular moment of decision, but as a 'living obedience offered here and now, at this actual moment of time, to His living will, which has an absolute and special significance at this particular moment.'[189] This echoes Paul's image of presenting one's life as a 'living sacrifice' (Romans 12:1), in which discipleship is marked by continual surrender to God.[190] The emphasis, therefore, should not be on the specifics of the call, but on the Caller. While obedience is vital, it must be framed within an understanding of God's love, grace, mercy, and kindness. The individual is not a mere automaton, responding mechanically to divine command, but a creature who exercises freedom in responding to the initiative and invitation of their Heavenly Father.[191]

Having examined the role of obedience in responding to God's commanding call, I now explore the scope of human freedom in vocational decision-making. I argue for an interpretation of vocation in which human choice is understood as cooperation with God and participation in the co-creation of God's will.

3.2.2 God's Command and Human Freedom

Many of the difficulties that emerged within humanity – and subsequently among the people of Israel – stemmed from a failure to exercise human freedom to faithfully fulfil the

[185] Neafsey, 179.
[186] Schuurman, *Vocation*, 44n.
[187] Swinton, *Becoming Friends of Time*, 117–18.
[188] Hahnenberg, *Awakening Vocation*, 120–21.
[189] Brunner, *The Divine Imperative: A Study in Christian Ethics*, 118.
[190] Karl Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans*, trans. Edwyn Clement Hoskyns (Oxford University Press, 1968), 431.
[191] Demetrios Katos, 'In the Image of God: Mystical Theology and Secular Vocations', in *Christ at Work: Orthodox Christian Perspectives on Vocation*, ed. Ann Mitsakos Bezzerides (Holy Cross Orthodox Press, 2006), 139.

vocation given by God.[192] The writer of the book of Hebrews highlights the faith of the patriarchs, monarchs, judges, and prophets, who were unusual and inspirational in their obedience to the call of God on their lives, and invites a similarly faithful obedience from his hearers (Heb. 11-12).[193] Two essential elements are identified as necessary for such faithful and obedient living: first, a sense of purpose and vision that extends beyond one's own lifetime (Heb. 11:13-16); and second, a relationship with God characterised by trust in God as a loving Father, whose desire is for the growth and flourishing of His children (Heb. 12:5-11). In this framing, human freedom and obedience are situated within both an eschatological and relational context.

The exhortation in Hebrews is to submit willingly to God, trusting that God's plan is loving and will '[yield] the peaceful fruit of righteousness to those who have been trained by it' (Heb. 12:11). The emphasis here is not primarily on the specific tasks to which an individual is called, but rather on the formative process of trusting and obeying God.[194] Vocation, understood in this way, is embedded within an ethical framework and conceived as a means by which virtue and faith are tested and cultivated. The link between vocation and sanctification is recognised by theologians across a range of traditions. Stanley Harakas, writing from an Eastern Orthodox perspective, observes that those discerning vocation often use 'normative language' in their decision-making, suggesting 'the ethical and vocational are integrally related.'[195] Similarly, Brunner and Bonhoeffer, both from the Lutheran tradition, affirm this connection by locating discussions about vocation within their substantial volumes on Christian ethics.[196] Bonhoeffer remarks that 'the concept of *vocation*…in the history of ethics has gained an almost unique significance.'[197] Pope Benedict XVI, in the encyclical *Caritas In Veritate*, likewise recognises the close relationship between vocation and ethics. He describes vocation as 'a call that requires a free and responsible

[192] Tomlin, *The Widening Circle*, 93–94.
[193] Gareth Lee Cockerill, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, The New International Commentary on the New Testament (Eerdmans, 2012), 514–15.
[194] von Wahlde notes a similar concern in John's Gospel commenting, 'The Johannine portrait [of vocation] does not call for a specific *form* of response but for a particular *kind* of response.' von Wahlde, 'Jesus as a Model of Vocation in the Gospel of John', 76.
[195] Harakas, 'Vocation and Ethics', 191–94.
[196] Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, 289–98; Brunner, *The Divine Imperative: A Study in Christian Ethics*, 198–207.
[197] Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, 289.

answer,' and highlights how this ethnical dimension to vocation encompasses human dignity, personal development, and broader financial and societal ethics.[198]

The close connection between ethics and vocation affirms that human freedom is not illusory: God allows human beings to make choices, face decisions, and bear responsibility for the consequences of their actions. Yet this freedom is not static. Over a lifetime of discipleship, it can be shaped and trained to prayerfully seek and respond to the will of God.[199] Barth describes this process as developing an 'orientation towards obedience.'[200] This framing offers a nuanced understanding of the interplay between human freedom and divine command, recognising that God's call is rarely experienced as a single moment of clarity. Rather, it is usually discerned through a series of faithful and obedient steps over time.[201]

Such an understanding points to vocation as a relational journey, rather than a transactional one. The God who calls is also the God who created and formed each individual, and thus fully knows their characteristics, foibles, talents, physical capabilities, and social context.[202] While God's call may be new, unexpected or surprising to the individual, it is likely to exhibit continuity and coherence with the unique person God has created.[203] Personal aptitudes and abilities may not be definitive indicators of vocation, but nor should they be dismissed as potential means by which God's purposes may be realised.[204] As Barth observes, 'the command of God is the call to wake up, to recognise ourselves and to take ourselves seriously in the totality of what we can actually do.'[205] For Barth, vocation is not in opposition to the self, nor a requirement to act against one's nature, but rather a form of 'coordination' or cooperation between creature and Creator.[206]

The conceptualisation of vocation as cooperation with God can be recognised at both individual and universal levels. New Testament biblical scholar, Urban von Walde, defines

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[198] Benedict XVI, 'Caritas In Veritate: Encyclical on Integral Human Development in Charity and Truth', 29 June 2009, Chapter 1, https://www.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_ben-xvi_enc_20090629_caritas-in-veritate.html.
[199] Merton, 'No Man Is an Island', 422.
[200] Barth, *Church Dogmatics III.4: The Doctrine of Creation*, 597.
[201] Rowan Williams, *Open to Judgement: Sermons and Addresses* (Darton, Longman & Todd, 1994), 174.
[202] Williams, 174.
[203] Barth, *Church Dogmatics III.4: The Doctrine of Creation*, 596; Lovell, 'Surprise, Hope and Gift', 109–10.
[204] Lovell, 'Surprise, Hope and Gift', 94.
[205] Barth, *Church Dogmatics III.4: The Doctrine of Creation*, 626.
[206] Barth, 566–67; Lovell, 'Surprise, Hope and Gift', 94–95.

vocation as 'the conviction that one's life, in whatever specific form, can be lived in such a way as to cooperate, or be in touch, with God's plan for the world.'[207] God's will is cosmic in scope and the individual, enabled by the Spirit, is invited to participate in the eschatological renewal of all things.[208] While God may call individuals to particular tasks within this broader narrative, there remains a significant degree of freedom in how that call is enacted, with leeway for different choices to be made without these being inherently disobedient.[209] Accordingly, Schuurman suggests that vocation is best understood as an 'invitation' to participate, rather than a 'command' to be obeyed.[210] This shift in language reframes obedience, not as passive acquiescence, but as an active, freely given response that honours human agency, responsibility, and the dignity of participation in God's redemptive purposes.

Schuurman further notes that, as an individual responds to the general call to discipleship, they become increasingly willing and able to hear and respond to God's specific call because 'the basic stance of the heart shifts from suspicion and disobedience to trust and obedience.'[211] Clearly, obedience cannot be reduced to mechanistic duty or unquestioning submission to the divine command. Rather, the relational foundation of vocation should be emphasised in which human freedom is exercised as a child and friend of God.[212] This dynamic is reflected in Jesus' words to his disciples at the Last Supper: 'I do not call you servants any longer, because the servant does not know what the master is doing; but I have called you friends' (Jn. 15:15-16). While the Christian acknowledges God as Lord and embraces the posture of a servant, Jesus' invitation is to a deeper relationship – one marked by intimacy, trust, and active participation in the mission of God.[213]

Having recognised the challenges involved in thinking theologically about human obedience and freedom in responding to God's commanding call, I now consider how differing theological perspectives on obedience raise questions about the process of vocational discernment towards ordained ministry.

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[207] von Wahlde, 'Jesus as a Model of Vocation in the Gospel of John', 53.
[208] Volf, *Work in the Spirit*, 115.
[209] Schuurman, *Vocation*, 47.
[210] Schuurman, 46.
[211] Schuurman, 26.
[212] Merton, 'No Man Is an Island', 422.
[213] Raymond Edward Brown, ed., *The Gospel According to John. (XIII - XXI)* (Doubleday, 1985), 683.

3.3 God's Command and Vocational Discernment for Ordained Ministry

In a qualitative research project published in 2013, Nigel Peyton and Caroline Gatrell found that vocational obedience and priestly self-sacrifice were significant themes in the ministry of parish priests in the Church of England.[214] Obedience, they observed, was often internalised by priests as a core aspect of their self-identity, rather than functioning as a pragmatic response to the systems and structures of authority embedded in Anglican ecclesiology.[215] They traced this view of obedience to a Benedictine influence on the vows made during the Ordination Service when priests make oaths of obedience, commit to lifelong service, and where ministry is depicted in sacrificial terms.[216] For many of their participants, ordination was described as 'a crisis moment of obedient responsiveness,' encapsulating the reality that 'the life-changing choice of ordination and the vocational journey of priestly ministry in the Church [incorporates] both obedience and agency.'[217] Clearly, the process of vocational discernment will be influenced by how obedience and sacrifice are presented and interpreted by those involved. In the contemporary context, this often means that 'embracing personal sacrifice is [seen as] the hallmark of vocational faithfulness' and priests recognise the cost of answering God's call.[218] It is therefore essential to examine how understandings of obedience to God's call influence the discernment process, given that these concepts often serve as foundational for life-long conceptions of priesthood and influence the daily practice of ministry.[219]

At the same time, growing concerns have emerged about the impact of internalised ideals of self-sacrifice on clergy well-being and boundary-keeping,[220] as well as the potential for harm when ecclesial authority is exercised coercively or abusively.[221] The report from the Independent Inquiry into Child Sexual Abuse (IICSA) published in 2022, highlighted a culture

[214] Peyton and Gatrell, *Managing Clergy Lives*, 53–123.
[215] Peyton and Gatrell, 81.
[216] Peyton and Gatrell, 59.
[217] Peyton and Gatrell, 89.
[218] Peyton and Gatrell, 123.
[219] Peyton and Gatrell, 60.
[220] Elizabeth Graveling, *How Clergy Thrive: Insights from Living Ministry* (Church House Publishing, 2020), 56–57; Peyton and Gatrell, *Managing Clergy Lives*, 86–123.
[221] Independent Inquiry Child Sexual Abuse (IICSA), 'The Anglican Church: Safeguarding in the Church of England and the Church in Wales' (IICSA, October 2020), vi, https://www.iicsa.org.uk/key-documents/22519/view/anglican-church-investigation-report-6-october-2020.pdf.

of deference and a misuse of clerical authority in the Church of England, which has resulted in cases of abuse being overlooked, ignored or hidden.[222] The redesign of the new Shared Discernment Process took place with IICSA's recommendations in mind – particularly a recognition that references to obedience, duty, and sacrifice can become entangled with institutional expectations.[223] The IICSA report identified the urgent need for the Church of England to review and improve its recruitment processes, particularly regarding how power and authority are exercised, and how safeguarding practices can be strengthened.[224]

Recognising the potential for unhealthy theological interpretations of self-sacrificial obedience, as well as the risk of coercive power dynamics in ministry, raises important questions for vocational discernment. Is the process able to identify candidates who may wield authority in unhealthy, irresponsible, or abusive ways? Are the interpersonal power dynamics sufficiently recognised and addressed by those discerning vocation on behalf of the Church? In light of the possibility that ecclesial processes may become conflated with divine imperatives, how do candidates experience and interpret the theology of the discernment process as one in which others hold decision-making power over their lives?

3.4 Conclusion

In this chapter, I have explored the significance of divine command and human obedient response within the theological dynamics of vocation. I have traced the recurring motif of obedience in the biblical narrative and theological literature, while also acknowledging the challenges of engaging with these themes in a cultural context that often resists external authority and questions imposed duty. By exploring the tension between theological accounts which prioritise obedient response to God's command and those that emphasise human freedom and agency, I have argued for an interpretation of vocational obedience that is both formational and relational – framing it not as passive submission, but as a freely given response to God's invitation and participation in God's redemptive plan. Finally, I have considered how these theological dynamics raise critical questions for the vocational discernment process, particularly concerning the role of power, the language of sacrifice, and the potential impact of internalised obedience on priestly identity and practice.

[222] Independent Inquiry Child Sexual Abuse (IICSA), vi.
[223] Ministry Division, '"DDO Training"', Slide 6.
[224] Independent Inquiry Child Sexual Abuse (IICSA), 'IICSA Investigation Report: The Anglican Church', 29.

Recognising these tensions is essential for shaping a discernment process that is both theologically robust and pastorally responsible.

Part 1: Summary

In Part One, I have argued for the importance of engaging theologically – rather than simply pragmatically – with the concept of vocation, and I have explored the theological dynamics which are explicitly or implicitly involved in discerning calling.

In Chapter One, I began by identifying the linguistic and conceptual challenges associated with the term 'vocation' which has carried different meanings throughout Christian history. I highlighted the dual nature of calling as the general, foundational call to discipleship, as well as the particular callings in which individuals are gifted by the Spirit for specific tasks or roles within the body of Christ. Having considered how spiritual gifts might indicate particular vocations, I raised questions about how the Church of England discerns, nurtures, trains, and deploys those whom God has gifted and called to ordained ministry.

Chapter Two addressed common misconceptions surrounding the will of God, particularly when vocation is perceived as a highly individualised, divinely ordered life-plan. I argued that this perspective is shaped by contemporary individualism and must be held in tension with a broader theological understanding of God's will for the Church and the world. This raised important questions about how the Church of England's discernment process navigates the tension between recognising an individual's inner sense of calling and the Church's responsibility to test that call.

In Chapter Three, I turned to contemporary concerns about the potential misuse of power and authority, and how this complicates engagement with theological concepts such as duty and submission to God's command. I examined the scriptural and theological theme of obedience, exploring the limits of human freedom and autonomy. I suggested that vocation, in its imperative sense, is best understood as willing cooperation with God's will as part of an ongoing process of sanctification and submission to a loving Creator, rather than a diktat imposed by distant autocrat. I noted that many clergy describe their vocation in terms of personal sacrifice and obedience, and highlighted the potential for ecclesial authority structures to be conflated with divine command. This raises pressing questions about how the Church recognises and manages power in the discernment process, especially when vocation implicitly evokes complex theological dynamics relating to God's commanding authority. I argued for the need to explore how these dynamics are experienced by

candidates, and to consider how the process might guard against any confusion between ecclesial procedure and divine imperative.

By engaging with the theological dynamics of vocation, I have sought to uncover the interplay of theological concepts that often remain hidden or implicit in approaches to vocational discernment. I have argued that the Church of England needs to recognise the complexity of these theological dynamics, particularly in relation to discerning a vocation to ordained ministry. At the heart of this lies the foundational theological assumption underpinning the Church of England's approach: that God calls specific individuals to ordination. This conviction is expressed in the words of the Common Worship Ordination Prayer: 'in every age you send your Spirit to fill those whom you have chosen...we give you thanks that you have called these your servants...to share as deacons in the ministry of the gospel of Christ.'[225]

While this thesis accepts this foundational theological assumption about the divine call to ordained ministry, it also highlights the need to recognise the complex dynamics involved in understanding vocation in this way. In Part One, I have identified some of the challenges presented by the contemporary cultural context and the theological tensions inherent in thinking about vocation. These raise important theological and practical questions surrounding the discernment process for ordained ministry in the Church of England, emphasising the necessity of integrating theology and practice. These questions will be explored further in the empirical components of my research.

[225] Church of England, *Common Worship: Ordination Services*, 20.

PART 2

METHODOLOGY

Chapter 4:
Methodology and Methods

4.1 Introduction

When the vocational discernment process towards ordained ministry in the Church of England was re-launched as the Shared Discernment Process in 2020, the team responsible for its redesign described how it sought 'to discern the call of God' with candidates for the sake of the whole people of God.[226] They explained that this was why they deliberately chose terminology which emphasised the 'ecclesial and theocentric nature of the process'.[227] In previous chapters, I have positioned my research as sharing this concern. While I attend to practical aspects of the SDP and highlight the implications of my research for practice, my primary focus is on the ways in which this process is, at its heart, one in which the church understands God to be involved.

The research question for this project reflects this theological emphasis: What empirical and theological analysis might be made of the vocational discernment process towards ordained ministry in the Church of England? As outlined previously, to explore this overarching question I have identified three aims for the study. First, I will provide a thick description of the SDP focusing on participants' experience and understanding of the process. Second, I will explore how aspects of the SDP can be interpreted theologically, and how this expands, deepens or challenges existing theological approaches. Third, arising from the thick description and theological reflection, I will offer practical recommendations for best practice in vocational discernment in the Church of England.

In this chapter, I outline the methodological considerations involved in conducting research with these descriptive, theological, and practical aims. I begin by discussing the epistemological approach underpinning the research design. I position the study within the wider discipline of Practical Theology, and reflect on both the generative potential and interpretive challenges of engaging in empirical theological research focusing on an ecclesial

[226] Mark Berwick and Criteria Review Group, 'Discernment Process and Framework - Longer Briefing Paper', January 2019, 1, https://www.iicsa.org.uk/key-documents/12435/view/ACE026772_001_002_003_004.pdf.
[227] Berwick and Criteria Review Group, 1.

process. I identify my epistemological approach as one of ontological and critical realism – open to learning from interdisciplinary sources while remaining determinedly theological through the prioritisation of a theological interpretative lens. I then discuss the theoretical approaches which have had the greatest influence in shaping my project, namely the concept of theological 'complexification' from John Swinton and Harriet Mowat,[228] and Mark Cartledge's dialogical approach to Practical Theology.[229]

Having outlined my methodological approach, I discuss how I designed the research to meet the study's aims, and the methods used in the empirical work. I describe and evaluate key decisions I made in conducting this qualitative research, including the use of interviews and documentary analysis. I outline my approach to data gathering, data analysis, and subject selection, before briefly addressing the ethical considerations involved in being a researcher who simultaneously occupies roles in discernment and ordinand training.

Overall, this chapter offers essential methodological background and context for the data presented as a thick description of the SDP in Part Three, and for the theological reflection on significant themes in Part Four.

4.2 Methodology: Epistemological Approach

The focus of this research is a formal process established by the Church of England to identify those called to ordained ministry. I have already noted that the claims made for this process go beyond secular recruitment and selection by consciously seeking God's guidance as the source of calling and gifting. This focus on interpreting the life and practices of the church within a theological framework appropriately locates this research within the discipline of Practical Theology which has 'an ecclesial perspective and purpose.'[230] This attention to the lived experience of Christian faith within the church distinguishes Practical Theology from other fields of theological study.[231]

4.2.1 Practical Theology

While practical theologians have often felt the need to justify the life of the church as worthy of academic theological attention, the past fifty years have seen growing recognition

[228] Swinton and Mowat, *Practical Theology and Qualitative Research*.
[229] Mark Cartledge, *Practical Theology: Charismatic and Empirical Perspectives* (Wipf & Stock, 2012).
[230] Pete Ward, *Introducing Practical Theology* (Baker Academic, 2017), 11.
[231] Swinton and Mowat, *Practical Theology and Qualitative Research*, 11.

of the value of such contextual work.[232] Practical Theology acknowledges the 'complexities of ecclesial life', and recognises that Christian worship and witness are shaped by cultural, social and historical contexts.[233] Research into church life can reveal areas where current practice diverges from espoused ideals of Christian discipleship, and offers insight into the 'complexities, joys and challenges of lived church'.[234] Rather than promoting a 'blueprint ecclesiology'[235] whereby the church looks the same in all times and in all places, practical theologians seek to 'articulate the new thing God is doing and will do as the people of God continue on their journey.'[236] Attending to present realities, they support the church's task of engaging meaningfully with contemporary society. Hence, Swinton & Mowat describe Practical Theology as 'a fundamentally missiological discipline which receives its purpose, motivation and dynamic from acknowledging and working out what it means to participate in God's mission.'[237]

4.2.2 Interdisciplinarity

With this foundational commitment to praxis, Practical Theology is not limited to academic theologians; it is something all believers undertake as they reflect on faith and live out discipleship.[238] However, as an academic discipline, Practical Theology often draws on social science methods to enable deep and systematic attention to be paid to the life of the Church.[239] I previously mentioned that, as someone with experience in healthcare research, it was this connection between social science and theology which first drew me to this field. Nevertheless, incorporating social science methods within theological research raises questions about the differing epistemological assumptions of different disciplines and the extent to which interdisciplinary engagement may influence or reshape theological understanding.[240]

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[232] Paul Ballard and John Pritchard, *Practical Theology in Action: Christian Thinking in the Service of Church and Society* (SPCK, 1996), 2–6; Ward, *Introducing Practical Theology*, 21–25.
[233] Nicholas Healy, ed., *Church, World, and the Christian Life: Practical-Prophetic Ecclesiology* (Cambridge University Press, 2000), 37.
[234] Clare Watkins, *Disclosing Church: An Ecclesiology Learned from Conversations in Practice* (Routledge, 2020), 4.
[235] Healy, *Church, World, and the Christian Life*, 37; Pete Ward, 'Blueprint Ecclesiology and the Lived: Normativity as a Perilous Faithfulness', *Ecclesial Practices* 2 (2015): 74–90.
[236] Richard R Osmer, *Practical Theology: An Introduction* (Eerdmans, 2008), 9.
[237] Swinton and Mowat, *Practical Theology and Qualitative Research*, 26.
[238] Bonnie Miller-McLemore, *The Wiley Blackwell Companion to Practical Theology* (Blackwell, 2011), 5.
[239] Ballard and Pritchard, *Practical Theology in Action*, 3–4.
[240] Ward, *Introducing Practical Theology*, 77.

Andrew Root, an American Lutheran practical theologian, captures the tension and creative potential of interdisciplinarity by defining it as 'the organized or conceptual articulation of how two or more distinctive disciplines enter into conversation so that the integrity of both is maintained and yet theory construction can be born from within their generative conversation'.[241] This highlights the recognition that different disciplines bring distinct, but partial, interpretations of reality whilst recognising that they may share common areas of interest, such that their interaction can generate fresh insights which have the potential to shape both fields. For example, Jocelyn Bryan, a British theologian and psychologist, notes that psychology and Practical Theology share an interest in human experience, so that interdisciplinary work 'throws back questions for both psychology and theology' with neither discipline remaining unchanged.[242]

However, interdisciplinarity is not without its pitfalls. Practically, it can be difficult to stay informed about developments in an unfamiliar discipline, and theories can be adopted selectively or superficially simply because they appear to offer interpretative value in line with the researcher's purposes.[243] Epistemologically, there is the risk of 'false assimilation,' where the distinct frameworks and methodologies of different disciplines are overlooked, resulting in misleading equivalences, such as when words and concepts appear similar but actually refer to different phenomena. [244]

In my project, I acknowledge that valuable psychological or sociological research could be conducted into the SDP, yet neither would fully address my central research question, which is fundamentally theological. Nevertheless, I approach theological research open to the insights interdisciplinary perspectives may offer in interpreting participants' experiences. This will be evident in Chapters Eight, Nine, and Ten, where each chapter includes a section exploring contributions from psychology and sociology in relation to the themes identified through data analysis. By engaging with other disciplines in a discrete section of each chapter, I aim to interact with interdisciplinary concepts in appropriate depth and critically

[241] Andrew Root, *Christopraxis: A Practical Theology of the Cross* (Fortress Press, 2014), 272.
[242] Jocelyn Bryan, *Human Being: Insights from Psychology and the Christian Faith* (SCM Press, 2016), 8.
[243] Ballard and Pritchard, *Practical Theology in Action*, 116–18; G Marti, 'Ethnographic Theology: Integrating the Social Sciences and Theological Reflection', *Cuestiones Teológicas* 49, no. 111 (2022): 1–18; Stephen Pattison, *The Challenge of Practical Theology: Selected Essays* (Jessica Kingsley, 2007), 254–58.
[244] Ballard and Pritchard, *Practical Theology in Action*, 118.

assess the relevance to ecclesial contexts. I will identify areas where this engagement enriches theological interpretation, and where its limitations must be acknowledged.

4.2.3 Epistemology

My openness to engaging with and learning from other disciplines is indicative of my underlying critical realist approach which combines epistemological humility and 'judgemental rationality' to carefully and analytically welcome insights from other disciplines.[245] This critical realist epistemology is also marked by 'ontological realism,' which allows theological research to 'speak of divine action...as a confession of reality, as the experience of something real – dare we even say, true.'[246] Such an approach is fitting in a study in which participants reflect on their personal experiences of God's guidance and calling. Root argues that research into Christian experience should prioritise theological interpretation – not out of superiority, but because 'theological discourse gives us the best epistemological tools to express and reflect on the reality of God's act in our concrete lives.'[247] Similarly, Swinton & Mowat describe the 'logical priority' of theological interpretation in qualitative research focused on faith communities, but highlight that this requires reflexivity on the part of the researcher about their own faith commitments.[248]

In that spirit, I acknowledge that my ontological realist epistemology is shaped by my own faith. Like my participants, I believe myself to have been called by God to ordained ministry. Coming from a charismatic-evangelical tradition, I am also comfortable describing the discernment of that vocation in experiential terms through scripture, worship and prayer. I am, therefore, drawn to a confessional ontological realist approach which recognises the limits of human knowledge yet remains open to personal accounts of divine encounter.

4.2.4 Theoretical Methodological Approaches

My ontological and critical realist epistemological stance is reflected in the methodological approaches of John Swinton and Harriet Mowat, and Mark Cartledge, which have been influential in shaping my research.

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[245] Andrew Wright, *Christianity and Critical Realism: Ambiguity, Truth, and Theological Literacy* (Routledge, 2013), 13–16.
[246] Root, *Christopraxis*, 191.
[247] Root, 190.
[248] Swinton and Mowat, *Practical Theology and Qualitative Research*, 82–88.

My research question seeks an in-depth insight into the SDP as experienced by participants. Social scientists call this kind of detailed, analytical narrative a 'thick description.'[249] Swinton and Mowat's concept of 'complexification' is helpful in defining the role such analysis plays in theological research. They suggest that 'to complexify something is to take that which at first glance appears normal and uncomplicated...through a process of critical reflection at various levels, [to] reveal that it is in fact complex and polyvalent.'[250] This process of 'complexification' will enable aspects of the SDP which might otherwise be taken for granted or overlooked, to be brought to the fore for further analysis. This will be evident in Part Three where three chapters present the data in the form of a rich, detailed account of participants' experience.

If I approached this descriptive analysis from a constructivist epistemology, rather than the critical realism previously outlined, then I might interpret the data solely as indicative of socially-constructed meaning, rather than potentially revealing participants' genuine encounters with God.[251] Instead, I seek to honour participants' accounts as sources of insight and critique, bringing them into dialogue with theological sources. Like Swinton & Mowat, I understand this interaction as potentially generative of new understandings which may affirm, challenge, or develop theology and ecclesial practice.[252]

My approach to this interaction between empirical research data and the resources of theology is also shaped by the dialectical methodological approach of Mark Cartledge. Drawing on charismatic and Pentecostal practices, Cartledge offers a framework for empirical research which reflects the ongoing dialogue between creature and Creator without conflating the two.[253] Like Swinton & Mowat, he emphasises the need for careful and systematic attention to lived experience and the ecclesial practice, such that 'primacy will be given to their stories, symbols and praxis.'[254] These narratives are then brought into conversation with theoretical literature, including perspectives from the social sciences,

[249] Lyn Richards and Janice Morse, *README FIRST for a User's Guide to Qualitative Methods*, 2. ed (SAGE, 2007), 57.
[250] Swinton and Mowat, *Practical Theology and Qualitative Research*, 13.
[251] Swinton and Mowat, 87–88; Lynn Butler-Kisber, *Qualitative Inquiry: Thematic, Narrative and Arts-Informed Perspectives* (SAGE, 2010), 6.
[252] Swinton and Mowat, *Practical Theology and Qualitative Research*, 88–89.
[253] Cartledge, *Practical Theology*, 2012, 22.
[254] Cartledge, 29.

allowing an 'oscillation between praxis and theory [which] generates insights.'[255] There will also be a further interaction between human experience as described by the empirical research and theology, whereby 'the beliefs and practices found in the lifeworld are made to encounter the beliefs and practices of the metanarrative.'[256] For Cartledge, these interactions proceed through the articulation of questions raised by each encounter, or alternatively, the identification of recommendations for changed practice.[257] In my study, this dialectical approach is evident in the questions I raise from the data and the practical recommendations I offer for vocational discernment.

Having outlined the underlying epistemological and methodological approaches, I now turn to the research methods and process for the empirical component of this study.

4.3 Methods: Data Collection and Analysis

Although my previous experience was exclusively in quantitative or mixed-method research, it was apparent that qualitative methods were more appropriate for addressing the research question in this study.[258] My primary interest lay in exploring participants' experience, interpretation, and meaning-making, rather than evaluating the efficacy of the SDP or assessing the accuracy of its decisions regarding candidates' suitability for ordained ministry. While quantitative research can be useful in generating data from large samples, qualitative methods offer deeper insight into the underlying emotions and ideas that govern belief and behaviour.[259] Qualitative research is also responsive and interactive, allowing the researcher to explore ambiguities or unclear aspects, helping to avoid misinterpretation or misrepresentation of participants' experiences.

While undertaking a previous healthcare research study, I was once complimented on my ability to distance myself from the subject matter – then considered a marker of objectivity and neutrality.[260] However, there is growing recognition that all researchers bring their own experiences and assumptions to the research process, and that it is important to

[255] Cartledge, 29.
[256] Cartledge, 29.
[257] Cartledge, 30.
[258] The research question determines selection of qualitative or quantitative methods: Richards and Morse, *Qualitative Methods*, 34
[259] Swinton and Mowat, *Practical Theology and Qualitative Research*, 28.
[260] Cara Belcham, 'Spirituality in Occupational Therapy: Theory in Practice?', *British Journal of Occupational Therapy* 67, no. 1 (2004): 39–46.

acknowledge how these influence methodology, epistemology, and data interpretation.[261] In this project, I have intentionally highlighted aspects of my own contextual experience, where these are relevant to the topic. As a priest, theological educator, and Director of Ministry, I have personal experience of the discernment process I am researching, and I have drawn on this reflexively throughout the research, while remaining attentive to the experiences of others, especially where these differ from my own.

Having outlined my reasons for undertaking qualitative research, I will now detail the methods used to gather data about the SDP, how I identified subjects, how data was analysed, and the ethical issues considered in planning and conducting this study.

4.3.1 Data Gathering

The first aim of this research was to provide a thick description of the SDP focusing on participants' experience and understanding of the process. To address this aim, I gathered data from two data sources: Diocesan Directors of Ordinands (DDOs) and candidates themselves.

My first dataset focused on how the SDP was explained to candidates at the outset. I anticipated that early descriptions of the process would shape how candidates understood the journey ahead. My original plan was to analyse documentation provided to candidates at this stage to see how the process was explained; however, I found that very few dioceses offered written material. Instead, initial explanations were generally delivered verbally by DDOs. Therefore, to gather relevant data, I conducted semi-structured interviews with DDOs from different dioceses, focusing on how they typically introduced and explained the SDP to candidates. I clarified that my interest was in hearing the ways they usually explained the process to candidates, rather than their personal reflections about what they were doing or why – although some rationale for their choices naturally emerged in conversation. I also asked to see any written materials they provided to candidates at this early stage to reinforce and further explain the process. As most dioceses did not supplement verbal explanations with written resources, I also reviewed the national documentation sent to candidates before national panels to see how the SDP was presented at a national level.

[261] Butler-Kisber, *Qualitative Inquiry*, 19.

The second dataset comprised semi-structured interviews with candidates about their experience of vocational discernment through the SDP. These interviews were conducted after their paperwork had been submitted and while they awaited attendance at the Stage Two Panel. Conducting interviews at this point enabled candidates to reflect on their experience while it was still fresh in their minds and before their perspective was influenced, either positively or negatively, by the outcome of the Stage Two Panel. However, it should be acknowledged that the decision to interview candidates at this late stage in the process excluded those who had either chosen not to continue discerning a call to ordained ministry or who were not recommended for a Stage Two Panel. This group of candidates might have offered a different, possibly more critical, perspective on their experiences of the SDP. Although it is only possible to speculate on how these candidates experienced the process and the reasons why they did not proceed towards a Stage Two Panel, I have, where relevant, indicated in the data analysis chapters how their omission may have influenced the findings. Future research could focus on hearing from those with this experience to explore how the SDP may have helped or hindered their vocational discernment.

Interviews are an established qualitative method for exploring how individuals think, feel and make sense of their experiences.[262] Swinton & Mowat describe interviews as, 'concentrated human encounters that take place between the researcher who is seeking knowledge and the research participant who is willing to share their experience and knowledge.'[263] These are purposeful conversations centred around a research topic requiring both parties to articulate and interpret complex emotions through the medium of language.[264] Given that the SDP itself includes several interview-style conversations, it was reasonable to expect that both DDOs and candidates would be comfortable with this format. The interviews were semi-structured to allow for flexibility and to focus on aspects which were important to the participants themselves.[265]

All interviews were conducted online using a synchronous video conferencing platform, and recorded with the participants' consent. Online interviews expanded the geographical reach

[262] Butler-Kisber, 52.
[263] Swinton and Mowat, *Practical Theology and Qualitative Research*, 60.
[264] Swinton and Mowat, 61; Butler-Kisber, *Qualitative Inquiry*, 52.
[265] See Appendix 1.

of the study and overcame potential barriers such as travel and time constraints.[266] While I recognised that online interviews might limit rapport and non-verbal communication, the widespread shift to remote communication due to the COVID-19 pandemic meant that participants were familiar with this medium. Even prior to the pandemic, some researchers had noted that online interviews can increase participant comfort by enabling conversations to take place in familiar surroundings, sometimes creating a safe space to explore personal thoughts and emotions.[267]

4.3.2 Subject Selection

Interviewees for the first dataset were current DDOs. Recruitment followed a convenience sampling approach, inviting participation from DDOs known to me or recommended by others. Five DDOs from five dioceses agreed to participate. These dioceses were located across England (both northern and southern provinces of the Church of England), and included rural, suburban, and urban contexts. This was considered sufficient to provide a meaningful snapshot of the SDP nationwide, particularly as the focus of this dataset was on how the process was described to candidates, rather than on the personal views or experiences of DDOs themselves. Only two of the five dioceses provided written material to candidates, and copies of these were obtained for analysis.

The second dataset comprised candidates with recent experience of vocational discernment for ordained ministry through the SDP. These candidates came from dioceses across England but were not matched with the DDOs from the earlier dataset as this was not a comparative study. As previously noted, candidates were interviewed after submitting their Stage Two paperwork but before attending the Stage Two Panel. The inclusion criteria required candidates to be sponsored for incumbency-level ministry, ensuring that interviewees were discerning vocation to roles with a similar ministerial focus. The Participant Information Sheet highlighted that I was keen to hear from a diverse range of candidates. A purposeful sampling strategy was adopted inviting participation from candidates who met these inclusion criteria.[268] Invitations were circulated via DDOs

[266] Rebecca Mirick and Stephanie Wladkowski, 'Skype in Qualitative Interviews: Participant and Researcher Perspectives', *The Qualitative Report* 24, no. 12 (December 2019): 3062.
[267] Sally Seitz, 'Pixilated Partnerships, Overcoming Obstacles in Qualitative Interviews via Skype: A Research Note', *Qualitative Research* 16, no. 2 (2015): 232–33.
[268] Richards and Morse, *Qualitative Methods*, 195.

(including those who had participated in the earlier interviews) and advertised via social media. Twenty candidates from eight dioceses across England took part. This number allowed for a wide range of perspectives while still enabling detailed analysis.

The candidate sample included seven men, twelve women, and one participant identifying as non-binary. Ages ranged from 21 to 54, with an average of 36.8 years. Participants represented a broad spectrum of church traditions: Conservative Evangelical, Open Evangelical, Charismatic Evangelical, Liberal Catholic, Middle-of-the-Road, and Anglo-Catholic. Two candidates were Black (one identifying as Black African, and the other as Black British Caribbean), three candidates were white but born outside of the UK, and fifteen identified as White British. Eighteen were heterosexual, and two identified as gay. Educational backgrounds ranged from A-levels to doctoral-level qualifications.

4.3.3 Data Analysis

Once interviews were completed, recordings were transcribed using transcription software and manually checked for accuracy. I considered various approaches to data analysis, including Qualitative Content Analysis and Discourse Analysis, but ultimately chose Reflexive Thematic Analysis (RTA). RTA offered the flexibility needed for analysing both interview and documentary data, and aligned with my critical realist epistemology and reflexive methodology.[269]

RTA recognises the active role of the researcher as a located individual whose interpretation is shaped by personal experience.[270] Coding data using RTA requires that the researcher reflects on how they are interpreting the data and identifying key themes to address the research question.[271] In this project, I approached coding prayerfully – not to claim divine inspiration, but as a conscious acknowledgement that I approached data analysis through the lens of my own faith and vocation. Before coding, I reflected on scripture and prayed for guidance, attentiveness, and sensitivity as I analysed the data. This practice aligns with Andre Van Oudtshoorn's description of prayer as 'the inner mode by which practical theology should be conducted,' cultivating humility in the face of the mystery of God's work

[269] Virginia Braun and Victoria Clarke, *Thematic Analysis: A Practical Guide* (SAGE, 2022).
[270] Braun and Clarke, 169–79.
[271] Braun and Clarke, 197–98.

in the lives of others.[272] A prayerful stance seemed particularly appropriate in research focused on vocational discernment as participants themselves were actively and prayerfully seeking God's guidance.

With this prayerful and reflexive posture, I inductively coded the interviews and documents using NVivo software. I identified significant quotes, concepts, and experiences, grouping similar codes into thematic categories. This enabled the thick, descriptive account of the SDP in Chapters Five, Six, and Seven to remain 'close to the data, to participants' sense-making' and to connect individuals' experience to those of others in order to identify shared themes and concepts.[273]

As Braun and Clarke note, this descriptive phase is not an end in itself: the researcher must engage in interpretation, discerning what the data mean and why they matter.[274] Therefore, following this descriptive analysis, I identified three overarching themes which spanned both datasets. These were not passively 'found' in the data, but actively noted and interpreted in light of the research aims and theological questions.[275] The three themes I identified were those which seemed to relate to fundamental aspects of the process, and raised pressing theological questions warranting further reflection in dialogue with interdisciplinary and theological sources. These three themes are the focus of the theological analysis in Chapters Eight, Nine, and Ten.

Overall, Reflexive Thematic Analysis provided a robust and flexible framework for identifying, describing, and interpreting meaning across both datasets. Its emphasis on reflexivity and the active role of the researcher was particularly appropriate for a study focused on 'meaning-*making* and meaning-*telling*' in both its descriptive and interpretive phases.[276]

4.3.4 Research Ethics

Ethical approval for this study was granted by the Research Ethics Committee of Durham University. All participants received an introductory email with a Participant Information

[272] Andre van Oudtshoorn, 'Prayer and Practical Theology', *International Journal of Practical Theology* 16, no. 2 (2013): 294–95.
[273] Braun and Clarke, *Thematic Analysis*, 203.
[274] Braun and Clarke, 196.
[275] Braun and Clarke, 233.
[276] Braun and Clarke, 214.

Sheet, Privacy Notice, and Consent Form. After the interview, participants received another email thanking them, along with a Debrief Sheet.[277]

Participants were assured that their confidentiality would be maintained, and candidates were told that their DDO would not be informed of their participation. This was important as candidates needed to feel confident that their involvement in the study would not influence the outcome of the Stage Two Panel. I also clarified that, in my role as a lecturer at St Mellitus College, I would not be involved in their admissions process should they apply to study there, and that nothing shared in the interviews would be disclosed in that context.

4.4 Summary

This chapter establishes the methodological foundation for my research into the vocational discernment process of the Church of England. I have situated this research within the discipline of Practical Theology, and outlined my ontological and critical realist epistemology. I have also reflected on how my methodological approach has been shaped by my previous experience in healthcare research, current roles in theological education and discernment, and my vocation as a priest. I outlined how the empirical research component of my study addresses the first of my identified research aims, namely complexifying understanding of the discernment process by offering a thick description of the SDP grounded in participants' experiences. I evaluated the decision to use qualitative semi-structured interviews for data collection, and Reflexive Thematic Analysis for data analysis. The findings will be presented in Part Three. The second and third aims of my study will be addressed in Part Four where I explore how aspects of the SDP can be interpreted theologically, considering how this deepens or challenges existing theological approaches to vocation, and proposing practical recommendations for vocational discernment.

[277] Appendix 2.

PART 3

DATA ANALYSIS

Part 3: Introduction

In earlier chapters, I outlined the reasons behind the Church of England's changes to the discernment process for ordained ministry and argued for the need to view this process through a theological lens, rather than evaluating it solely for efficiency or effectiveness in recruiting ordinands. I highlighted the risk of overlooking the complex theological dynamics at work in an ecclesial process that seeks to determine whether God is calling an individual to ordained ministry within the body of Christ. This study pays close attention to how these theological dynamics are understood, interpreted and experienced within the Shared Discernment Process. I have positioned this research as an opportunity to interrogate the theology of calling through exploration of a contemporary vocational discernment process.

Part Three presents data analysis from the empirical component of the research and addresses the first of my research aims: to provide a thick description of the SDP, focusing on participants' experiences and interpretation of the process. Each chapter draws on two primary sources of data. The first dataset comprises interviews with five Diocesan Directors of Ordinands (DDOs), in which I asked how they introduce and explain the SDP to prospective candidates. Where available, I also analysed documents they provided at this early stage, alongside documents from National Ministry Team (NMT) given to all candidates ahead of the national panels. This data offers insight into the theology that informs the SDP, particularly how it is framed at the outset. The second dataset derives from interviews with twenty candidates from eight dioceses across England. Participant demographics were set out in Chapter Four and where age, church tradition, education, ethnicity or sexuality are relevant to the analysis, these are noted. Interviews were conducted shortly before candidates attended a Stage Two Panel and explored both their experience of the SDP and their theological interpretation of that experience.

The two datasets – DDOs and candidates – are presented separately to allow for comparison. While it would have been possible to apply a single coding framework across both datasets, I decided to analyse the interviews inductively and independently to attend to aspects which might otherwise have been overlooked. Consequently, there is some thematic overlap, but categories and headings are not identical. To preserve confidentiality, all participant names, locations and identifying features have been anonymised. DDOs are

numbered for reference, while candidates are assigned alphabetised pseudonyms. When citing documents, I indicate whether they are diocesan documents (DD) or from National Ministry Team (NMT).

It was clear from the interviews that DDOs and candidates understood the SDP to be a formal process established by the Church of England to discern and test whether God is calling an individual to ordained ministry. This shared understanding and interpretation suggest that participation in the SDP functions as an enculturating process through which DDOs and candidates learn to inhabit particular ways of thinking and speaking about vocation. Over time, the selection process, both in its earlier and present forms, has shaped a common language and set of assumptions about what it means for God to call specific individuals to ordination and for the Church to discern that vocation. Having myself taken part in the previous discernment process as a candidate and the current process as a DDO, I recognise that I too have been formed within this tradition of understanding vocation. This inevitably influences the way I approach and interpret the data arising from my research interviews. While my research does not seek to challenge or deconstruct these shared assumptions, I aim instead to explore how the theological and practical dynamics of calling, discernment, and testing are lived, experienced and interpreted within this existing theological and ecclesiological framework.

Having recognised the centrality of this shared understanding about the purpose of the SDP, I have structured Part Three around three central aspects of this process: calling, discernment, and testing. Each chapter in Part Three focuses on one of these aspects, drawing on both datasets to explore how these are explained by DDOs and experienced by candidates.

Chapter Five (*Hearing God's Call*) examines how DDOs define calling and how they frame what it means to hear God's call when introducing candidates to the SDP. This is followed by an analysis of how candidates understand the concept of calling and describe their own experiences of responding to God's call, both before and during the process.

Chapter Six (*Discerning God's Call*) explores the SDP as a process of discernment. I outline how DDOs describe discernment as prayerful attentiveness to God's call and how this is embedded in the design of the process. I then consider how candidates experience discernment, focusing on their emotions, concerns, and discernment practices.

Chapter Seven (*Testing God's Call*) addresses how the SDP functions as an ecclesial process for testing vocation. I explore how DDOs present this element of the SDP, and analyse candidates' experiences of having their vocation tested, recognising that many found the interpersonal and organisational aspects of this process particularly challenging.

By analysing DDOs' explanations of the process alongside candidates' accounts of their experiences, I explore the multifaceted character of the SDP and complexify understanding of it.[278] As outlined previously, my approach is dialectical, recognising the dynamic interplay between lived experience and the metanarrative of scripture, theology, and interdisciplinary resources.[279] At the end of each chapter, and again in summary at the close of Part Three, I identify theological questions arising from engagement with the data. These will inform the conversation with theological and interdisciplinary sources in Part Four.

[278] Swinton and Mowat, *Practical Theology and Qualitative Research*, 15.
[279] Cartledge, *Practical Theology*, 2003, 28–29.

Chapter 5:
Hearing God's Call

In this chapter, I examine how the concept of calling is understood and interpreted by DDOs and candidates. I begin by outlining how DDOs present the idea of God's call to candidates and identify some theological commitments about vocation which shape the discernment process. I then turn to candidates' own accounts, exploring how they understand and experience God's call, including key moments they interpreted as indicative of a vocation to ordained ministry. The chapter concludes by identifying the theological questions that emerge from this analysis.

5.1 DDO Perspectives

In presenting the data from the DDO interviews and documentation, I begin by identifying their working definitions of calling. This is followed by an exploration of the source and nature of calling which adds experiential depth to the earlier discussion in Chapter One. DDOs emphasised that God is the instigator of vocation, highlighted the fundamental call to discipleship, and acknowledged that God calls people to particular roles within the body of Christ. They also described this call in dynamic terms, framing it as something that develops throughout a person's lifetime – discovered through reflection on their life story, shaped during the discernment process, and anticipating a future trajectory of growth.

5.1.1 Defining Calling

A definition of the concepts of 'vocation' and 'calling' was most clearly outlined in the written documents given to candidates and referred to only obliquely in DDOs' verbal introductions to the SDP. Two diocesan documents briefly defined and described vocation. One began with a poem introducing vocation as 'the work of God in our lives,' framing the SDP as one possible response to God's call.[280] The other defined 'vocation' from the Latin 'to call' and emphasised that exploring calling distinguished the SDP from other forms of recruitment or decision-making: 'because recognising and articulating that call is a task for which we need the wisdom and guidance of the Holy Spirit.'[281] Both documents presented

[280] DDa
[281] DDb

vocation in broad terms and framed a call to ordained ministry as an extension of God's work in the life of every disciple.

Beyond these written materials, DDOs appeared to assume that 'calling' and 'vocation' were self-evident concepts that did not require further explanation. This assumption is evident in DDO2's comment: 'we make it clear that this is talking about calling. Calling and vocation...we use interchangeably.' As noted in Chapter One, there is potential for confusion or tension when differing interpretations of 'calling' are not named or explored. In these interviews, DDOs did not appear to clarify or check whether their understanding of vocation was shared by the candidate. There were some indications, however, that the concept would be revisited in more depth later in the process – for example, through conversations with vocations advisors[282] or during group sessions.[283]

Despite this lack of a detailed definition, two key theological convictions about vocation can be identified in the way DDOs presented the SDP. First, they emphasised that God is the instigator of vocation – calling individuals both to discipleship and to specific roles within the body of Christ, including public ministry. Second, they described vocation as dynamic rather than fixed or predetermined, inviting candidates to reflect on how God has been at work in their lives, how they are being called in the present, and how their vocation might continue to unfold over time. In the sections that follow, I explore how these two aspects were expressed in interviews and documentation.

5.1.2 God's Call to Discipleship and Ministry

5.1.2.1 God as Caller

The agency in vocation was attributed to God. DDOs and documentation repeatedly referred to 'God's call' or 'God's calling,'[284] and understood God to communicate calling 'in different ways and in different voices throughout all of our life'.[285] The SDP was presented as an opportunity to explore whether God is calling an individual to a particular ministry, prompting DDOs to advise candidates to discern tentatively and prayerfully, recognising the outcome may differ from their initial expectations.[286] One DDO described this level of

[282] DDO5
[283] DDO1, DDO2
[284] DDO1, DDO4, DDa, NMTa
[285] DDa
[286] DDa

uncertainty and provisionality as inherent in God's nature and, by extension, in the process of vocational exploration: 'often there are bends and twists in the road and that's just the way it often is when God's calling us – expect the unexpected. He's described as a God of surprises with good reason.'[287] One diocesan document similarly emphasised the tentative and exploratory nature of vocational discernment, noting: 'Listening and paying attention to God's call inevitably means that we are drawn deeper into the mystery of who God is; we are also drawn deeper into the mystery of who we are and the mystery of God's love for us.'[288]

5.1.2.2 Discipleship as the Primary Call

Reflecting the dual meaning of 'calling' outlined in Chapter One, DDOs consistently emphasised that the first and primary call of God is to a life of discipleship, and it is only in the context of this foundational call that vocation to a specific role can be explored. This is reflected in the Qualities Grid, which was included in the two sets of diocesan documents and referenced verbally by all DDOs. The first quality expected of candidates is 'Love for God,' understood to be evident in their interactions with others and in their personal spiritual practices.

The primacy of the call to discipleship was emphasised by DDO1, who described vocational discernment as an outworking of discipleship: 'this whole journey is about the trajectory of growth we think you're on as a disciple of Christ...growing to inhabit this quality more fully as a disciple of Christ, and as somebody called to lead within the people of God.'[289] Such a 'living faith'[290] and deepening relationship with God were expected to be demonstrated through regular engagement with scripture, prayer and other spiritual disciplines.[291]

Two DDOs commented that the SDP should not be the context in which these foundational habits are established. Instead, they expected to see evidence that candidates were already committed to regular prayer, worship and Bible reading.[292] One DDO reflected: 'we did find previously that some candidates were coming into the process with a real passion to

[287] DDO4
[288] DDa
[289] DDO1
[290] DDO3
[291] DDa, DDb
[292] DDO1, DDO3

explore what vocation meant, but actually without some of the basic spiritual disciplines and commitment to church.'[293] Without evidence of established discipleship, candidates were considered unready to enter the SDP.

5.1.2.3 Specific Callings within the Body of Christ

While discipleship was seen as the foundational call on an individual's life, there was a clear acknowledgement that the purpose of the SDP is to discern and test whether God is calling someone to a specific role within the church. Although there is no comparable framework for exploring lay ministries, DDOs affirmed that the outcome of the process may be a recommendation to serve in a lay role, rather than ordained ministry. This was framed as evidence that the process is personalised, responsive, and prayerful. As DDO2 commented, 'you can come now not being quite sure what the goal is – this is a discernment process, not a sausage-making machine.' This openness to uncertainty prompted several DDOs to present the SDP as a positive opportunity for personal growth and deepening discipleship, regardless of the eventual outcome.[294]

At the same time, DDOs were clear that the purpose of the SDP is to discern whether an individual is called to ordained ministry specifically. The theological and ecclesiological understanding of ordination within the Church of England was not explored in detail during initial conversations with candidates, but DDOs referred to the importance of engaging with these themes more fully through reflection on the Ordinal, recommended reading, and group work. Understanding the nature of the diaconate and priesthood is expected in the early stages of the process as this is assessed at the Stage One Panel.[295]

Two aspects of ordained ministry were mentioned by the DDOs as necessary to establish early: leadership and service. DDO1 asked, 'Do you have the right skills in leadership, in pastoral ministry, in team building, in building others up to lead the people of God in a certain place...?' Another highlighted that 'deacons and priests are servants of the church and there's various public and private aspects to that.'[296] Notably, the sacramental and pastoral dimensions of ordained ministry were not mentioned by DDOs at this stage.

[293] DDO3
[294] DDO1, DDO2, DDO5
[295] DDO1, DDO2, DDO3
[296] DDO2

5.1.3 God's Call in the Past, Present and Future

I have outlined how DDOs defined calling, presenting it as encompassing both the call to discipleship and the call to specific roles within the church. They did not typically describe calling as a moment of divine revelation. Instead, vocation was framed in dynamic terms – as something which develops and grows over time, rather than being fixed and static, or heard in a single, identifiable encounter with God. This understanding was reflected in the way DDOs spoke about the discernment process. They anticipated that signs of vocation would emerge through reflection on an individual's story, deepen through the journey of discernment, and indicate a future trajectory towards training and active ministry.

5.1.3.1 Story of Calling

For all DDOs, the process of discernment began with inviting candidates to share their life story and reflect on how they began to sense that God might be calling them to ordained ministry. During the initial meeting, DDOs described devoting a significant portion of their time to hearing this story: 'the first meeting, the first bit is me introducing the process. The last and the biggest chunk is me just inviting them to retell their story [then] I say, "Now I'm going to shut up, and I would love you just to tell me your story."'[297]

This storytelling continues in greater depth over subsequent meetings and is repeated when candidates are asked to write an account of their life story in preparatory paperwork for national panels.[298] The emphasis placed on this narrative suggests that DDOs expect signs of calling to be identifiable within key events of a candidates life and that the process of recounting this story is itself part of how individuals come to interpret their sense of vocation in relation to God's activity in their lives.

Alongside looking for signs of calling in this narration of life experience, DDOs also looked for evidence that significant events had been emotionally processed and integrated into the candidates' self-understanding: '[we want to] ensure that everything is as settled as it needs to be, that you can minister from that stuff and not be reacting from it, and that all of that can be a resource in your ministry, developing robustness and resilience.'[299] Candidates are warned that the SDP will involve deep and probing questions, requiring exploration of

[297] DDO3
[298] DDa, DDO3, DDO4
[299] DDO4

aspects of themselves that would otherwise remain private. The need for honesty and openness is frequently emphasised, along with recognition that discernment is emotionally demanding.[300]

5.1.3.2 Journey of Calling

A notable feature of the language chosen by DDOs to describe the SDP was their frequent use of journeying or travelling imagery to explain the process. They spoke of a 'journey of discernment,'[301] 'go forward,'[302] 'route we'll be taking,'[303] 'bends and twists in the road,'[304] and 'signpost you wherever we think is the direction.'[305] These descriptions of the SDP as a journey were reinforced in the documentation – one featured a roundabout road sign on its cover, and the other quoted French writer, André Gide: 'One doesn't discover new lands without consenting to lose sight of the shore for a very long time.'[306]

DDOs described their own contribution to the SDP using similar imagery, presenting themselves as fellow travellers journeying alongside the candidate: 'it's a real privilege in my role to able to journey with people...we're going to be journeying together for a while and this is a really deep journey.'[307] While this language suggests accompaniment, it was also clear that DDOs viewed themselves as expert guides who would help the candidate navigate the twists and turns of the process. This presentation of the DDO as a fellow traveller and experienced guide is complicated by the unspoken responsibility they have to assess and feedback on the candidate, and this tension will be further explored later in the chapter.

Although DDOs emphasised that the final destination of this journey might not be ordination, it was often assumed that, unless something significant emerged, the process would move in that direction: 'assuming all's well with that, we will then move to [the next step of the SDP]'[308] One DDO described how a change in direction should not be seen as failure: 'we speak of, not rejection, but new direction. You know, it's not a rejection, it's just

[300] DDO1, DDO4, DDa
[301] DDO1
[302] DDO2
[303] DDO3
[304] DDO4
[305] DDO5
[306] DDa
[307] DDO1
[308] DDO4

a left turn.'[309] The process was thus framed as an accompanied exploration that may lead to ordained ministry or to the discovery of an alternative vocation.

5.1.3.3 Trajectory of Calling

DDOs were keen to emphasise that the SDP is only the beginning of an ongoing process of training and formation. While no one expected perfection,[310] DDOs needed to be confident that 'there's potential here for you to be an ordained minister.'[311] This meant that DDOs wanted candidates to be informed and realistic about what ordained ministry entails. Given its challenges, assessors looked for evidence of candidates' ability to sustain ministry in the long-term. This included evaluating candidates' 'resilience and stamina,'[312] 'personality and character,'[313] and 'robustness, resilience, emotional intelligence and emotional processing.'[314] Such an assessment is necessary for the future wellbeing of both the individual and the wider Church. As one diocesan document explained:

> 'the [psychotherapy] assessment is concerned with resilience for priestly ministry and safeguarding for the individual priest and to the communities where they may be offering care. This safeguarding is both in terms of any potential risk presented by a candidate in future ministry, but also primarily to ensure the wellbeing of those called to this ministry for the duration of their ministry.'[315]

While trained psychotherapists contribute to the process, DDOs acknowledged that this can only ever be a snapshot. They expected the trajectory of formation observed during the SDP to continue into training. The recommendation made to the bishop after the Stage Two Panel is not for ordination but for training, which is a further period of testing, formation, and discernment.[316] Discernment continues beyond the SDP, with understanding that the process can only identify potential and the direction of travel.

[309] DDO5
[310] DDO4
[311] DDO1
[312] DDd
[313] DDO1
[314] DDe
[315] DDc
[316] DDO1, DDa

5.2 Candidates' Experiences

Turning to the candidate interviews, I begin by exploring how candidates described their experience of hearing God's call. This includes their understanding of what it means to hear God's call, how they recounted and re-interpreted their story of calling for assessors, and how they expressed awareness of the possibility of mishearing or 'getting it wrong.' I then outline the ways in which candidates attended to particular signs or situations as indicators that God might be calling them to ordained ministry. These signs clustered into three main areas: past experiences, ministry gifting, and life circumstances.

5.2.1 Hearing God's Call

During my research interviews, I did not ask candidates to define vocation, yet their theological understanding of calling was apparent throughout the conversations. Like the DDOs, they recognised God as the source of their vocation, rather than considering ordination to be a career choice or a pragmatic response to a need within the church. This was apparent in candidates' use of auditory metaphors to describe the experience of God communicating with them about vocation: 'God telling me...'[317] 'God said...'[318] and 'those were the sort of whispers [from God] that I started hearing.'[319]

Building on the understanding of vocation as divinely initiated, I will explore how candidates in the SDP are required to repeatedly share their stories of calling, and how they navigate the fear of mishearing or misinterpreting God's voice.

5.2.1.1 Telling the Story

Many candidates commented that they were asked to tell and retell their story of calling frequently during the SDP. While two found the process repetitive – noting the same information was gathered by multiple people[320] – others viewed this repetition as beneficial. It helped them learn to articulate their story more clearly and to identify aspects which were particularly meaningful to them.[321]

[317] Daniela
[318] James
[319] Kathryn
[320] Emma, Sarah
[321] Philippa, Rachel

Several candidates described identifiable moments when God communicated directly with them about exploring ordination. These experiences were often those that prompted them to enter the SDP and formed the foundation of their perceived vocation. Brenda recalled, 'I was just praying and heard a voice in my head, which I have come to recognise as God's voice from other times, saying "become ordained."' This experience gave her a strong sense of confidence throughout the process:

> 'It was a very sort of specific event. Basically, God telling me that...to do this and other people backing it up. So, I came in [to the SDP] thinking, "Yeah, I know what my calling is, you know, I don't have any doubts on this." I mean, I have questions about my ability, but my actual calling, I don't have any questions about and it's almost like I now need to persuade other people that's so.'[322]

Another candidate described being 'stopped in her tracks' while walking the dog, suddenly struck by the realisation that God was calling her to ordained ministry: 'it just hit me like a sledgehammer.'[323] While, others reflected that they would likely have dismissed the idea of ordination altogether had they not felt a direct call from God.[324]

For most candidates, however, hearing God's call was not a single event. Their sense of vocation developed and deepened over time. Many spoke of how the SDP itself had strengthened their sense of call. Reflecting the DDOs' use of travelling analogies, thirteen out of twenty candidates described the process as a 'journey.' Claire, for example, said, '[discernment has been] a pilgrimage. I have felt like a foreigner in a strange land,' and explained that she had heard an Old English word 'coddiwomple' which encapsulated her experience, meaning 'to travel purposefully towards an unknown destination.'

While the destination remained uncertain, for many candidates there was growing clarity about their calling to ordained ministry which further deepened during the process. Andrew commented: 'I entered the discernment process still being very unsure [...] as the process has developed, I have become more and more excited at the prospect of it [...] I've been really affirmed and strengthened in the fact that it could well be the direction I'm being

[322] Brenda
[323] Fiona
[324] Brenda, Max, Olivia

called.' There was a sense of formation beginning during the SDP which they anticipated would continue through training and into ministry.

In this way, the dynamic nature of vocation described by the DDOs was mirrored in candidates' experience. While God's call may initially be heard in a particular moment, it is subsequently deepened, developed and affirmed through sharing their story with others as they journey through the discernment process towards future training and ministry.

5.2.1.2 Potential for Mishearing God's Call

Candidates described a strong sense that the Holy Spirit was guiding and sustaining them throughout the discernment process.[325] Rachel remarked, 'even from the very, very, very beginning, with the discernment process, it felt like God was in that from the first step [...] I've just seen him throughout the whole thing.' For candidates whose discernment process had not been straightforward or who perceived there to be obstacles to ordination, such as gender or sexuality, this ongoing sense of God's presence was especially significant in affirming their vocation. Max, a non-binary candidate in a civil partnership, described encountering God most vividly during 'the knockbacks...the times when it's been really hard, when I've thought to myself, "Should I just go? Should I just end now? Should I just leave?" [I've had a] profound sense of God being with me in the difficulty and wrestling.'

This experience of God's continued presence often intensified candidates' fear that they may not be recommended to train for ordained ministry as that this would suggest they had misheard God's call or 'got it wrong.' While many acknowledged that they would eventually need to accept such an outcome as indicative of God's will,[326] several expressed how hard they would find it to reconcile a non-recommendation with their strong sense of personal calling as being from God. Olivia, for example, anticipated that a negative outcome would profoundly shake her confidence in hearing from God in prayer: 'if there was a 'no' it would be like, "Okay, so have I just spent nine years mis-hearing God?" What does that look like for me, kind of, listening to God in the future?' Max similarly struggled with the distinction that others encouraged them to make between God's call and the church's discernment, expressing concern that such a distinction might leave them with an unhealthy and

[325] Henry, Gabrielle
[326] Andrew

inaccurate theology of providence and discernment.[327] This reflects the earlier discussion in Chapter Two, as there is recognition of the challenge of understanding God's will as both individual and communal. Candidates are required to hold in tension their personal conviction of being called and the church's role in discerning whether that call is, in fact, God's will.

5.3.2 Signs of God's Call

In sharing their stories of calling and acknowledging the potential to mishear or misinterpret God's call, candidates often pointed to additional evidence to support their sense of vocation – drawing on past events, ministerial experience and gifts, and life circumstances.

5.3.2.1 Signs of Calling: Past Experiences

Candidates valued the opportunity to share their story with DDOs and others in the SDP as it helped them reflect on past experiences with fresh eyes. Within these events, they identified signs of being called to ordained ministry, and found it encouraging to think that God had been calling them over many years, rather than in a single moment of revelation.

Many candidates reinterpreted painful past experiences as preparation for ministry. For instance, in an emotional tone, Fiona reflected, 'This process has brought together every part of me! It's just made me so in awe of everything God has accomplished in different parts of my life to bring [me] to this point,' and described how her experience of divorce and cancer treatment had increased her pastoral sensitivity and resilience. Others spoke similarly of bereavement, ill health, and loss, which, although they were not seen as signs of calling at the time, were retrospectively interpreted as God's formational work for ministry.

For a few candidates, reflecting on their past experiences necessitated making sense of factors which had held them back from exploring ordained ministry earlier in their lives. Una, for example, spoke of a longstanding sense of call but had previously felt constrained by cultural, educational, and theological assumptions:

> 'From my earliest memories, I've wanted to go into full-time ministry. Then I wanted to be a pastor's wife because I didn't think that women [could be minsters]. But it

[327] Max

was like... this was for the elite of the elite, the chosen... none of my family went to university or college or anything.'[328]

Participation in the SDP enabled Una to process the messages she had received as a child in light of her sense of calling to ordained ministry.

5.3.2.2 Signs of Calling: Experience and Gifts

Candidates also saw their experience and gifting as evidence of vocation. Lay experience of preaching, leading services, or participating in pastoral care often awakened a desire to serve in an ordained capacity.[329] One Anglo-Catholic candidate described how serving at the altar prompted a vision of herself presiding at the Eucharist,[330] while a charismatic evangelical candidate spoke of a growing desire to help others grow in evangelism and discipleship.[331] The SDP also prompted deeper reflection on the skills candidates would bring to ordained ministry from their past experience in the church and secular employment. For example, Brenda identified transferrable skills from her nursing background,[332] and Andrew commented that, 'as the process has developed, I have understood better and better how [ordained ministry] fits with my skill set and what I want out of the rest of my life.'

One means by which the SDP prompts discussion around skills, gifting and experience is through the Qualities Grid, although this received mixed reviews from candidates. For five candidates, reflecting on the Qualities affirmed their readiness for ministry and sense of vocation.[333] However, for other candidates, the Qualities were perceived as a bureaucratic element of the SDP – more akin to a job specification than a meaningful guide for vocational reflection.[334] A few described a strongly negative response to the Qualities Grid, either because it provoked feelings of inadequacy, or due to a dislike of its format and presentation.[335]

While candidates felt affirmed in their sense of call when they recognised that their existing skills would be useful in ministry, they also reflected on their fresh dependence on God as

[328] Una
[329] Emma, Lewis, Olivia, Daniela, Fiona
[330] Claire
[331] Kathryn
[332] Brenda
[333] James, Olivia, Philippa, Una, Sarah
[334] Andrew, Daniela, Ian
[335] Claire, Nathan

the source of these gifts. Some felt overwhelmed at the prospect of ordained ministry, but trusted God would equip them. Claire described experiencing God giving her the ability to lead online prayer during the pandemic: 'I lack self-confidence...[but, I recognised] 'Hang on, this isn't me, this is the Holy Spirit! And when I gave myself over to the Holy Spirit, it just became more enjoyable.' Similarly, James expressed thankfulness that, 'this is a two-way thing. God will equip me and God gives me gifts and God would then want me to use them.' This led him to respond in prayer saying, 'Look, Jesus, if you're prepared to channel your power through my immense weakness, then you could do something amazing through me, if you want to, for your glory and not for mine.'

5.3.2.3 Signs of Calling: Life Circumstances

A third way in which candidates recognised God's call was through interpreting life circumstances as evidence of divine guidance. Many used the image of a door being opened to describe a sense of God preparing the way.[336] For example, Claire described praying and finding that 'every time I was saying "yes" to God, the door was swinging wider open and light and joy was coming into my life. So, that's why I wanted to [enter] the discernment process.' Others, like Daniela, framed this imagery in terms of surrendering the outcome to God: 'the whole way through the process I've been really, really open to doors being shut and almost expecting them to be [shut]. And of course, it's been the opposite, you know, they've really kept opening. And that's been quite affirming.' Ian linked this imagery to scriptural promises about seeking and knocking (Mt. 7:7-8), while Emma spoke vividly of resisting God's call:

> 'honestly, I had shut the door, bolted it, padlocked it, all the rest of it, because I didn't like the idea of it! But in that moment, when I heard that voice, I said, "Okay, God, I will at least open the door. I'm not saying I'm going to walk through it. But I'll open the door."'

The element of human agency in responding to divine initiative will be explored later, but here it is worth noting that candidates expected God's call to be evident not only internally, but also in the external circumstances of their lives. Several treasured what they perceived as supernatural confirmations – such as people independently asking whether they had

[336] James, Olivia, Rachel, Ian

considered ordination.[337] Brenda recalled her sister unexpectedly suggesting it: 'she said the thought "ordination" came to her. And I was just thinking...You can't really say, "I'm making this up now!"' Such comments from others were seen as confirmation that the call was not self-seeking or imagined.[338]

Although rarely viewed as a primary indicator of vocation, circumstances were also interpreted as part of God's guidance. Henry noted: 'This is the right time for everything to happen,' while others observed that training now would coincide neatly with children's schooling, a spouse's job, or their housing situation.[339] These experiences left candidates with a sense that 'God's been moving the pieces around'[340] to prepare them for this next step.

5.4 Hearing God's Call: Theological Themes and Questions

In reflecting on the nature of vocation, both DDOs and candidates recognised that the source and instigator of calling is God, who calls people to discipleship and also to particular tasks or roles. Despite this broad consensus, the interviews raised several theological questions about the nature of vocation and how discernment is approached.

First, a theme running through both sets of interviews was the interpretation of vocation in dynamic terms as something that grows or develops over time. While candidates often spoke of distinct moments of crisis or clarity in which they sensed God's call, both groups used journeying language to describe vocational discernment. This raises important theological questions: Does God's call evolve in response to changing circumstances, or is it the individual's awareness and acceptance of that call which deepens over time? In discerning a life-long vocation to ordained ministry, does this sense of call continue to unfold post-ordination, or does it reach a form of resolution during the discernment process or at ordination itself? Candidates expressed uncertainty about how to make sense of such a dynamic understanding of vocation within theological frameworks of providence and divine guidance.

[337] Lewis, Nathan, Tom
[338] Emma, Olivia
[339] Fiona, James, Lewis
[340] Lewis

A second theme, closely related to the first, was the centrality of storytelling within the SDP. While vocation was seen as originating from God and thus external to the self, the discernment process focused heavily on introspection, reflection, and conversation – often framed around personal narrative. For candidates, the SDP encouraged deeper engagement with their life stories, prompting them to reflect on repeated patterns and significant events which might indicate a call to ordained ministry. This raises further theological questions: To what extent can an individual truly know themselves as they are known by God, let alone communicate that self to others? How might inaccurate stories told by the candidate about themselves be appropriately challenged, particularly when the outcome they believe is indicated by their story is not the one discerned by the church?

DDOs viewed candidates' stories as a primary source for identifying signs of vocation, expecting that indicators of calling would emerge through reflection on lived experience. This highlights potential issues with the role of narrative in vocational discernment which require further exploration. How far is it possible to discern something as complex as vocation through a selective, narrative presentation of the self? Does the ability to tell a persuasive story become, in itself, a sign of calling? Has the SDP been shaped, perhaps implicitly, by psychological rather than theological assumptions about identity, human nature, and character development? What are the limits, as well as the possibilities, of discovering vocation through narrative reflection?

I now turn from examining how vocation is understood to the related question of how a call to ordained ministry is discerned.

Chapter 6:
Discerning God's Call

Despite being central to the Shared Discernment Process, the term 'discernment' is often used without clear definition. This chapter examines how both DDOs and candidates understand and interpret the concept of discernment, and how these interpretations shape their engagement with the process. From the interview data, I highlight a recurring tension between the pastoral, formational aspects of discernment and the need to assess and evidence a call to ministry. I also explore how candidates are supported in reflecting on the personal cost of responding to a call to ordained ministry, and how vocation is articulated through a combination of prayerful attentiveness to God and interpersonal interactions with others. The chapter concludes by identifying three areas of theological interest raised by these findings: the complexity of holding together the nurturing and testing of vocation; the challenge posed by the expectation that candidates should 'trust the process'; and the theological significance of articulating calling as a central aspect of discernment.

6.1 DDO Perspectives

In presenting the SDP to candidates, DDOs consistently emphasised that discernment requires active engagement from both the church and the individual. It is not sufficient for either party to assert a call unilaterally or treat it as a foregone conclusion. This reflects the tension discussed in Chapter Two between views of vocation which prioritise direct, individual communication of calling from God and those which frame discernment as the church's responsibility for the sake of communal flourishing.

While DDOs alluded to discernment as both the responsibility of the individual and the church in their verbal introductions, it was primarily in diocesan documentation that the SDP was explicitly described as a 'dual discernment process.'[341] One document stated:

> 'The ministry of deacons and priests in the Church of England is a ministry of service, both privately in prayer and the study of scripture and publicly as they lead the people of God in worship, preach and teach, and take the good news of Jesus into

[341] DDa

> the world. As such, those who are ordained into the Church of England will be able to recognise and articulate both and inner (individual/private) call and an external (public/affirmed) call to that ministry. The discernment process...is designed to nurture and test both your internal sense of call and the church's external call to you to enter ordained ministry.'[342]

The rationale for the dual nature of the process is clearly linked to the public role and representative nature of ordained ministry. The document also seeks to manage expectations and clarify the purpose of the process from the outset. However, definitions and descriptions of discernment were only explicitly provided in dioceses when written resources were provided. DDOs did not articulate this dimension as clearly in their verbal introductions to the SDP, although it was often implied.

In what follows, I consider how the differing forms of discernment and responsibilities of the church and the individual were understood and presented by DDOs as indications that the SDP is a dual discernment process in which both the church and the candidate have an active role to play.

6.1.1 Church's Discernment: Assessment and Nurture

DDOs presented the role of the church in the SDP as encompassing both the assessment and nurturing of vocation. Although I will return in the final section of this chapter to the potential tension between these two functions, here I will outline the practical ways in which both assessment and nurture are understood and enacted in the discernment process.

6.1.1.1 Assessment

Assessment was regarded by the DDOs as central to the purpose of the SDP. This was evident in repeated references to 'assessment' and 'assessors'[343] and in the emphasis on gathering evidence for the sponsoring papers submitted to the Stage Two Panel.[344] While the process was framed as a means of prayerfully exploring whether God is calling the individual to ordained ministry, in practice the emphasis fell more on assessing whether the

[342] DDb
[343] DDb, DDc, NMTa
[344] DDO2, DDb

candidate possesses the necessary skills, character, and capabilities for public ministry.[345] These personal attributes were viewed as key indicators of God's call on an individual's life. DDO1 made this connection explicit, stating that the Qualities, 'give us a framework...to look at candidates in order to discern whether or not God might be calling you to ministry as a priest in the Church of England.' This was further reinforced by the centrality of the Qualities Grid to discernment conversations and by how frequently DDOs mentioned the need to gather evidence for the national panels.[346]

While DDOs were careful to describe the Stage One Panel as a 'qualitative' process that is 'not determinative', they expressed concern that use of a numerical rating scale in the report might be seen by candidates as grading their ability.[347] They commented that the emphasis at Stage One tends to be on knowledge and past experience, whereas the deeper work leading up to Stage Two focuses on formation and character.[348] Although this distinction between the two national panels can be helpful for highlighting areas where growth is required, they also felt that it can complicate discernment as essential qualities, such as relational maturity or emotional resilience, are not fully assessed until later in the process.[349]

6.1.1.2 Nurture

Alongside their role in assessment, DDOs also saw themselves as responsible for nurturing candidates' sense of vocation. This nurturing was strongly relational, taking place through both group sessions and one-to-one meetings.[350]

Groupwork was a component in the process for four of the five dioceses in this study, although the format and frequency varied. One diocese required monthly sessions over eleven months,[351] while another offered optional study days exploring topics such as ecclesiology, leadership, and mission.[352] Two dioceses were piloting short weekly programmes on discipleship and discernment.[353] Only one diocese focused solely on

[345] DDO1, DDa
[346] DDO3, DDa
[347] DDO1, DDO2, DDO3, DDO4
[348] DDO1, NMTa
[349] DDO1,DDO2, DDO4
[350] DDO1, DDO2, DDO3
[351] DDb
[352] DDO4
[353] DDO1, DDO5

individual meetings, with the DDO noting that they preferred a personal approach over group discussion.[354]

Where groupwork was offered, it was seen as an opportunity for candidates to meet others on a similar journey, to hear different vocational stories, and to grow in respect for the range of traditions across the Church of England.[355] DDOs viewed these sessions as preparatory for national panels as they helped candidates grow in confidence, particularly in their ability to articulate their sense of vocation.[356] This was especially important for candidates from non-traditional backgrounds who might feel apprehensive about formal interviews. DDO4 spoke about designing the diocesan process with a 'post-industrial' context in mind, recognising that many candidates in his diocese arrived with 'low educational attainment' or experiences of trauma. He saw his role as building candidates' confidence so they felt able to engage with the national process.

In groupwork and individual conversations, DDOs stressed the importance of resourcing candidates as they discerned God's call. This included recommending reading material, encouraging journaling, reflecting on the Ordinal, and identifying areas where further experience was needed.[357] DDO1 described how the material he shared often acted as a 'catalyst' or 'springboard' for deeper conversations with candidates. There was also a clear expectation that candidates would themselves be actively and prayerfully discerning God's call, bringing their reflections into conversations with the DDO.

I now turn to how the DDOs encouraged this active engagement from candidates, and how these expectations were presented in their early explanations of the SDP.

6.1.2 Expectations of Candidates' Discernment: Prayer and Honesty

As participants in a 'dual discernment process,' both the church and candidates play active but distinct roles. While DDOs presented the church's responsibility as one of assessment and nurture, they expected candidates to commit to prayerful reflection and honest self-examination throughout the SDP.

[354] DDO3
[355] DDO2, DDO4, DDO5, DDb
[356] DDO2
[357] DDO1, DDO4

6.1.2.1 Prayer

As noted earlier, candidates should have an established pattern of prayer and Bible reading before entering the SDP. DDOs communicated a clear expectation that candidates would continue to seek guidance from God through intentional prayer and scriptural reflection. Several DDOs commented that the expectation that the candidate is themselves prayerfully discerning vocation suggests candidates do have some agency in the outcome of the process. While the church may ultimately decide not to recommend someone for training, candidates too may prayerfully conclude that ordained ministry is not their calling.[358] DDO2 noted, for example: 'If at the end of [the discernment process], you decide [ordained ministry] isn't right for you, then it's still done its work, it's still been a good use of time.' They also emphasised flexibility about the timescales involved in discernment, recognising some candidates need time and space, while others wish to progress more quickly.[359]

6.1.2.2 Honesty

Alongside prayer, DDOs placed strong emphasis on honesty as a key requirement of the discernment process. This included integrity in interactions with assessors and a willingness to share deeply personal aspects of one's life. Truthfulness was not only seen as a necessary characteristic of those called to ordained ministry but also essential for enabling an accurate assessment of vocation.

In initial conversations with candidates, DDOs often prepared candidates for the depth and scope of what would be explored. DDO4, for example, reported saying to candidates:

> 'there are no questions that are off-limits in this process, it is quite a probing process. [We] will be looking at areas of past vulnerability...everything from pornography to prostitutes and everything else...that just gives you a sense of what you're letting yourself in for.'

Recognising the intensity of this questioning, several DDOs spoke of the temptation candidates might feel to present a polished or idealised version of themselves.[360] In response, DDO4 was clear: 'We are not looking for perfection. What we are looking for is honest answers, not right answers.' DDO2 similarly acknowledged that candidates might

[358] DDO3
[359] DDO3, DDO5
[360] DDc

choose to hide parts of their story, but stressed that honesty was expected from the outset and that any omissions would be followed up and investigated.[361]

While DDOs viewed openness as vital to being able to discern calling, they acknowledged the emotional and relational complexity of asking candidates to disclose details of the deepest, most personal areas of their lives, whilst simultaneously assessing their suitability for ordained ministry. For instance, DDO3 reflected on the tension between offering spiritual support and fulfilling an evaluative role, wondering whether praying with candidates blurred the line between a 'pastoral relationship and the relationship with someone who is involved in [assessment].' DDO1 similarly expressed concern about power dynamics, saying he was 'passionate about [doing] everything I can to lower power imbalances.' These concerns were reflected in diocesan documents. One resource acknowledged that 'the discernment journey is one of significant depth,' and recognised that some candidates may find the process triggering, particularly if they have experienced trauma or abuse.[362] In other dioceses, this tension between nurture and assessment was referenced more briefly, particularly in relation to the psychotherapy assessment.

The power dynamics involved in the DDO as someone who both nurtures and assesses vocation will be explored further in the next chapter.

6.2 Candidates' Experiences

Candidates' experiences of discernment varied significantly, shaped by personal context and by differences in how the SDP is implemented across the eight dioceses represented in this study. Their accounts reflected the 'dual discernment' approach discussed previously, although candidates naturally focused less on conceptual framing and more on the lived experience of discernment as something they engaged in both individually and with others. In what follows, I explore how candidates interpreted these two aspects of discernment.

6.2.1 Personal Discernment: Active Discernment and Obedience

Candidates identified engaging in a range of activities to help them discern vocation. They also discussed how discernment required them to wrestle with the personal cost of responding obediently to a call to ordained ministry.

[361] DDO2
[362] DDa

6.2.1.1 Experience of Personal Discernment

Candidates engaged in a range of practices as they sought to discern God's call – including prayer, retreat, Bible study, reading the Ordinal or books on priesthood, and personal discernment tasks set by their DDO. These required emotional investment and time,[363] but many spoke of moments when they sensed God's call being affirmed. For example, Lewis spoke of having an intense emotional response to reading a book on priesthood:

> 'When I was reading it, it was almost like every page I was either saying, "Yeah, sign me up, I want to do that!" or "Wow! That sounds like me!" It almost felt like it was written for me...That was hugely significant.'

Many candidates described the discernment process as transformative, reflecting on the personal growth and deepening self-awareness it fostered. Even though the final outcome was still uncertain, they saw the experience as worthwhile. Fiona described herself as 'utterly transformed by this process,' while Ian found it 'remarkable' how much he had changed, recommending it to others as a process of self-discovery. However, discernment was also experienced as emotionally demanding. While, as previously noted, 'journey' was the most frequently used metaphor to describe the process, several candidates opted for the descriptor 'rollercoaster' which carried the same sense of dynamic movement, while acknowledging that it comprised both highs and lows.[364] Gabrielle explained, 'it has felt very non-stop, full of plenty of surprises and loop-the-loops, full of emotion...joy as well as fear....hopefully it's going somewhere...yeah, a rollercoaster.'

Two aspects were repeatedly mentioned when candidates spoke about the lowest points of the process: living with uncertainty and feelings of isolation. Claire described feeling in the 'wilderness' as there were periods of time when the process seemed to stall and she felt unclear about the direction of travel. Other candidates commented on how stressful it was to navigate the discernment process anticipating the practical implications for family and work, but often unable to share openly what they were going through with friends and employers.[365] Fiona found discernment 'quite an isolating time,' while Gabrielle noted, 'I've not talked about it with anybody and everybody' because of the personal and practical

[363] Fiona, Gabrielle
[364] Gabrielle, Ian, Tom
[365] Brenda, Ian, Kathryn

stakes involved.[366] Both the uncertainty of the process and feelings of isolation were contributing factors to some candidates feeling that their mental health and well-being had been negatively impacted during their participation in the SDP.[367]

6.2.1.2 Obedience and Sacrifice in Discerning God's Call

Participation in the SDP also prompted candidates to wonder how they made sense of discernment as a human response to a divine call. Related to the challenge of living with uncertainty outlined previously, candidates reflected on what it meant to count the cost of offering themselves for ordained ministry. Candidates described this in terms of obedience and sacrifice – echoing themes from Peyton and Gatrell's research outlined in Chapter Three.[368]

Many were conscious of the implications of being nationally deployable for their family, finances, and stability. Claire spoke of carrying a 'weight' and 'burden' because she knew the impact her ministry could have on her husband and stepchildren, while Gabrielle felt this responsibility so acutely that she had doubted her calling.[369] Some candidates considered that there were aspects of their personal situation which made the decision to offer themselves for ordained ministry particularly costly. For example, Max entered a civil partnership rather than marrying their same-sex partner, knowing that marriage would be a barrier to ordination: 'that's a massive cost...a hard cost that we've had to face.' Meanwhile, Lewis worried about the impact of repeated moves on his autistic son explaining, 'we wouldn't want to disrupt him...unless God was really calling me.'

Candidates often used the language of 'wrestling' to describe this inner struggle.[370] For instance, Max reflected on the risks and relational implications of engaging in the discernment process:

> 'Wrestling with my story; wrestling with my past; wrestling with the present [and] what's going on; wrestling with my future – taking a massive risk in all of this; wrestling with whether I feel at peace with a risk like this; wrestling with how it

[366] Fiona, Gabrielle, Tom
[367] Fiona, Max, Olivia
[368] Peyton and Gatrell, *Managing Clergy Lives*, 53–123.
[369] Gabrielle
[370] Gabrielle, Max, Nathan, Una

> impacts my relationship and impacts other people...But this is only the [discernment] process – if it's a "yes" then there'll just be so much more wrestling to do!'

Even those who did not use the term 'wrestling' directly spoke of the tension between trusting and resisting God's call. Some framed this in terms of learning to 'trust God' when the way forward was unclear,[371] others in terms of obedience despite the cost.[372] A few commented that they were finally accepting God's call after a period of actively resisting or ignoring it.[373] Brenda pondered how she made sense of the nature of divine command and human agency:

> 'At no stage of this have I ever said 'no' to God. I've always thought, "Was that voice... was it an order, was it an instruction, was it a suggestion, or was it a request?" And I've always felt it was an instruction, but one that I had choice over. If I'm calling him Lord of my life, then I need to accept his Lordship over this and go along [with] what he wants.'

6.2.2 Discerning with Others

Candidates recognised that, while personal discernment was important, they could not discern the will of God alone. In this section, I outline how they experienced the active involvement of others in discernment. I then highlight how speaking with others clarified and strengthened their sense of vocation.

6.2.2.1 Experience of Discerning with Others

For most candidates, their first conversations about calling were with their vicar or members of their local church congregation. The local church continued to offer support, encouragement and affirmation throughout the SDP, although some candidates commented that they found it surprising that the vocational discernment process appeared detached from the local church once the candidate was referred to the DDO. Sarah described such an approach as 'divorced,' and commented that she felt uncomfortable with decisions reliant upon a candidate's own self-presentation at the national panels, as she understood scripture to indicate that ministers should be identified by the local

[371] Ian, Una, Rachel, Tom
[372] Claire, Kathryn
[373] Emma, Rachel

congregation.[374] Similarly, Ian noted the contrast with his previous church experience: 'in the Baptist tradition it's the gathered church appointing a leader, whereas in the Anglican [tradition] actually the parish are irrelevant.'[375] Among the candidates interviewed in this study, there were several who had come to the Church of England from other denominations, and expressed surprise at the different ecclesiology and theology of ministry they encountered once they entered the SDP.[376] In the next chapter, I will examine how DDOs explained the implications of Anglican ecclesiology on the design of the SDP. However, they did not fully or directly address candidates' concerns outlined here about the way that assessments are only lightly informed by observation of the candidate in their local church context.

Candidates appreciated the opportunities to interact with others during the SDP – both with other candidates during groupwork, and the individual conversations with their DDO. Groupwork was not a universal feature of the process in all dioceses, and candidates in dioceses without discernment groups said they would have found these helpful.[377] Those who did participate in groups during the SDP felt that this had been an encouraging source of support.[378] They found that the group provided a context in which they could hear other people's stories of being called to ordained ministry and were able to share their own experiences. Henry reflected on the encouragement he found in hearing the diversity of stories shared in the group: 'We're all unique. We've all got things that set us apart and make our own callings valid and interesting and personal to us.'

While groupwork was significant for many candidates, central to their experience of the SDP was the relationship with the DDO. While the complexity of this relational dynamic will be considered in the next chapter, most candidates expressed appreciation for the valuable conversations they had with their DDO.[379] Candidates trusted that DDOs had been appointed for their skills, gifts and experience in discernment.[380] In particular, they found that DDOs' questions prompted them to reflect deeply on their sense of vocation.[381] For

[374] Sarah
[375] Ian
[376] Brenda, Ian, Lewis, Philippa, Sarah
[377] Fiona, Max
[378] Ian, Lewis, Olivia, Philippa
[379] Emma, Nathan
[380] Gabrielle, Nathan, Una, Rachel
[381] Lewis, Olivia, Philippa, Sarah

example, Kathryn noted how helpful it was to have someone who could challenge her thinking: 'the questions that [the DDO] asked just added something new to my reflection, which was really helpful...they were challenging, but [it] felt like a very safe space...to explore.'

Having an opportunity to articulate calling in conversation with others was a repeated theme throughout the interviews, and I will now examine this aspect of discernment in more depth.

6.2.2.2 Articulating Calling

Candidates repeatedly used words such as 'speech', 'talk' and 'articulate' to describe how they explored their vocation. While in the next chapter, I will discuss concerns they had about mastering the 'right' language when their call was being tested, here it is worth noting the significant formational role articulation plays in discernment. In putting their sense of vocation into words and discussing this with others, candidates experienced greater clarity and certainty that God was calling them to ordained ministry.

Several candidates described experiencing relief when they finally spoke to someone about whether they might be called to ordained ministry. They found articulating this possibility made a nebulous sense of calling become more real, and these early conversations often prompted them to enter the SDP to explore vocation further.[382] For example, Kathryn recalled holding on to 'whispers' of calling for years before saying them aloud, but once she began speaking about it, others affirmed her call. Similarly, Henry found that when he first spoke about his possible vocation with others, it was as though 'I could see God...reflected in the people around me...affirming my calling and [I realised] I wasn't barking up the wrong tree.'

Opportunities to speak about vocation – whether in DDO meetings,[383] groupwork,[384] or in Carousel Conversations[385] – helped candidates grow in clarity and confidence. Fiona described the process as 'joyful... [because] its actually forced me to talk about it and to pray about it' which convinced her that she was not 'going mad' considering a call to

[382] Daniela, Kathryn, Henry
[383] Emma, Lewis, Max
[384] Olivia, Kathryn
[385] Daniela, James

ordained ministry. Meanwhile, Philippa was keen to emphasise that learning to speak more clearly about her calling helped her to grasp its implications more deeply and was not merely a process of interview preparation: '[it's like] learning a language...you know what God's put on your heart, but you don't necessarily know how to articulate it to people... [you learn to] explain and walk in it, and feel a lot more comfortable in it.'

This experience of articulating calling was interpreted by candidates as bringing more than the clarity which might come through repeated exploration of any single topic. Instead, they often referred to moments when they felt divinely inspired in how to explain things. For example, Rachel described how, in moments of questioning, 'it just felt like God was giving me the words. Not that I'm a robot, but that it comes from...the Holy Spirit.' There is an interesting theological dynamic in this description whereby God enables the individual to clarify their calling through articulating their sense of being called, and also guides the hearer in the discernment of calling through the words spoken. This suggests that articulation is not just a pragmatic aspect of discernment, but may be intrinsic to it. Speaking a sense of vocation aloud – especially in the presence of others – appears to deepen clarity, invite affirmation, and functions as a theological act through which God continues to call.

6.3 Discerning God's call: Theological Themes and Questions

DDOs and candidates affirmed that discerning a call to ordained ministry is a shared responsibility between the individual and the church. Both parties are expected to engage actively and prayerfully in seeking God's will. However, the interviews pointed to some underlying tensions in the process which raise important theological questions.

The first concerns the dual role of the church in both nurturing and assessing vocation. DDOs acknowledged the inherent challenge of holding these two responsibilities together. On the one hand, they saw their role as encouraging and accompanying candidates in vocational exploration. On the other, they were tasked with evaluating the candidate's potential for ordained ministry and submitting formal assessments to the national panels. To do this well, they stressed the need for candidates to be open, honest, and vulnerable. Yet this expectation raises further theological questions: Can such honesty flourish in a process that is, by design, evaluative? To what extent is it possible for DDOs to encounter

the ‘real’ or ‘authentic’ candidate within a system that inevitably invites self-presentation and performance? Candidates themselves also raised related concerns, questioning whether vocational discernment might be more appropriately carried out within local church communities by those who have seen them live out their faith over time. This invites deeper reflection on the ecclesiological assumptions embedded in the design of the SDP: where, and by whom, is vocation best discerned?

A second tension concerns how candidates and the church navigate agency, obedience, and trust within the SDP. While DDOs were clear that candidates retained some agency – such as the freedom to pause or withdraw from the process – the structure and requirements of the SDP were largely fixed. For candidates, this tension was experienced less in relation to the process itself and more in the cost of offering themselves for ordained ministry. Many described a profound sense of obedience and sacrifice, accepting the personal and familial implications as part of responding to God’s call. Candidates are often told to ‘trust the process’ as one by which God’s will is discerned and this requires temporarily laying aside these bigger questions and focusing on completing each component of the process, trusting that ultimately the outcome can be entrusted to God.[386] Yet this raises important theological questions: When candidates speak of obedience and sacrifice, to whom is that obedience owed and for whom is the sacrifice being made? Is it appropriate for DDOs to urge candidates to place their trust in the process, or should trust be directed more explicitly towards God? Is there a risk that divine authority becomes conflated with the institutional authority of the church, and what might be the implications for how vocation is discerned and tested?

A third theme, running throughout the interviews, was the central role that articulation plays in vocational discernment. Candidates repeatedly spoke of the importance of giving voice to their calling – both in private conversations and in formal components of the SDP. They described how speaking aloud helped them gain clarity, confidence and assurance. Many experienced affirmation when others reflected back what they had shared, or when they recognised their own journey in someone else’s story. DDOs, too, saw the ability to articulate vocation as central to the discernment process. Groupwork and one-to-one

[386] Claire, Emma, Ian, Lewis

conversations were seen as key tools to build confidence and clarity in preparation for national panels. While articulation clearly serves a practical function within the SDP, it also raises theological questions: If candidates are discerning God's will through speaking and being heard, how are divine communication and human expression interwoven in the discernment of vocation? In what ways might articulation itself be a theological act – a means by which God calls, confirms and clarifies?

This chapter has identified several areas of theological interest within the process of discernment. The tension between nurture and assessment, the complex dynamic of agency and obedience, and the formational role of articulation, all point to the need for further theological reflection on the nature and practice of vocational discernment. In the next chapter, I explore how these themes intersect with the design and structure of the SDP as a formal process to test vocation.

Chapter 7:
Testing God's Call

DDOs and candidates recognised that a central purpose of the SDP is to test whether God is calling an individual to ordained ministry. In this chapter, I examine how they understood the idea of 'testing' vocation, how this was implemented by DDOs, and how it was experienced by candidates. I begin by exploring how DDOs presented decision-making in the SDP. I also outline how DDOs explained the rationale behind the introduction of the revised discernment process, particularly its aim to improve accessibility and prioritise safeguarding. I then turn to candidates' experiences, focusing on the complexity of relational dynamics within the SDP, how candidates learnt to articulate their sense of call clearly and concisely for testing, and the challenges they faced in trusting the Church of England's institutional decision-making. I conclude by identifying theological questions raised by how vocation is tested within the SDP.

7.1 DDO Perspectives

When introducing the SDP to candidates, DDOs highlighted two key aspects of how vocation is tested. First, they explained the structure of the process, including outlining the distinct roles played by the local church, diocese, national panels, and the bishop. Second, they provided context for the recent redesign of the discernment process, noting its aims to improve accessibility, increase diversity, and embed robust safeguarding practices.

7.1.1 Decision-making in the SDP

7.1.1.1 Local, Diocesan and National Church

DDOs described the SDP as operating at three levels: local, diocesan, and national. Discernment begins in the local church – 'a living community where something's happening'[387] – before moving into the diocesan process (including meetings with the DDO, Bishop and others), and finally to the national process when candidates attend Stage One and Stage Two Panels.

[387] DDO5

Referring to local discernment, DDOs emphasised the importance of early conversations with the incumbent,[388] although some acknowledged that local clergy may not feel equipped for these.[389] Once a candidate enters the diocesan process, input from the local church recedes into the background except for the completion of a written reference by the incumbent. This shift was noted in the previous chapter when candidates expressed concern that local observations no longer significantly informed discernment.

At the diocesan level, the focus is on preparing candidates for the national panels – particularly through reflective conversations, paperwork, and gathering evidence of the Qualities. DDO3 commented, '[candidates] understand from the start...it's all building towards these two [panels] which are part of the national process.' Prior to attending the national panels, DDOs try to help candidates grow in confidence and the ability to articulate their sense of call, while identifying any areas needing further experience.[390] However, the focus of conversations often becomes primarily about gathering the information needed to complete the paperwork for the national panels. DDO2 explained, 'There is an evidence gathering aspect for us...we need to be writing papers at the end of it.' A document from his diocese stated: 'The exploration stage requires time and care so that tangible evidence can be provided for those who will play a part in the formal discernment of a call.'[391]

DDOs differed in what they understood themselves to be doing during the discernment process and emphasised different aspects of their role when explaining the process to candidates. Some DDOs saw themselves as discerning on behalf of the bishop, while others viewed their role primarily as facilitators who prepare candidates and present evidence. For example, DDO2 told candidates: 'We're providing evidence...we're not testing you here,' and used a flowchart to distinguish diocesan and national stages, explaining that 'the local is "discernment," the national is "assessment".' This distinction may be intended to reassure candidates that the diocesan stage is more exploratory, while the national panels assess candidates against agreed standards to ensure consistency across the Church. Nonetheless, some ambiguity about the influential role of the DDO remained. While the Stage Two Panel would give their recommendation, based partly on the DDO's report, DDOs gave mixed

[388] DDa, DDb, DDO1, DDO4
[389] DDa
[390] DDO2, DDO3, DDO4, DDb
[391] DDa

messages about whether the bishop was bound to follow this recommendation and about their own input into the bishop's decision.

7.1.1.2 Role of the Bishop and their Advisors

DDOs were clear that the bishop is ultimately responsible for decisions about whether a candidate proceeds to training.[392] They regularly referred to the bishop as the 'sponsor' and DDO2 described this as someone who 'agrees to finance their training and be the person overseeing it.' DDO3 noted that the final decision is 'absolutely part of [the bishop's] authority,' and the discernment process, while agreed nationally by the House of Bishops, is shaped locally, reflecting each bishop's preferred approach.[393]

Although the bishop makes the final decision, candidates often only meet them briefly and need to be reassured that the bishop's decision would be informed by an accurate assessment of their character and calling.[394] To this end, DDOs presented the wider discernment team – including themselves, Examining Chaplains, Vocations Advisors, Lay Assessors, and psychotherapists – as helping to build a comprehensive picture for the bishop to consider when making the decision whether to sponsor the candidate.[395]

DDOs reflected on their own specific role and contribution to the process of discernment. They recognised that they would be the primary point of contact with the candidate and their opinion will contribute to the bishop's eventual decision whether to sponsor them for a Stage Two Panel. However, they were keen to clarify that, while God was understood to be guiding the process, this did not mean DDOs had supernatural insight, nor were they infallible. DDO1 noted that this was one of the reasons why a psychotherapist was involved, 'just checking that we haven't missed anything...checking there's nothing that I haven't seen or I haven't been able to see from my skill set. You know, I'm not trained in looking deep into you.' Similarly, DDO3 spoke of the challenge of praying with candidates without implying divine approval and authority for the eventual outcome.

Throughout, DDOs affirmed that vocation comes from God, but discernment includes testing by the church and takes place within established church processes. As discussed in

[392] DDa, NMTa
[393] DDO2, DDO3, NMTa
[394] DDa, DDb, DDO2, DDO4, DDO5
[395] DDa, DDb, DDO4, DDO5

Chapter Three, there is a risk of conflating divine calling with institutional authority. This was recognised by DDO1 who briefly referred to 'obedience structures' in the Church of England, but was quick to clarify, 'we don't major on that part.' Nevertheless, the presentation of God as caller and the church as tester of that call presents an ongoing tension for DDOs and candidates to navigate.

7.1.2 Re-design of the Process

The research interviews for this study took place during the first year of the newly revised SDP. DDOs acknowledged that they were still adjusting to the new process themselves,[396] and offered candidates some explanation for the changes – particularly those aimed at increasing diversity and strengthening safeguarding.

7.1.2.1 Diversity and Inclusion

DDOs emphasised that one motivation for redesigning the process was to widen access and remove barriers for under-represented groups. DDO3 explained: 'There are those for whom there may have been obstacles...because of educational attainment or whatever it might be. There's been a lot of work to try and pull down those barriers.' He felt that, in naming this explicitly to candidates, he offered 'reassurance and confidence' to those who might otherwise feel overwhelmed or excluded. Other DDOs appreciated the use of more creative exercises at Stage One which enabled some candidates to participate more fully.[397] Nonetheless, recommended reading and essay-style written tasks remained central components of discernment in some dioceses.[398] While these requirements helped candidates reflect on their calling and learn to articulate it clearly, they also risked excluding those less confident in academic skills – suggesting further work may be needed to ensure genuine inclusion.

7.1.2.2 Safeguarding

DDOs also highlighted safeguarding as a key driver of the process's redesign by emphasising that, as part of the church's commitment to fostering an 'excellent safeguarding culture,' safeguarding is now embedded throughout the SDP.[399] This includes assessing a candidate's

[396] DDO3, DDe
[397] DDO1, DDb
[398] DDO1, DDO3
[399] DDO3, NMTa

character, boundaries, and potential to lead communities which offer 'a safe place for all.'[400] This assessment starts earlier than in the previous process. DDO4 mentioned requiring candidates to complete a 'safeguarding CV' which he described as an audit of significant relationships to pre-emptively check 'anything you think might emerge out of the woodwork.' In other dioceses, past relationships and patterns of behaviour were addressed through the Traffic Light Questions and psychotherapy assessment. This was explained as having a dual concern for the welfare of the church and the candidate: 'This safeguarding is both in terms of any potential risk presented by the candidate in future ministry, but also... to ensure the wellbeing of those called to this ministry for the duration of their ministry.'[401]

DDO3 commented that changes to the process had increased the 'depth and rigour' of the questions candidates were asked, but highlighted the need for more clarity about how this information would be used and who would read it.[402] In one diocese, the documentation given to candidates included a privacy statement and guidance on how to raise concerns.[403] However, this information was not routinely provided to candidates, suggesting inconsistency of practice and the need for clearer communication. As will be seen in the following section, candidates were concerned about this lack of transparency which impacted their experience of the process.

7.2 Candidates' Experience

Candidates recognised that the SDP is a formal ecclesial process with a clear purpose: to test whether an individual is being called by God to ordained ministry. While they sometimes likened it to a job interview[404] or school exams,[405] they acknowledged that these comparisons were overly simplistic. The SDP is not a competitive process, nor was it merely a test of skills or knowledge. Rather, it sought to consider the whole of a candidate's life and sense of vocation.[406] Crucially, candidates understood the process to be guided by God and marked by prayerful participation.[407] This added a layer of complexity: the SDP is both a

[400] NMTa
[401] DDc
[402] DDO3
[403] DDa
[404] Brenda, Ian, Lewis
[405] Emma, Ian, Philippa
[406] Emma, Nathan
[407] Rachel, Olivia

human system, serving 'a very large organisation, which the Church of England is,'[408] and a spiritual process concerned with discerning God's will. As Nathan put it, 'you're preparing for a vocation, not just...a job.'[409]

In reflecting on their experiences, candidates spoke about the complexity of the interpersonal dynamics involved in the SDP, the strategies they developed to navigate and communicate within the system, and their perceptions of ecclesial authority and institutional structure. These aspects are explored in greater depth below.

7.2.1 Complicated Relational Dynamics

7.2.1.1 Authenticity and Assessment

As previously noted, DDOs recognised that their role involved both nurturing and assessing vocation – a tension also felt by candidates. Gabrielle, for instance, expressed confusion about the purpose of her interactions during the SDP, saying, 'you come in "discerning" and, actually, really quickly it turns to "assessing".' For many candidates, discernment was seen as the spiritual exploration of calling, while assessment was understood as evaluation of their suitability based on experience, character, or ability.[410] The latter prompted some to wonder, 'Do I really have to go through this whole process? Do I really have to face all these kinds of challenges and hurdles?'[411] and to grapple with the idea of entrusting the outcome of the process to fallible human judgment.

The sense of being assessed was closely linked with notions of passing or failing. Andrew, for example, described preparing for Stage Two by reminding himself, 'I have been assessed on everything I need to be assessed on, and I've passed.' Others found the scores received at Stage One either affirming[412] or distressing.[413] Gabrielle described the scoring system as 'brutal,' saying that the numerical scores made her feel judged: 'They're trying to find out what you haven't got and what you're not good at.'

This sense of scrutiny complicated relationships with the DDO and others within the process. This was evident when Philippa described her relief at having an opportunity during

[408] Brenda
[409] Nathan
[410] Andrew, Claire, Gabrielle
[411] Olivia, Philippa, Kathryn
[412] Fiona, Lewis, Rachel
[413] Tom, Gabrielle, Rachel

the research interview to speak to someone who was not involved in evaluating her vocation: 'No matter how easy-going the conversation is, there's an element of anxiety...because [the DDO's] opinion matters and it could influence the rest of your journey.' This anxiety was heightened by the short timescales in which judgements were made. Candidates felt they needed to make a good impression quickly and condense their presentation of themselves and their sense of call into pithy, concise responses.[414] This was particularly evident at the national panels where conversations were much shorter than at a diocesan level. Sarah observed that after months of in-depth conversations, 'everything is condensed into two 75-minute interviews...which puts immense pressure on us.'

Candidates recognised the necessity of being open and honest to enable accurate assessment of their vocation, and several framed this as a commitment to authenticity.[415] For example, Nathan argued that presenting a false front during discernment could lead to issues surfacing at a later date and causing a problem for the individual and church.[416] Meanwhile, Kathryn said that she had to keep reminding herself that, if she was called, she was called as herself, not a projection of the ideal priest: 'if I do progress, then I want to know that it's me who's being called, not this pretend person that I've created along the way.'[417]

Yet being authentic and open in an evaluative context left many feeling exposed.[418] Max described their experience using vivid terms:

> 'They cut you open in front of you, pull all your guts out. You have a look at your guts, they're like, "Mmm...what's this? What's this?" and then they...put it all back in the wrong place and you have to...jiggle it all down to move it back again. And the emotional [impact of that]...yeah, it goes all over the place.'

While recognising that they needed to allow a close and careful testing of their calling, and that this necessitated scrutiny at a deep level, Max's experience was of being told to be honest about their character and past experiences, whilst simultaneously feeling that 'they were going to try and catch me out' and that 'I was sort of being punished for having a life

[414] Gabrielle, Ian, Kathryn, Sarah
[415] Emma, Rachel
[416] Nathan
[417] Kathryn
[418] Fiona, Max

and having a story.' Max found much of the discernment process 'painful' and commented, 'there's a lack of trust there.'

Similarly, other interviewees described feeling that the emphasis on authenticity in the context of assessment left them feeling vulnerable and exposed.[419] While candidates often considered their relationship with the DDO to be one in which they felt safe to explore difficult topics, there was a concern that they did not know how the personal information they revealed would be used, or what the limits of confidentiality were within the SDP. For instance, Fiona wondered, 'Who's going to read [my story] and what they are going to do with it?' Similarly, Max had moments of questioning 'What's going around [about me]?' and described feeling 'vulnerable at stages in the process when you don't know where that information is going.' Emma, by contrast, felt less concerned because her diocese had clearly explained how information would be used, showing that transparency helped mitigate these fears.[420]

7.2.1.2 Impact of Candidates' Personal Characteristics

For some candidates, the tension between authenticity and assessment in the SDP was more concerning and upsetting than it was for others. Certain personal characteristics were mentioned in interviews which led to candidates feeling particularly vulnerable. These included: low academic attainment, being female, sexuality or gender identity, and being from a Global Majority Heritage (GMH) / UK minority ethnic (UKME) background.

While candidates knew that the SDP was designed to be more inclusive than previous systems of discernment, they still felt academic ability remained essential for engaging with reading material and completing forms.[421] This was perceived as a barrier for those with lower levels of prior academic attainment. Una reported consciously encouraging herself by saying, 'Have faith. Hold on. If this is God's will, he's going to provide [me] with the academic ability and with the time and with the money.'

Women in discernment also faced particular challenges, recognising that they had not always been welcomed in ordained ministry and that women's priesthood remained contentious in some traditions. Una reflected on her upbringing and church context, both of

[419] Emma, Fiona, Rachel
[420] Emma
[421] Una, Emma

which viewed ministry as male-only, and noted that she would need to leave her church to train, despite their general encouragement. Max, who described their gender identity as 'complex', said they would have benefited from contact with the Dean of Women's Ministry or other spaces to explore gender and ministry.[422] There were also examples of overt insensitivity related to gender. Olivia was told that her pregnancy meant she would be 'taking up someone else's space' if she went to a national panel while pregnant, and that her marriage to a divorcee and subsequent pregnancy were 'unfortunate life events' as they delayed her discernment process. She questioned whether a male candidate would have been treated similarly.

The two candidates who identified as gay described the process as painful and costly – particularly when engaging with *Issues in Human Sexuality*,[423] which led both to consider leaving the process.[424] Other candidates also expressed discomfort with the Church's stance on LGBTQ+ inclusion and found this document difficult to reconcile with their sense of being called to ministry in the Church of England.[425]

Race further complicated the relational dynamic in the SDP. Philippa described the discomfort of often being 'the only black person in the room' and the isolation that came from not knowing others from a similar background who were exploring vocation. She said that she would have found it helpful to reflect on how her African heritage and the colonial past in her birth country impacted on her sense of being called to serve in the Church of England. However, she felt unable to do this with her DDO, fearing that it might affect the assessment made of her readiness for ministry. She commented that there needs to be an acknowledgement within the SDP that, 'sometimes we think about race as just "oh, okay, representation, that's important." But actually, there's an internal conflict in people engaging in that space.' She suggested that an external mentor or conversation with a Black priest would have helped her explore this racial dynamic more fully during her discernment.[426]

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[422] Max
[423] Church of England, *Issues in Human Sexuality: A Statement by the House of Bishops of the General Synod of the Church of England* (Church House Publishing, 1991).
[424] Fiona, Max
[425] Andrew, Daniela
[426] Philippa

7.2.2 Learning to Communicate Calling

Building on the previous section, which identified the challenges candidates faced in being authentic within an evaluative process, this section considers how candidates navigated those interpersonal dynamics by learning to communicate their calling effectively. As noted previously, many described this as a gradual process in which their ability to articulate vocation became clearer over time. However, given the significance of such conversations, candidates were also acutely sensitive to moments when communication was difficult. Several expressed feeling under pressure to say the 'right' things to convince assessors of their vocation and were particularly distressed when they felt misunderstood by those responsible for testing their sense of call.

7.2.2.1 Saying the 'Right' Things

Throughout the process, candidates frequently felt the need to convince or persuade assessors of their suitability for ministry by what they said and how they spoke.[427] This was particularly stressful for those who found it difficult to think on their feet or express their thoughts concisely.[428] While most entered the process with a strong sense of call, many struggled to communicate this, and needed space and practice to refine how they spoke about it.[429] Philippa reflected, 'You know what God's put on your heart, but don't necessarily know how to articulate it to people in a way that they would understand and digest it fairly quickly.' Similarly, Kathryn felt she needed time to explore her vocation in a way that was, 'authentic, but also...could be assessed.'

As candidates approached Stage Two, many described the diocesan process as a form of preparation for this culminating point of assessment.[430] Several acknowledged that they had grown in clarity through repeated opportunities to speak about their vocation, but that this growth was often motivated by the perceived need to perform well in interviews.

This pressure was particularly acute for candidates from low church or charismatic evangelical backgrounds. They worried that their language and theological frameworks might not resonate with assessors from different traditions. Nathan had been warned early

[427] Brenda, Gabrielle, Kathryn, Nathan, Philippa
[428] Emma, Gabrielle, Olivia
[429] Gabrielle, Kathryn, Olivia, Sarah
[430] Gabrielle, James, Philippa

on that, 'if you're not Anglo-Catholic, you're probably going to struggle.' Rachel contrasted her experience as someone from an informal church background with that of a friend more familiar with sacramental theology and practice who seemed to instinctively know what to say and how to say it.[431] She felt that the process assumed that 'a traditional Church of England church' context was normative for ordinands. Brenda echoed this, saying that she felt 'pushed into or channelled one particular view' of the sacraments and priesthood, and although uncomfortable with that framing, she still felt the need to say the right things to satisfy her assessors.[432]

7.2.2.2 Feeling Misunderstood

Having an assessor of a different church tradition was a reason that candidates worried they might be misunderstood and not recommended for training.[433] Nathan reflected on how easily conversations could go wrong if a candidate 'offend[ed] or upset someone by triggering or pushing buttons...because their tradition is...different to mine.' He suspected that this had contributed to negative feedback from one assessor in his case.[434] Rachel also recalled a difficult interview with an assessor from a different tradition, even as she affirmed the value of encountering a breadth of perspectives during discernment.[435]

Tradition was not the only cause of potential misunderstandings. Candidates also described being judged or misinterpreted in more personal ways. Max, for example, spoke about the difficulty of discussing past mental health issues and feeling 'they were going to try and catch me out,' along with the fear that 'if they're not sure, then everything just stops.' Others struggled to convey the emotional depth of their experiences in words. Several mentioned the importance of having supportive friends with whom they could process feelings of frustration and hurt, such as Olivia who said she needed people she could 'shout and rant at...and go, "Ah! I can't articulate this, or I'm feeling hurt by this!"'

While difficult interactions were upsetting, some candidates reflected that such challenges ultimately helped them articulate their calling with greater clarity and confidence.[436]

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[431] Rachel
[432] Brenda
[433] Kathryn, Sarah
[434] Nathan
[435] Rachel
[436] Gabrielle, Max, Olivia, Una

However, this may reflect sample bias. It is possible that candidates who felt misunderstood or deeply affected by difficult conversations chose to withdraw from the process before the Stage Two Panel. A number of those interviewed admitted they had considered doing so at various points, even though they eventually decided to continue in discernment.

7.2.3 Ecclesial Authority and Decision-making

Several factors appeared to shape candidates' interactions with those tasked with testing their vocation, including their perceptions of how the Church of England functions as an institution. Many candidates expressed some suspicion and hesitancy about institutional systems and how decisions are made within the Church. Nevertheless, candidates also appreciated the clarity and value in having a national process, and felt that it brought a degree of parity and rigour to vocational discernment. These aspects of testing will be explored in more depth in this next section.

7.2.3.1 Engaging with the CofE as an Institution

While many candidates felt they developed a trusting relationship with their DDO, several expressed discomfort, distrust, or suspicion of the Church of England as the overarching authority in the SDP. Brenda, for example, described the church in institutional terms, likening ministry to her experience working in the NHS: 'We work within an organisation, which has its own rules and culture...but at the same time, [we're] also given quite a lot of freedom and responsibility.' She expressed concern that the Church of England did not really care for individuals who worked within it, particularly the financial and practical conditions under which clergy were expected to minister: '[they've] got us over a barrel...it's like, "the conditions are going to be awful; we're not going to pay you, we're only going to give you one day off a week; but it's alright because you're doing God's will!"' Her comment suggests a suspicion that theological language could be used to justify institutional goals.

Similar concerns arose for candidates required to apply for a C4 Faculty due to previous divorce or to discuss their sexuality. Several felt that the church operated within contested theological and ethical terrain, but held significant power to end the discernment process if a candidate objected to the interpretation of marriage/re-marriage or sexuality expressed in *Issues in Human Sexuality*. Claire described the repeated interrogation of her divorce, twenty years earlier, as 'almost a form of abuse.' She could only make sense of this experience by focusing on her sense of being called by God personally, and distinguishing

that call from the church's role in assessing it.[437] Olivia expressed something similar, saying she found peace by 'relocating the conversation between me and God' rather than focusing on institutional mechanisms. Fiona, who engaged with the C4 Faculty process as a divorcee and struggled with *Issues in Human Sexuality* as a lesbian, said her friends were 'horrified that I've been prepared to offer my innermost-self up for scrutiny,' and added, 'they can't imagine having trust in an institution in that way.'

There was some acknowledgement that the Church of England had tried to address issues of power and abuse in redesigning the discernment process.[438] However, suspicion remained that the Church had not fully reckoned with its historic legacy, including abuse scandals, sexism, homophobia, and colonialism.[439] For many candidates, the experience of vocational discernment required them to hold in tension a personal sense of divine calling and a cautious relationship with the institutional church testing it.

7.2.3.2 Contribution of National Components of the SDP

Despite these concerns, most candidates valued the national components of the SDP. They appreciated the consistency and parity it brought across dioceses. As noted previously, candidates often worried that national advisors did not have long enough to be informed in their recommendations, however there was general recognition that the national team had a vital role of 'oversight' for the whole process.[440] Tom commented, 'There's got to be some sort of common benchmark for selection for ordination' noting that clergy might later serve in other dioceses and therefore needed to meet a shared standard.

Candidates also appreciated the rigour of the process, even when it felt burdensome. They reported that friends and family were often surprised by how long the process took, but were reassured by its thoroughness. Daniela recalled her friends saying, 'There should be a really high bar for being a vicar...it's quite reassuring that not just anyone is let in on a whim.' Similarly, Emma's non-Christian friends were 'impressed by the rigour of the process.'

[437] Claire
[438] Kathryn, Philippa
[439] Fiona, Ian, Max, Philippa
[440] Henry

Although demanding, the length and depth of the process often strengthened their sense of call. Fiona noted, 'when anything is tested or challenged, you don't know how it will respond' and found that her vocation had been 'strengthened and affirmed' by the experience. Max appreciated being 'tested and pushed' during the process, while Gabrielle, Una and Rachel used language such as 'suffering,' 'struggle,' 'emotional,' and 'gruelling' to describe their experience. Nonetheless, they too found their calling clarified and deepened through being thoroughly tested.[441] These accounts suggest that the challenge of testing vocation, though difficult, can yield a profound sense of confidence and confirmation which might not be achieved through a shorter or less rigorous process.

7.3 Testing God's Call: Theological Themes and Questions

While it is encouraging that DDOs are aware of the issues of power and authority involved in testing a call to ordained ministry and that efforts have been made to mitigate these in the design of the SDP, candidates' accounts suggest that significant challenges remain. This research has highlighted particular concerns around institutional power, the interpersonal dynamics of assessment, and the need to communicate vocation in ways that can be recognised by others. These raise important questions which warrant further theological reflection.

Firstly, this research identified concerns among candidates about the extent to which they could 'trust the process' when it was perceived as an expression of institutional power and decision-making. DDOs presented the structures and systems of vocational discernment as a logical outworking of the Church of England's ecclesiology, with the bishop making the final decision based on advice from various advisors. However, candidates remained anxious about whether they could be accurately assessed within a process established by a large institution to determine their suitability for ministry. This concern was especially pronounced among candidates from under-represented or non-traditional groups, who questioned whether the Church of England had fully reckoned with its legacy of institutional discrimination. This raises important theological questions: How does the church recognise and take responsibility for the institutional power it holds – particularly when that power can be exercised with a claim of divine mandate? How does it acknowledge the possibility,

[441] Gabrielle, Rachel, Una

even the inevitability, of getting things wrong? How might formal ecclesial processes, such as the SDP, be designed to account for and mitigate these dynamics, ensuring that discernment is genuinely open, just, and responsive to the Holy Spirit rather than shaped by unexamined institutional bias?

A second aspect of testing in the SDP highlighted by this research was the tension between assessment and authenticity. Candidates described feeling exposed when asked to reveal deeply personal aspects of their identity within a process designed to test, weigh and judge their suitability for ministry. This sense of vulnerability was particularly acute for those who feared that aspects of their identity – such as race, gender, sexuality, mental health history, or academic background – might count against them. As noted earlier, DDOs are aware of the relational and pastoral dimensions of their role and the inherent tensions in a process that is both nurturing and evaluative. Many sought to mitigate these tensions by being approachable, offering clarity about the process, and explaining how candidates' personal information would be handled. Nevertheless, it appears that candidates often experienced a greater emotional and spiritual response to this tension than DDOs seemed to recognise. This raises important theological and pastoral questions: What might it look like for a process of testing vocation to hold together a commitment to truthfulness, vulnerability and authenticity with the institutional requirement for assessment and discernment? How can the church ensure that its practices of testing are not inadvertently exclusionary or damaging, especially for those who may not conform to dominant norms? And more broadly, what theological framework might support a mode of discernment that honours the dignity of each candidate while still exercising the church's responsibility to discern calling with wisdom and integrity?

The third aspect emerging from this research into the testing of vocation concerns the pressure candidates felt to express their sense of call in the 'right' way in order to be understood and accepted. This adds complexity to the theme of articulation explored in the previous chapter. While earlier findings suggested that speaking about vocation was a generative and affirming part of the discernment journey, in this context it emerged as a source of anxiety. Candidates worried that they might be misunderstood, misrepresented, or fail to meet the expectations of those responsible for assessing their call. This concern was notably absent from DDOs' reflections. Instead, DDOs viewed the diocesan process as a

space for candidates to become more confident and precise in articulating their call, preparing them for the definitive conversations at the Stage Two Panel. However, this divergence in perspective raises significant questions: Are candidates being implicitly taught to translate or reframe their vocation in ways that conform to a particular set of expectations? What happens to the discernment of those whose communication style, cultural background, or church tradition does not align with the norms assumed by assessors? Theologically, how might the Church reflect on the risk that certain voices may be unintentionally marginalised or silenced within a process meant to be attentive to God's call? And how can the Church cultivate a mode of testing that makes space for diverse expressions of vocation without compromising rigour or discernment?

This chapter has identified three areas of tension in how vocation is tested within the SDP. First, candidates often expressed a lack of trust in the Church of England as an institution, and by extension, in the processes it uses to assess vocation. Second, the relational dynamic of discernment demands authenticity and vulnerability, yet the context is one of assessment and judgement. Third, the emphasis on articulation can imply that only certain ways of expressing vocation are acceptable, pressuring candidates to conform. Together, these issues raise important theological questions about the Church's processes and practices of vocational discernment.

Part 3: Summary

In Part 3, I have explored how DDOs and candidates understand and experience vocational discernment towards ordained ministry through the SDP. I focused on this process as a context in which candidates hear God's call, discern a vocation to ordained ministry, and have that vocation tested by the church. Each of the three chapters concluded with theological questions raised by this data analysis. In reviewing these questions, I have identified two recurring themes which require further theological reflection.

The first theme is the significant role that articulation of vocation plays within the SDP. DDOs described supporting candidates in gaining the confidence and clarity needed to tell their story and express their sense of call, both as a way of nurturing vocation and preparing them for assessment. Candidates found that verbalising their call helped them reflect more deeply on their life experiences and discern God's guidance. However, this was often accompanied by anxiety about saying the wrong thing, being misunderstood, or failing to meet unspoken expectations. Many felt the pressure to frame their story in a particular way, especially when preparing for national panel interviews, and wondered whether this was truly authentic. For those from under-represented backgrounds, this pressure was amplified by the need to conform to a perceived normative model of priesthood.

The second theme is the power dynamic embedded within the SDP as a process which seeks to both nurture and assess vocation. While DDOs recognised this tension and employed various strategies to build trust, their approaches varied and often relied on establishing good rapport with candidates and guiding them through the process. Candidates, meanwhile, frequently described feeling vulnerable, uncertain, and fearful – particularly regarding how their personal information would be interpreted and whether the church, as an institution, could be trusted to judge their vocation fairly. This concern was especially acute among candidates from marginalised or historically excluded groups.

These two themes are deeply interconnected. The pressure to articulate vocation in the 'right' way is heightened by the institutional power held by assessors, and the relational complexity of being known and assessed within the same conversations. In Part Four, I will explore these tensions further, drawing on theological and interdisciplinary sources to offer a deeper analysis and develop constructive insights from theological reflection on this

process of vocational discernment. The first theme around the articulation of calling will be addressed in two chapters focusing on narrative and authenticity in discerning vocation, while the second theme will be addressed in a chapter on the power dynamics in the SDP.

PART 4
THEOLOGICAL REFLECTION

Part 4: Introduction

As outlined at the end of Part Three, from interviews with DDOs and candidates about their experience and understanding of the SDP, I have identified key themes which require further theological reflection.

The first theme relates to the articulation of calling as candidates are required to verbalise their life story to others, and share these personal stories with authenticity and openness.

The second theme is that of power, with DDOs and candidates recognising the relational complexity of their interactions.

I explore these themes over the three chapters of Part Four:

Chapter Eight (*Storying the Self: Narrative*) examines how vocation is nurtured through the telling and re-telling of personal stories, and how candidates interpret interpersonal interactions as indicators of God's guidance and direction.

Chapter Nine (*Preparing to Perform: Authenticity*) considers how vocation is tested by others. I reflect on the pressure candidates feel to be authentic while they are being assessed, and the weight placed on interview performance in discerning vocation.

Chapter Ten (*Trusting the Process: Power*) draws together the themes of nurture and assessment to explore power differentials within the SDP, especially between DDOs and candidates.

In each chapter, I draw on theological and interdisciplinary sources to interrogate how narrative, authenticity, and power operate in the SDP. I offer theological analysis and critique, as well as identifying practical recommendations for vocational discernment.

Chapter 8
Storying the Self: Narrative

8.1 Introduction

Part Three presented a thick description of the SDP, drawing on interviews with DDOs about how they explain the process to candidates, and with candidates about their experience of discerning vocation through the SDP. From these data, I identified the articulation of calling as a significant theme in the discernment process. In this chapter and the next, I explore this theme in conversation with interdisciplinary and theological sources. The present chapter focuses on the storytelling aspects of discerning vocation, while Chapter Nine will examine authenticity in the performance of calling when that call is being tested by others. In the final chapter of Part Four, I widen the lens further, exploring the complex power dynamic between candidates and assessors.

The focus of this chapter is on narrative in vocational discernment, and on how the storytelling components of the SDP might be understood theologically. Storytelling was spoken about in DDO and candidate interviews in two ways. First, vocation was often described using narrative imagery as something dynamic and unfolding throughout an individual's life. Within this framework, past events were seen as indicative of a call to ordained ministry, woven together with the present formational experience of discernment, and the anticipation of a possible future as a priest. Fiona captured this sense when she reflected on sharing her life story during the process, saying: 'It's just made me so in awe of everything God has accomplished in different parts of my life to bring [me] to this point.' Second, storytelling was a primary means by which DDOs anticipated being able to discern vocation. This was evident in how they invited candidates to share their stories of calling, expecting that signs of vocation would be apparent through this narrative presentation of past experiences, current engagement with the process, and future hopes for ministry. Candidates reported being asked to share their vocational story repeatedly with different assessors. While many felt that this repetition helped them hone their ability to tell their story succinctly and confidently, they also expressed anxiety that their narrative could be misheard or misinterpreted – especially when their experiences differed from what they

perceived as the 'norm' for ordained ministry. This was evident in Max's reflection about sharing their past mental health challenges with assessors: 'I [felt] I was sort of being punished for having a life and having a story.'

The emphasis on storytelling as both indicative of calling and a means by which it can be assessed raises important theological and practical questions about the rationale behind this narrative approach and its impact on vocational discernment.

First, it highlights a tension between the interior work of self-reflection undertaken by the candidate and the need for that sense of call to be externalised so that the church can test it. This raises the question: Does the focus on storytelling in the SDP suggest that vocation is something discovered within the individual or chosen by them, rather than something heard as an external call from God through the church?

Second, the emphasis on candidates' re-telling of past events raises the possibility that their recollection and interpretation of their own stories may be inaccurate or incomplete. This prompts a further question: How can the discernment process appropriately challenge a candidate's vocational narrative, especially when their personal interpretation points towards ordained ministry but others in the process discern a different outcome?

In this chapter, I explore these two questions by engaging with narrative approaches from psychology and theology. I begin with an overview of how 'story' has become an influential lens for interpreting selfhood, identity, and meaning-making. I examine the contrasting ways in which psychology and theology conceptualise narrative's function in constructing the self and shaping individuals' sense of purpose.[442] From this broad overview, I then engage more deeply with the influential perspective of Stanley Hauerwas, in which narrative is central to his vision of identity, character, community, and ministry. I argue that Hauerwas' narrative theology offers a constructive framework for understanding the role that storytelling can play within vocational discernment – although this connection has not previously been explored either by Hauerwas himself or by others writing about his work. I suggest that Hauerwas' narrative approach highlights both the risk of self-deception and the vital role of the church community in discerning and testing vocation. I conclude by outlining the implications of viewing the SDP through a narrative theological lens, proposing that this

[442] 'Story' and 'narrative' are used interchangeably, in line with: Bryan, *Human Being*, 30.

offers a helpful re-framing of the tensions between individual and communal discernment, while also clarifying the distinctive approach to selection required by the nature of ordained ministry.

8.2 Storying the Self: Interdisciplinary Perspectives of Narrative

In an influential essay published in 1971, philosopher Stephen Crites argued that human life is fundamentally shaped by narrative – through both the 'mundane stories' that individuals tell about themselves and the 'sacred stories' which connect them to their wider cultural, historical and social contexts.[443] Although Crites acknowledged that he could not empirically prove this claim, he described it as 'self-evident' and intuitively accurate to suggest that human beings tend to view their lives through a narrative lens.[444]

In the decades since, various academic disciplines have taken up this insight, exploring narrative as a conceptual framework for understanding human identity and social interaction.[445] In particular, narrative psychology has developed Crites' suggestion that storytelling is integral to human self-understanding, proposing that the self is primarily formed through narrative. Theologians, too, have explored how recognising the centrality of narrative offers fresh perspective on God's self-revelation in history and scripture, as well as on personal identity and ethical formation. In this section, I offer a brief overview of how narrative approaches have developed within psychology and theology, in order to locate storytelling in the vocational discernment process in this wider interdisciplinary context.

8.2.1 Narrative in Psychology

Storytelling has long been associated with psychotherapy and counselling sessions during which individuals are invited to explore the influence of their past experiences on their present circumstances.[446] Although academic psychology has traditionally emphasised the need to understand human behaviour through verifiable empirical studies, over the past thirty years narrative has increasingly been adopted as an integrating theoretical concept. Within this framework, narrative is seen as foundational to how people interpret their

[443] Stephen Crites, 'The Narrative Quality of Experience', in *Why Narrative? Readings in Narrative Theology*, ed. Stanley Hauerwas (Wipf and Stock, 1997), 69–72.
[444] Crites, 65.
[445] Eunil David Cho, 'Do We All Live Story-Shaped Lives? Narrative Identity, Episodic Life, and Religious Experience', *Religions* 12, no. 71 (2021): 1.
[446] Bryan, *Human Being*, 7.

experiences, understand themselves, and relate to others.[447] Indeed, it has been suggested that narrative offers psychology a 'root metaphor' for thinking about human nature and behaviour, in contrast to more mechanistic or reductive models.[448]

A key figure in the development of narrative psychology is Dan McAdams, who in the mid-1980s proposed narrative as a comprehensive theoretical model for identity and identified research approaches to explore identity within a narrative framework.[449] McAdams argued that, 'in the modern world...*identity is a life story,*' suggesting that individuals begin to understand the self as a narrative project in late adolescence, and continue making sense of their experiences by telling stories about themselves throughout their lives.[450] According to McAdams, this storytelling enables individuals to construct meaning and coherence from disparate events by organising and interpreting their experiences in narrative form.[451] He describes this process as the creation of a 'personal myth...an act of imagination that is a patterned integration of our remembered past, perceived present, and anticipated future,' observing that 'as both author and reader, we come to appreciate our own myth for its beauty and its psychosocial truth.'[452] For McAdams, identity is not a fixed essence hidden within the individual but something shaped and created through life events and reflection upon those experiences. 'We do not discover ourselves in myth; we *make ourselves* through myth,' he asserts.[453] Later work by McAdams and others has explored in more detail how personal narratives are constructed, expressed, and interpreted, as well as the insights this offers into character development and identity formation.[454]

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[447] Bryan, 7; Cho, 'Do We All Live Story-Shaped Lives? Narrative Identity, Episodic Life, and Religious Experience', 1; Janet Ruffing, *To Tell the Sacred Tale: Spiritual Direction and Narrative* (Paulist Press, 2011), 68; James M. Day, 'Narrative, Postformal Cognition, and Religious Belief', in *Religious Stories We Live By: Narrative Approaches in Theology and Religious Studies*, ed. Reinder Ruard Ganzevoort (Brill, 2014), 33.

[448] Theodore R. Sarbin, 'The Narrative as a Root Metaphor for Psychology', in *Narrative Psychology: The Storied Nature of Human Conduct* (Praeger, 1986), 3–21.

[449] Dan McAdams, 'Narrative Identity', in *Handbook of Identity Theory and Research*, ed. Seth J. Schwartz, Koen Luyckx, and Vivian L. Vignoles (Springer, 2011), 99.

[450] Dan McAdams, *The Stories We Live by: Personal Myths and the Making of the Self* (Guilford Press, 1997), 5.

[451] McAdams, 11–13.

[452] McAdams, 12.

[453] McAdams, 13.

[454] For example: Dan McAdams, 'What Do We Know When We Know a Person?', *Journal of Personality* 63, no. 3 (1995): 365–96; Dan McAdams, 'Psychopathology and the Self: Human Actors, Agents and Authors', *Journal of Personality* 88, no. 1 (February 2020): 146–55; Dan McAdams and Kate McLean, 'Narrative Identity', *Current Directions in Psychological Science* 22, no. 3 (June 2013): 233–38; Joshua Wilt, Sarah Thomas, and Dan McAdams, 'Authenticity and Inauthenticity in Narrative Identity', *Heliyon* 5 (2019): 1–13. James Holstein and Jaber Gubrium, *The Self We Live by: Narrative Identity in a Postmodern World* (Oxford University Press, 2000).

Beyond identity, McAdams suggests that narrative is also the means by which people discover meaning and purpose in life.[455] The act of selecting, interpreting, and organising life events into a coherent story allows individuals to make sense of their experiences and to discern a trajectory toward the future. As the individual reflects on their experiences and acts as both author and editor in telling their life story, they select certain events which are deemed particularly significant, while others are minimised or overlooked.[456] This process seeks to recognise coherence amidst the complexity of life's events and, from this, to discern a meaningful narrative arc.[457] In addition to bringing a sense of purpose and clarifying personal identity, this kind of narrative meaning-making also offers a way of reinterpreting negative experiences which McAdams calls 'the redemptive self.'[458] This mode of storytelling focuses on the positive outcomes from negative events, enabling individuals to find meaning and significance through what they have experienced.[459] However, this optimistic emphasis has been critiqued as overly simplistic, particularly in the face of severe trauma which can shatter an individual's sense of identity.[460] Sociologist Arthur Frank, for example, describes the 'narrative wreckage' or 'anti-narrative' which can occur when events do not fit into the meaningful and coherent story an individual has constructed about themselves, and cautions against the desire for tidy narrative resolution in the midst of chaos.[461]

A further critique of narrative approaches to identity formation is the concern that the theory arises from the culture and personality of those who advocate for it, rather than being a universal feature of what it means to be human.[462] Early proponents of narrative identity sometimes implied that storytelling is a universal human practice, but more recent scholarship has made less strident claims about the universality of this approach to personal identity formation. Influenced by philosophers such as Paul Ricoeur and Alistair McIntyre, narrative psychologists have increasingly come to emphasise the communal and cultural

[455] McAdams, 'Narrative Identity', 99–100; McAdams, *The Stories We Live By*, 11.
[456] Holstein and Gubrium, *The Self We Live By*, 107; McAdams and McLean, 'Narrative Identity', 236.
[457] McAdams and McLean, 'Narrative Identity', 236.
[458] McAdams, 'Narrative Identity', 109.
[459] McAdams and McLean, 'Narrative Identity', 233.
[460] Bryan, *Human Being*, 46–47.
[461] Arthur Frank, *The Wounded Storyteller: Body, Illness, and Ethics* (University of Chicago Press, 2006), 98–110.
[462] Michael Bamberg, Anna DeFina, and Deborah Schiffrin, 'Discourse and Identity Construction', in *Handbook of Identity Theory and Research*, eds. Seth Schwartz, Koen Luyckx, and Vivian Vignoles (Springer, 2011), 186; Galen Strawson, 'Against Narrativity', *Ratio* 17, no. 4 (December 2004): 437.

embeddedness of personal storytelling.[463] McAdams himself has increasingly acknowledged the role of culture and community in shaping personal stories, describing narrative identity as a 'co-authored, psychosocial construction, a joint product of the person him/herself and the culture wherein the person acts, strives and narrates.'[464]

Whilst it is important to acknowledge concerns that stories can be unhelpfully interpreted or imposed, and that this may be a primarily Western postmodern perspective on selfhood, narrative identity continues to offer an enduring, rich and constructive contribution to psychological theory and practice. Its influence extends beyond academic psychology into popular culture, including through the popularisation of psychology in self-help books and growing numbers of people engaging in therapy.[465] For example, recent research presented in a Colombian psychology journal found that people going through career changes often made sense of significant vocational transitions by interpreting them within their unfolding personal life story.[466] The authors of this study suggest that this is indicative of wider social incorporation of narrative perspectives on identity and selfhood.[467]

Against this backdrop, it is unsurprising that both DDOs and candidates within the SDP instinctively turn to narrative as a familiar framework for vocational exploration. While the psychotherapeutic assessment component of the SDP explicitly draws on psychodynamic theory to interpret candidates' life stories, the use of storytelling throughout the rest of the discernment process does not appear to be informed by a particular psychological or theological framework. Without deeper theological reflection on the way that narrative functions within vocational discernment, the default interpretative framework may be a form of pseudo-psychology which draws superficially and uncritically on narrative identity theory.

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[463] Alasdair C. MacIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory*, 3rd ed (Bloomsbury, 2011); Paul Ricœur, *Time and Narrative. Vol. 1*, trans. Kathleen McLaughlin and David Pellauer, vol. 1 (University of Chicago Press, 2009).
[464] McAdams, 'Narrative Identity', 111–12.
[465] This popularisation of narrative identity is discussed by: Maria Mäkelä and Samuli Björninen, 'My Story, Your Narrative: Scholarly Terms and Popular Usage', in *The Routledge Companion to Narrative Theory*, ed. Paul Dawson and Maria Mäkelä (Routledge, 2023), 11–23; Michael White, 'Folk Psychology and Narrative Practice', *Dulwich Centre Journal* 2 (2001): 68 and 77; Daniel Nehring and Dylan Kerrigan, *Therapeutic Worlds: Popular Psychology and the Socio-Cultural Organisation of Intimate Life*, Therapeutic Cultures (Routledge, 2019).
[466] Javier Orlando Beltrán-Jaimes, Carlos Sandoval, and Moisés Esteban-Guitart, 'Vocational Choice: A Narrative Identity Approach Conceived from Cultural Psychology', *Revista Colombiana de Psicologia* 32, no. 2 (2023): 13–32.
[467] Beltrán-Jaimes, Sandoval, and Esteban-Guitart, 17.

Engagement with psychological work on narrative highlights the potential of storytelling to help individuals recognise continuity and coherence in their past experiences and to discern meaning and direction for the future. At pivotal moments of significant life transition, such as vocational discernment, this narrative framework can reassure candidates that their sense of call is not an impulsive decision but rather the fulfilment of a lifetime of disparate events and experiences. For those exploring ordained ministry, this may reinforce feelings of inevitability or destiny as they narrate their vocational journey in ways that suggest coherence and divine purpose. However, this approach also raises theological concerns. There is a risk, as John Swinton warns, of 'too readily assuming that God can easily be plotted into human narrative scripts,'[468] leading to an uncritical interpretation of personal experience as vocational confirmation. While this kind of meaning-making may reference God as the source of calling, it can slide towards prioritising the self-construction of an individual's sense of their own identity, overlooking the role of the church in offering critical discernment. Without a theologically grounded framework, there remains a danger that the narrative practices of the SDP might struggle to accommodate disagreement, critique, or the possibility that others may discern a different outcome to the one the candidate's story suggests.

Having outlined the development of narrative identity theory in the field of psychology and identified the risk that these may be imported into vocational discernment without deeper theological analysis, I will now consider theological perspectives on narrative.

8.2.2 Narrative in Theology

Over a similar time period to developments in psychology, theology has also experienced what has been described as a 'narrative turn'.[469] Alister McGrath refers to narrative theology as 'one of the most important theological movements to develop in the last few decades.'[470] While many practical and liberation theologians have embraced storytelling for the insight it offers into lived experience,[471] narrative theologians have generally expressed ambivalence or ambiguity towards the emphasis on selfhood and constructed identity which has

[468] Elaine Graham, Heather Walton, and Frances Ward, *Theological Reflection: Methods* (SCM Press, 2005), 76.
[469] Reinder Ruard Ganzevoort, 'Narrative Approaches', in *The Wiley-Blackwell Companion to Practical Theology*, ed. Bonnie J. Miller-McLemore, Wiley-Blackwell Companions to Religion (Wiley-Blackwell, 2012), 214.
[470] Alister McGrath, *Christian Theology: An Introduction*, 3rd ed (Blackwell Publishers, 2001), 167.
[471] Ganzevoort, 'Narrative Approaches', 215–18; Graham, Walton, and Ward, *Theological Reflection*, 75–76.

characterised narrative psychology.[472] Although many theologians accept that personal identity is experienced narratively, Peter Jankowski highlights a potential tension between theology and psychology: while theologians often argue that holistic and adaptive identity formation depends on locating the self within God's story, psychologists generally do not regard such a connection as essential to identity construction.[473] There is also resistance among theologians to the idea that Christianity might be reduced to a psychological framework for religious meaning-making, accompanied by concern that the lively activity of God could be sidelined by an overemphasis on individual expression.[474]

Instead, some systematic theologians and biblical scholars have focused on God's self-revelation and identification through the biblical story, prioritising a narrative hermeneutic for reading scripture. One example of this approach is Robert Jenson, whose systematic theology is grounded in the assertion that 'the biblical God can truly be identified by narrative' and can only be known as one who 'puts his self-identity at narrative risk' in the unfolding events of the biblical story.[475] This emphasis on the narrative shape of scripture is also apparent in the work of Hans Frei, who argued for the need to read scripture, not seeking the generalisable meaning behind the texts or as metaphor, but as a unified historical narrative.[476] This contrasts with other narrative theologians, such as David Tracy and Julian Hartt, for whom 'narrative is neither pure nor autonomous' and who argue that the biblical story must be read in light of wider philosophical, social and cultural considerations.[477]

These differences of approach within narrative theology have been described by Gary Comstock as 'a nasty tension in the ranks'[478] and prompt Stanley Hauerwas and L. Gregory Jones to comment on how easy it is to 'oversimplify the wide variety of ways in which the

[472] Ronald Grimes, 'Of Words the Speaker, of Deeds the Doer', *The Journal of Religion* 66, no. 1 (January 1986): 2; John Senior, 'Stories Revisited: Revelation, Narrative Ethnography, and the Story of Our Lives', *Practical Matters* Spring 2010, no. 3 (2010): 1.
[473] Peter Jankowski, 'Story Formed Identity and Spirituality in Psychological and Theological Dialogue', *International Journal for Dialogical Science* 5, no. 1 (2011): 55–56.
[474] Bryan, *Human Being*, 10; Terrence Tilley, *Story Theology* (Liturgical Press, 1990), 10.
[475] Robert Jenson, *Systematic Theology Volume 1: The Triune God* (Oxford University Press, 2001), 64–65.
[476] Hans Frei, *Theology and Narrative: Selected Essays*, ed. George Hunsinger and William C. Placher (Oxford University Press, 1993), 42 and 208–9.
[477] Gary Comstock, 'Two Types of Narrative Theology', *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 55, no. 4 (Winter 1987): 688.
[478] Comstock, 687.

category of narrative has been and can be used.'[479] This highlights the need to avoid superficial readings of narrative theology and I will therefore examine more thoroughly the narrative perspective of just one theologian as I explore the way storytelling operates in the SDP.

In what follows, I focus on the work of Stanley Hauerwas, whose contribution to narrative theology has been both significant and wide-ranging. Alongside his own theological writing, Hauerwas edited *Why Narrative? Readings in Narrative Theology*, which brings together a breadth of perspectives within the field.[480] Although Hauerwas writes from an American and Methodist context, his work has been influential within British Anglicanism, particularly through the interpretation and application of his ideas by the Anglican priest and theologian, Samuel Wells. Indeed, Hauerwas himself has commented that his theological project 'is better appreciated...in Britain than in the United States.'[481] His extensive writing on ministry, shaped by his experience as a theological educator involved in ministerial training at Duke University in North Carolina,[482] further supports the relevance of engaging with his work in exploring the connections between narrative theology and vocational discernment for ordained ministry.

In the next section, I explore how Hauerwas' narrative theology offers a constructive lens through which to understand the role of storytelling within vocational discernment, and how this may contribute to addressing the theological questions arising from my empirical research.

8.3 Stanley Hauerwas' Narrative Approach

Narrative has been a central theme throughout Hauerwas' theological work, albeit one that has evolved and shifted focus over time. Samuel Wells identifies the period from 1977 to 1984 as Hauerwas' 'exploratory phase,' during which he wrote extensively about narrative

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[479] Stanley Hauerwas and L. Gregory Jones, 'Introduction: Why Narrative?', in *Why Narrative? Readings in Narrative Theology*, eds. Stanley Hauerwas and L. Gregory Jones (Eerdmans, 1989), 2.
[480] Hauerwas and Jones, 1–2.
[481] Stanley Hauerwas, 'Foreword', in *Transforming Fate into Destiny: The Theological Ethics of Stanley Hauerwas*, by Samuel Wells (Cascade, 2004), xi and ix.
[482] Stanley Hauerwas and William Willimon, *Resident Aliens: Life in the Christian Colony; a Provocative Christian Assessment of Culture and Ministry for People Who Know That Something Is Wrong* (Abingdon Press, 1998), 112; Samuel Wells, *Transforming Fate into Destiny: The Theological Ethics of Stanley Hauerwas* (Cascade, 2004), 121.

approaches to theology, ethics, scripture, and the church.[483] However, in 2004, Hauerwas reflected on his own theological journey, reviewing his engagement with narrative as an approach to Christian ethics.[484] He expressed frustration at having been narrowly defined as a narrative theologian, acknowledging that while the concept of narrative had been fruitful for his work, he had intentionally moved away from presenting it as a discrete theological method or organising 'category'.[485] Instead, he described his more recent work as seeking to demonstrate how a narrative approach operates in practice, rather than theorising about it in abstract.[486]

In line with Hauerwas' own move from theory to practice, I draw on both his earlier methodological reflections on narrative and his later writing on the subject of ministry. I explore how his narrative approach to selfhood, character, and community underpins his account of ministry and the formation of ministers. I argue that Hauerwas' contribution to ministerial education is grounded in his narrative approach and that it offers valuable insights for understanding and developing the role of storytelling in vocational discernment for ordained ministry.

8.3.1 Selfhood

Hauerwas' interest in narrative accounts of selfhood arises from his dissatisfaction with ethical approaches which emphasise dispassionate, reasoned decision-making from a supposedly neutral standpoint. He critiques these accounts for their tendency to 'alienate ourselves from our past in order to be able to grasp the timelessness of the rationality offered by the standard account [of ethics].'[487] Such views, he argues, give the appearance of objectivity in ethical decision-making by detaching individuals from the particularities of their history, relationships, and social context.[488] He rejects the notion that the self is an inner, fixed essence which can be expressed or chosen without reference to these factors.[489] Instead, Hauerwas finds in narrative a conceptual framework that provides coherence to

[483] Wells, *Transforming Fate into Destiny*, 42–43.
[484] Stanley Hauerwas, *Performing the Faith: Bonhoeffer and the Practice of Nonviolence* (SPCK, 2004), 135–49.
[485] Hauerwas, 140.
[486] Hauerwas, 140.
[487] Stanley Hauerwas, Richard Bondi, and David Burrell, *Truthfulness and Tragedy: Further Investigations in Christian Ethics* (University of Notre Dame Press, 1977), 207–8.
[488] Hauerwas, Bondi, and Burrell, 207–8.
[489] Stanley Hauerwas, *A Community of Character: Toward a Constructive Christian Social Ethic* (University of Notre Dame Press, 1981), 84.

personal identity, enabling agency in decision-making while remaining rooted in the lived realities of the individual's story.[490]

In common with the psychological perspectives outlined previously, Hauerwas believes that personal identity is shaped by the stories we tell about our past, present and future. This narrative enables continuity of selfhood while also allowing for growth, development, and change over time. However, unlike many psychological approaches, Hauerwas is critical of contemporary culture's emphasis on personal meaning-making through isolated introspection and self-discovery.[491] He argues that the Christian recognition of sin, and the consequent need for repentance and conversion, offers a counter-perspective to the desire for self-improvement and self-help.[492] While Hauerwas holds that 'descriptively the self is best understood as narrative,'[493] this is not a static construction but an ongoing process of formation. Conversion, he argues, 'is something never merely accomplished but remains also always in front...a path of growth for which there is no end.'[494] There is continuity in selfhood as past actions and experiences are integrated into one's narrative, offering a coherent account of life up to the present, but crucially, this involves a clear-sighted owning of past actions, including those one may regret – not by disassociating from them as if they were the choices of another person, but by accepting responsibility and accountability.[495]

Hence, Christian discipleship (and by implication, vocation) is an invitation to view life as an open-ended 'adventure,' in which even failure is reconfigured as a site of grace and learning.[496] Hauerwas draws most vividly on this motif of 'adventure' in his essay on Christian social ethics, where he uses the story of *Watership Down* by Richard Adams to develop his narrative ethical perspective.[497] In the book, rabbits embark on a 'hazardous journey' in search of safety and a new home.[498] Hauerwas highlights that this resonates deeply with readers because human beings also seek purpose as they journey through life.

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[490] Hauerwas, Bondi, and Burrell, *Truthfulness and Tragedy*, 78.
[491] Hauerwas and Willimon, *Resident Aliens*, 77.
[492] Hauerwas, *A Community of Character*, 131.
[493] Hauerwas, 144.
[494] Hauerwas, 131.
[495] Hauerwas, 147.
[496] Hauerwas, 13 and 147.
[497] Stanley Hauerwas, 'A Story-Formed Community: Reflections on Watership Down', in *A Community of Character: Toward a Constructive Christian Social Ethic* (University of Notre Dame Press, 1981), 9–35.
[498] Hauerwas, 13.

He favours the term 'adventure' over the more prosaic 'journey' because 'by its very nature adventure means that the future is always in doubt...it involves the simple willingness to take the next step.'[499] The self is not formed through isolated reflection, but takes shape through active participation in this shared adventure alongside others. It is through the concrete events and experiences of life that selfhood emerges and, for Hauerwas, this requires a narrative account of how character is formed.

8.3.2 Character

Hauerwas' narrative account reflects his central concern for character and the development of virtue – a perspective shaped significantly by his engagement with philosopher Alastair MacIntyre and their personal friendship.[500] Hauerwas argues that ethical decisions cannot be evaluated in the abstract, but must be understood as the lived expression of character.[501] Particularly relevant to vocational discernment is his emphasis on character as the link between the events of an individual's past and the shape of their future.[502] He suggests that character is the determinative factor in decision-making as 'the kind of person we are, our character, determines to a large extent the kind of future we will face.'[503] Character, in this view, is not a set of intentions or ideals, nor the expression of the inner 'self,' but is formed through concrete experience and habitual practice over time, giving it a distinctively historical and narrative quality.[504] Crucially, for Hauerwas, this formation of character is never an individualistic endeavour. It is always located within a community – specifically among a 'storied people' who worship a 'storied God' and whose shared practices shape their common life and character.[505] Growth in virtue occurs through participation in this communal narrative, as individuals embody the habits and dispositions of the God they worship.[506] Character, selfhood and community are inseparably bound together in Hauerwas' narrative theology, such that any talk of a personal story becomes meaningless if detached from the formative influence of the church's shared story.[507]

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[499] Hauerwas, 13.
[500] Stanley Hauerwas, *Hannah's Child: A Theologian's Memoir* (SCM, 2010), 160–61.
[501] Hauerwas, *A Community of Character*, 131–35.
[502] Stanley Hauerwas, *Vision and Virtue: Essays in Christian Ethical Reflection* (Fides Publishers, 1974), 64–65.
[503] Hauerwas, 64.
[504] Hauerwas, *A Community of Character*, 125.
[505] Hauerwas, 91.
[506] Hauerwas, 91.
[507] Wells, *Transforming Fate into Destiny*, 146.

When writing about ministry, Hauerwas highlights the particular significance of character formation for those who hold positions of authority and responsibility within the church.[508] In his essay *Clerical Character: Reflecting on Ministerial Morality*, he argues that the need for higher standards of behaviour in clergy is not rooted in adherence to professional codes of practice, nor in the belief that clergy are inherently holier than other Christians. Rather, as those whose role is to sustain the church's faithfulness through word and sacrament, ministers' lives need to be consistent with this responsibility.[509] Ministers are called to embody the distinctive way of life to which the whole church is invited – a life shaped by the gospel narrative.[510] As public, representative figures, their lives are to offer a visible sign and example, drawing others into this shared way of living. Hauerwas therefore contends that 'there is no easy distinction between the office and the person in relation to the ministry,' since the integrity of the minister's life is central to their particular role within the church community.[511]

Building on his understanding of ministry as inseparable from the church's inhabitation of the gospel narrative, Hauerwas outlines the implications of this for the formation of those called to ordained ministry.[512] He identifies the necessity of ministers having a character which is able to responsibly handle the power and authority which comes with the role to 'protect them and the church from abuse of that power.'[513] Ministers also need to be the kinds of people who can sustain hope, wisdom, and vision over a lifetime of service, enabling them to lead well, make sound decisions, and inspire others.[514] Hauerwas recognises the spiritual and personal demands of this ministerial vocation and argues that the necessary character for sustaining ministry cannot be acquired solely through academic theological study or the development of practical skills in seminary.[515] Instead, he insists that the church must establish robust processes for testing vocation, competency, and character

[508] Hauerwas and Willimon, *Resident Aliens*, 113–14.
[509] Stanley Hauerwas, 'Clerical Character: Reflecting on Ministerial Morality', *Word & World* 6, no. 2 (1986): 182–83.
[510] Hauerwas, 183–84.
[511] Hauerwas, 193.
[512] Hauerwas, 191.
[513] Hauerwas, 183.
[514] Hauerwas, 190.
[515] Hauerwas, 193.

before ordination takes place, although he does not specify how he believes this kind of character can be identified or tested.[516]

Given Hauerwas' conviction that ordained ministry involves shaping the church as a 'story-formed community'[517] it is essential to consider how he envisages the church operating in this way – a theme to which I now turn.

8.3.3 Community

For Hauerwas, self-knowledge and personal growth are only possible within the context of a wider narrative as reflection on one's own story is insufficient to prompt genuine transformation. The story of Jesus Christ offers just such a larger narrative, since, as Hauerwas writes, 'like the self, God is a particular agent that can be known only as we know his story...God is not a concept, but a name.'[518] God is identified through God's self-revelation in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus, witnessed through scripture and recognised in the ongoing work of the Holy Spirit in the lives of the saints. This grander narrative, Hauerwas argues, 'demand[s] that we be true and provide[s] us with the skills to yank us out of our self-deceptions.'[519]

One of his central concerns is that the stories we tell ourselves can easily become self-justifying, distorted by our limited perspectives or detached from the truth of our lived reality.[520] The scriptural narrative, by contrast, offers what he calls the 'true story' against which our lives can be measured and held to account.[521] Crucially, Hauerwas asserts that individuals are incapable of gaining the necessary critical distance from their own narratives without the help of others.[522] It is the church community which enables this work of discernment, providing the relationships, practices, and accountability needed to challenge the ways in which our personal stories and actions may fall short of the gospel.[523]

[516] Hauerwas, 192–93.
[517] Hauerwas, 'A Story-Formed Community: Reflections on Watership Down'.
[518] Hauerwas, Bondi, and Burrell, *Truthfulness and Tragedy*, 79.
[519] Hauerwas, Bondi, and Burrell, 80.
[520] Hauerwas, Bondi, and Burrell, 82-100
[521] Hauerwas, *A Community of Character*, 149.
[522] Hauerwas, 125.
[523] Hauerwas, 12.

This understanding of the church as a 'story-formed community'[524] underpins Hauerwas' writing on ministry. His approach does not begin with the functions or tasks of ministers, but rather with the nature and purpose of the church itself. The church, for Hauerwas, is not an accidental or incidental feature of Christian faith, but the continuation of the narrative through which God reveals himself in Jesus Christ: 'Jesus is the story that forms the church...the church is the organised form of Jesus' story.'[525] The gospel narrative shapes not only the church's message but also its shared life and practices. This means that the way the church lives together – including its leadership, authority, and decision-making – must reflect and embody the story it proclaims, remaining distinct from the patterns of wider society.[526]

While Hauerwas has been critiqued for offering an overly idealistic vision of the church,[527] he firmly rejects any suggestion that his account ignores the mundane institutional realities of church life.[528] On the contrary, he insists that any serious account of the church must engage with its organisational forms, including leadership structures and the exercising of authority, which are necessary to sustain the church's witness and keep it faithful to its calling. This requires recognition of the diversity of gifts present in the church, along with the particular responsibility given to ordained ministers for leading the people in worship and teaching.[529] He resists the idea that the primary role of a minister is 'a vocation merely to help people,'[530] indicating that it is easy for ministers to get distracted from their central task to be those who 'help the congregation live in the light of the gospel.'[531] Hence, ministers preside at the sacraments as those whose role embodies and enacts the gospel narrative; while their teaching invites hearers to inhabit the biblical narrative and live faithfully in response.[532]

Hauerwas' account of the self, character, and community offers a compelling theological vision for how Christian identity is formed within the shared life of the church and shaped by the gospel narrative. This understanding does not separate personal growth from

[524] Hauerwas, 'A Story-Formed Community: Reflections on Watership Down'.
[525] Hauerwas, *A Community of Character*, 49.
[526] Hauerwas and Willimon, *Resident Aliens*, 102.
[527] Nicholas Healy, *Hauerwas: A (Very) Critical Introduction*, Interventions (Eerdmans, 2014), 71–90.
[528] Hauerwas, *The Peaceable Kingdom*, 106–7.
[529] Hauerwas, *A Community of Character*, 49.
[530] Hauerwas and Willimon, *Resident Aliens*, 121.
[531] Hauerwas and Willimon, 122.
[532] Hauerwas, *The Peaceable Kingdom*, 98.

communal formation, nor does it reduce Christian vocation to individual choice or introspection. Instead, vocation is always discerned in relation to the larger story the church inhabits and the practices that sustain this life together. In the context of ordained ministry, this raises important questions about how the church recognises, tests, and affirms a candidate's calling in ways that are consistent with this narrative vision. In the final section of this chapter, I consider how Hauerwas' narrative theology might inform and critique the practices of vocational discernment in the SDP, particularly in relation to the testing of vocation, the assessment of character, and the role of the church community in this process. From this theological analysis, I identify some practical recommendations for developing vocational discernment practices in the SDP.

8.3.4 Hauerwas' Narrative Approach and Vocational Discernment

Although Hauerwas stresses that it is 'important that those whom the church calls to be our officials be carefully examined and tested,'[533] he is not prescriptive about how such testing should be conducted. What he does make clear, however, is that the question of who should be selected for ordained ministry can only be addressed once the church's purpose and the minister's role within that community are clearly understood.[534] This reinforces the need for theological reflection, not simply pragmatic concerns, to shape the process and practice of vocational discernment. Hauerwas' narrative theological approach draws attention to how vocational discernment for ordained ministry is approached by highlighting the open-ended nature of formation, the risk of self-deception, and the necessity of communal testing of vocation.

8.3.4.1 Open-ended Vocation and Formation

Hauerwas' narrative theology situates the 'self' within a broader theological framework, allowing vocational discernment to be understood as more than the logical outworking of past experience. By presenting discipleship as an 'adventure'[535] that demands courage and openness to change, Hauerwas echoes the language used by participants in my research, who spoke of both excitement and uncertainty in the open-ended 'journey' of exploring vocation – a journey whose destination may not be as expected. His claim that 'by its very

[533] Hauerwas, 'Clerical Character', 193.
[534] Hauerwas, 184.
[535] Hauerwas, *A Community of Character*, 13.

nature adventure means that the future is in doubt...it involves a simple willingness to take the next step'[536] suggests that 'adventure' may offer a more fitting metaphor than the destination-focused language of 'journey' which dominated the presentation of the SDP by DDOs and in diocesan materials.

Telling their life stories within the discernment process often helped candidates to notice patterns or coherence in their experiences which might indicate a call to ordained ministry. Yet there was also recognition that the future remains open and may not unfold as anticipated. Elsewhere, I have argued that this potential for surprise in vocation requires a move away from theological frameworks that emphasise self-expression or the fulfilment of the individual's created being.[537] Instead, I proposed a pneumatological and eschatological paradigm for vocation, which allows for the *charismata* of the Spirit to prompt acts of service beyond natural ability.[538] In vocational discernment, this shifts the focus from 'who God has created someone to be' towards 'who they are becoming by the gift of God's Spirit.'[539] It is encouraging to see this reflected in the inclusion of 'Potential' as one of the Qualities considered in the SDP, which emphasises formation as an ongoing, open-ended process reliant on training, discernment, and the Spirit's enabling.[540] This also resonates with the Ordination Service, where candidates are reminded, 'You cannot bear the weight of this calling in your own strength, but only by the grace and power of God.'[541]

Hauerwas' narrative theology seeks to lift the gaze of the individual from the constraints of their own story to the larger narrative of God's story. Reflecting on Hauerwas' eschatological perspectives, Wells comments, 'As one journeys, one learns about the goal one seeks and also about oneself. For the Church, the *telos* is formed by Christians' perception of the *eschaton*. It is the sense of the end to the story that makes it possible to speak of a story at all.'[542] My research did not suggest that such connections to the wider narrative were explicitly being made within the SDP. Rather, storytelling appeared to remain largely at the personal, interpretive level. Although diocesan documents occasionally

[536] Hauerwas, 13.
[537] Lovell, 'Surprise, Hope and Gift', 9–12.
[538] Lovell, 18.
[539] Lovell, 20.
[540] Church of England, 'Qualities for Discernment', 10.
[541] Church of England, *Ordination Services*, 39.
[542] Wells, *Transforming Fate into Destiny*, 146.

recommended Bible passages for candidates' reflection, there was little guidance on how these might be read to inspire prayerful, shared discernment, rather than simply as texts onto which candidates might project their own sense of call. In line with Hauerwas' emphasis on the formative potential of communal practices, there may be value in encouraging prayerful engagement with scripture alongside others, such as with a spiritual director or discernment group.

Furthermore, it is necessary to recognise that questions remain about how the larger story is told and how individuals are invited to participate in it. Certain dimensions of the gospel narrative may be emphasised at the expense of others, shaped by institutional priorities or by the shared backgrounds and theological traditions of those who hold teaching and interpretive authority within the Church. In Chapter 10, I emphasise the importance of attending to the experiences of those from historically underrepresented groups in order to identify ways in which the existing telling of the wider story might be reshaped, challenged, and enriched, thereby deepening the Church's understanding of vocation and the practice of discernment and helping to remove unnecessary barriers to participation.

8.3.4.2 Character and the Risk of Self-Deception

Hauerwas emphasises that those entering ordained ministry must demonstrate the character required to sustain ministry and model discipleship in a public, representative role. He argues that 'the character of those serving in the ministry should be determined by the character of the office to which they have been ordained,'[543] although he offers little by way of practical guidance on how such character should be assessed.

His turn to narrative ethics arose from a dissatisfaction with abstract moral principles or good intentions detached from the concrete realities of lived experience. Similarly, in the SDP, there is a risk that candidates may present broad or idealised claims about their character which cannot easily be tested and may be self-deceiving or misleading. In a published sermon about vocation, Rowan Williams suggests that challenging self-deception is a central aspect of vocational discernment: 'Those whose job it is to assess the reality or adequacy of vocation can really do no more than attempt to say, "Have you reckoned with *that* aspect of yourself...Is this actually *you* we've got here? Or is it another defence,

[543] Hauerwas, 'Clerical Character', 183.

another game?"'[544] Within a narrative framework, the role of the DDO involves attentive listening and the asking of probing questions which invite candidates to engage deeply and reflectively with their own stories. This includes identifying any gaps within their narrative, seeking specific examples of times they have demonstrated particular aspects of their character, and encouraging the sharing of experiences of failure as well as success. The goal is not to demand perfection, but to discern evidence of growth, self-awareness, and openness to ongoing formation – key features of Hauerwas' understanding of character as shaped over time through concrete events and community participation.

However, the discernment process remains vulnerable to the limitations of self-reporting. DDOs are reliant on the story told by candidates which may be heavily edited or lack reflective insight. As Hauerwas recognises, the stories individuals tell about themselves can be selective, self-justifying, or detached from reality.[545] For this reason, he insists that character is best discerned in community, where others can challenge and correct these narratives. This reinforces the importance of including multiple perspectives in vocational discernment, particularly from those who have observed the candidate over time within their local parish context. It suggests that the initial stages of discernment should be deeply rooted in the community in which the candidate is known, where such self-deception is most likely to be recognised and addressed.[546]

8.3.4.3 Importance of Communal Discernment

Candidates in my research often expressed surprise at how disconnected the discernment process felt from their own worshipping communities. While incumbents were typically involved in early conversations about vocation, candidates noted that the process quickly shifted away from parish engagement, with relatively little attention being paid to the local context in which their calling was first recognised. DDOs also acknowledged that parish clergy may not always feel equipped for vocational conversations and that additional training and support may be needed, especially as there are pastoral complexities involved

[544] Williams, *A Ray of Darkness*, 151.
[545] For example, his chapter on Albert Speer (Nazi architect) explores the potential for self-deception through a false narrative. In: Hauerwas, Bondi, and Burrell, *Truthfulness and Tragedy*, 82-100
[546] Hauerwas, *A Community of Character*, 12.

in these conversations, along with the risk of a breakdown in the relationship if an incumbent does not agree with an individual's personal sense of calling.

Hauerwas' account of the church as a story-formed community highlights the central role of the church community in discerning both calling and character. Ministers, he argues, must embody 'an ability to trust in the gifts each [person] brings to the group's shared existence.'[547] This aligns with the 'Love for People' Quality within the SDP's discernment framework, which seeks evidence of a candidate's capacity to mentor and equip others, alongside fostering unity within the church.[548] However, my research suggests that the process currently offers limited scope for assessing this relational dimension outside of formal interviews and written references. There may be value in incorporating the voices of lay people and parish communities more intentionally and earlier in the discernment process, so that feedback might shape discernment more constructively. Such an approach would not only strengthen the assessment of candidates' character and relational leadership but would also embody the communal discernment that Hauerwas identifies as central to the church's faithful life together.

8.4 Concluding Remarks and Recommendations

In this chapter, I have explored the theme of storytelling in the Shared Discernment Process. Drawing on narrative psychology, I outlined how story has become an influential framework for understanding identity formation, and traced the concurrent narrative turn within theology. I focused in particular on the contribution of Stanley Hauerwas, whose theological account of narrative situates the individual and their personal history within the story-formed community of the church. I argued that Hauerwas' narrative theology offers a multi-faceted account of how storytelling functions in decision-making situations, including formal ecclesial processes, such as the SDP. His approach moves beyond the focus on personal identity, selfhood, and choice found in psychological theories, placing instead a stronger emphasis on the role of the church community in formation and discernment.

Earlier in the chapter, I identified two key questions about the use of storytelling in the SDP arising from my empirical research with DDOs and candidates. I conclude by summarising

[547] Hauerwas, 23.
[548] Church of England, 'Qualities for Discernment', 7.

how these questions have been addressed and outlining the recommendations offered for vocational discernment practice.

The first question asked whether the emphasis on storytelling might suggest to candidates that vocation is primarily discovered through personal reflection, rather than as an external call from God discerned by the wider church. In response, I have argued that psychological models of narrative identity, while helpful in recognising the coherence and significance of life experience, are insufficient to sustain storytelling practices in the SDP because they tend to prioritise individual meaning-making and do not account for the ecclesial and theological dimensions of vocation. Drawing on Hauerwas' narrative theology offers an alternative perspective. This approach affirms the storied nature of human identity and the need to locate the individual in their social and historical context, recognising that their past experiences have shaped them. However, Hauerwas resists the idea that these experiences determine future vocation. Instead, vocation remains open-ended, shaped by ongoing formation and responsive to the call of God through the church community. In this light, I suggest that Hauerwas' metaphor of discipleship as 'adventure' offers a more theologically grounded and pastorally helpful image for vocational discernment than the destination-focused language of 'journey' which dominates current diocesan discourse. The language of 'adventure' acknowledges both formation through experience and the genuine possibility of surprise in the discernment process.

The second question concerned how candidates' stories might be appropriately interrogated and challenged, particularly when these narratives are incomplete or inaccurate. I engaged here with Hauerwas' insight into the risk of self-deception and his argument that the individual alone cannot achieve the necessary critical distance to discern the truth of their own story. Instead, he highlights the importance of communal practices of accountability and engagement with the scriptural narrative as the 'true story' against which individual lives are measured. Applied to the SDP, this perspective affirms the DDO's role in probing for gaps and inconsistencies within candidates' narratives. However, I have also highlighted the limitations of relying primarily on candidates' self-reporting and suggested that there is a need for deeper involvement of the local parish and wider church community in the discernment process. It is within these communal contexts, where candidates are known and observed over time, that vocation can be more fully and accurately tested. This

does not negate the requirement for discernment outside of the parish context as this brings fresh perspective and tests the calling to a nationally deployable ministry, however it does suggest that church communities and clergy need to be better resourced and trained to foster and discern vocations at a local level. Additionally, I recommended that the current practice of suggesting Bible passages for candidates' personal reflection could be strengthened by creating opportunities for shared engagement with scripture – whether through discernment groups, spiritual direction, or other forms of communal reflection.[549] Such practices would reflect Hauerwas' emphasis on the formative potential of shared ecclesial life and help prevent storytelling and scriptural reflection becoming an isolated or purely introspective exercise.

8.5 Summary

By drawing on both narrative psychology and theology, particularly the work of Hauerwas, I have argued for a reframing of storytelling within the SDP. This reframing resists individualistic accounts of identity in favour of a theologically rooted understanding of vocation as a shared process of discernment within the church. Throughout this chapter, I have made practical recommendations for how such an approach might be more fully integrated into the SDP. In the following chapter, I will build on these insights by turning to the contexts in which candidates are asked to share their stories, focusing on the requirement for authenticity as these narratives are heard, tested, and assessed by others.

[549] For one approach to communal reflective engagement with scripture for ministerial formation, see: Helen Collins, *Reordering Theological Reflection: Starting with Scripture* (Hymns Ancient & Modern, 2020), 101–20.

Chapter 9
Preparing to Perform: Authenticity

9.1 Introduction

In the previous chapter, I explored the storytelling aspects of the discernment process through the lens of narrative theology. The theme of storytelling was identified in my interviews mainly when candidates and DDOs reflected on conversations about vocation at diocesan level. In this chapter, I turn to the theme of performance which arose when candidates and DDOs discussed preparing for the national components of the SDP, particularly the Stage Two Panel. The Stage Two Panel was regarded as the culmination and conclusion of the SDP, so one of the main tasks of diocesan processes was to prepare candidates for this definitive moment during which they would need to express and demonstrate their vocation to Bishops' Advisors. DDOs saw a significant part of their role as building candidates' confidence to participate in these interviews, while candidates wanted to learn how to articulate their sense of call concisely and clearly so it could be recognised by others.

This process of preparation highlighted the need for candidates to demonstrate integrity and approach all their discernment conversations with openness and authenticity. While it was tempting for candidates to see the national panels as a series of interviews in which they needed to present an attractive version of themselves, there was a recognition that offering a fake or idealised image would not be healthy for themselves or the church in the longer term. Nevertheless, candidates expressed feeling vulnerable or exposed by the expectation of complete transparency. This raises questions about what it means to be truly 'authentic' in the context of a process designed to assess suitability and test calling to ordained ministry. In the previous chapter, I recognised the potential for self-deception in vocational discernment and suggested that this could be addressed through communal discernment. However, the need to present oneself in front of others for the purpose of assessment highlights the need to wrestle with the extent to which the self can truly be known by the individual or by others. There are also significant power dynamics in such interactions which may make it difficult for candidates to feel comfortable sharing sensitive

and highly personal information in a process designed to test and judge their calling. These concerns will be explored more fully in Chapter Ten.

Alongside the need for authenticity and honesty, candidates were self-consciously aware of the need to convince or persuade Bishops' Advisors of their calling at the Stage Two Panel. They felt pressure to give the 'right' answers to the questions asked and feared being misunderstood or misinterpreted, particularly if they came from a different tradition or had different life experiences to the assessor. Candidates described how the diocesan process prepared them to answer questions they might be asked at the Stage Two Panel by offering opportunities to talk with a range of people about their sense of vocation. These conversations enabled them to refine and adapt what they might say depending on the audience. However, despite the desire to make a good impression, they did not want to appear overprepared, as this could imply a lack of authenticity in their interactions with Bishops' Advisors. This raises questions about the performative elements of the Stage Two Panel and the extent to which formal interviews in such an environment enable an accurate assessment of candidates' vocation. Although my research did not focus directly on the Stage Two Panel itself, the discernment process at diocesan level was perceived by both candidates and DDOs to function as preparation for this final moment of performance during which calling would be tested. This raises the question of whether assessors may be swayed in their decision-making by those who are able to present a convincing case in an interview, rather than by deeper evidence of ability, suitability, gifting, or calling.

These practical considerations were interpreted by candidates within a theological framework in which God was not only calling them to ordained ministry but was also actively involved in the process of discernment itself. Candidates spoke of their sense that God was at work both within them, enabling them to find the words to express their sense of vocation, and also within those tasked with testing vocation, through the gift of discernment given to assessors. This was not understood simply as a human evaluative process but one in which divine agency was at play, working through the interactions, conversations, and judgements of all involved. Fundamentally, candidates expressed trust that God was at work at every aspect of the discernment process: in their own self-reflection, in their articulation of calling, and in the insight and wisdom offered by advisors and assessors. This theological conviction shaped their approach to preparation,

performance, and participation in the process, framing discernment as a cooperative activity between human and divine actors. It is this trust in God's active presence alongside the human structures of discernment which underscores the need for theological questions to be asked of this process. Clearly, the SDP is experienced by candidates not merely as an administrative mechanism for selection, but as a space of spiritual formation, preparation, and vocational performance through which God's calling is tested, revealed, and confirmed.

This chapter will explore three interrelated questions identified through analysis of interview data when DDOs and candidates reflected on the performative aspects of the discernment process.

First, what role should preparation play in helping candidates engage with the Stage Two Panel as a key moment in which they need to be able to externalise or 'perform' their vocation so that it can be tested by others?

Second, given the concern that such preparation might lead some candidates to be perceived as inauthentic during interviews, or might enable a convincing but inaccurate performance, how might the relationship between preparation and authenticity be better understood?

Third, how might God's active involvement be conceived across all aspects of the SDP – not only as the source and instigator of vocation, but also as one who enables candidates to articulate their calling and equips assessors with the gift of discernment?

Together, these questions provide a framework for exploring the performative aspects of the discernment process within a theological context, holding together concerns about human preparation, authenticity, and divine agency.

I begin the chapter by recognising that concerns about authenticity and the potential to 'fake it' in interviews are shared by secular employment specialists who identify the different approaches applicants take when seeking a job. I then highlight that additional concerns are raised by scripture and the early church about the possibility of self-serving hypocrisy among religious leaders and about the danger of presenting a false mask to others – concerns which might contribute to a particular nervousness about approaching vocational discernment as a process in which candidates feel the need to 'perform.' I trace this performative thread through Christian history to more recent theatrical approaches to

theology. In the final section of the chapter, I engage with Wesley Vander Lugt's exploration of formation, authenticity and performance in his book *Living Theodrama,* to consider its relevance for interpreting the performative aspects of the SDP within a theological framework. I conclude by offering both challenges and affirmations of the way the diocesan discernment processes seek to prepare candidates for the Stage Two Panel as a definitive culmination of vocational performance.

9.2 Preparing to Perform: Interdisciplinary Perspectives

The extent to which interpersonal interactions are performative has been debated in many interdisciplinary fields. Job interviews are often cited as an example of a situation in which participants are consciously aware that applicants will showcase themselves in a favourable light, while interviewers seek to look beyond superficial appearances to assess whether a particular individual is a good fit for the organisation and able to do the job. Although DDOs and candidates in my research recognised that the SDP was not simply a job interview, this was a frequent point of comparison for them. Being evaluated against a stated list of expectations naturally evoked memories of other formal interview contexts. In this section, I explore interdisciplinary perspectives on performance in interpersonal interactions, focusing on recruitment and interviews. I begin by considering how human resources studies identify differing approaches to interview preparation and performance, including deliberate attempts to offer a 'fake' version of the self. I then draw on broader sociological perspectives that interpret performance as a central paradigm for understanding human interaction. Finally, I consider these performative themes through Christian history and in contemporary theological approaches that use the theatre as a central organising analogy.

9.2.1 Performance in Recruitment Processes

There is widespread recognition that job applicants will seek to present a favourable impression of themselves during interviews and when completing tests intended to evaluate their suitability for the role.[550] The financial and social rewards associated with being

[550] Benedikt Bill and Klaus Melchers, 'Thou Shalt Not Lie! Exploring and Testing Countermeasures against Faking Intentions and Faking in Selection Interviews', *International Journal of Selection and Assessment* 31, no. 1 (March 2023): 22–44; Miriam Fuechtenhans and Anna Brown, 'How Do Applicants Fake? A Response Process Model of Faking on Multidimensional Force-Choice Personality Assessments', *International Journal of Selection and Assessment* 31 (2023): 105–19; Julia Levashina and Michael Campion, 'Measuring Faking in the Employment Interview: Development and Validation of an Interview Faking Behaviour Scale', *Journal of Applied Psychology* 92, no. 6 (2007): 1638–56; Robert Tett and Daniel Simonet, 'Faking in Personality

selected for a job make the recruitment process one in which individuals are likely to display a socially attractive version of themselves. This might include emphasising aspects of experience or personality that align with what the recruiter is looking for, exaggerating competence or skills, omitting information that could raise concerns, or offering insincere praise for the organisation as a potential workplace.[551] For most applicants, such behaviour reflects a natural desire to connect with the interviewer and present themselves positively. Others, however, approach the process with the deliberate intention to deceive by presenting a false version of themselves to secure the job.[552]

In an influential study, sociologist Philip Brown and Anthony Hesketh, a lecturer in business management, identified differing approaches to interview preparation and performance among graduates seeking jobs in a highly competitive career market.[553] They suggested that graduates gravitated towards one of two 'types,' which they termed 'Players' and 'Purists'.[554] While both 'Players' and 'Purists' were highly motivated to secure the jobs for which they were applying, they demonstrated contrasting understandings of the interview process and prepared in different ways.[555]

'Players' viewed interviews strategically, expressing a desire to 'win' against other applicants.[556] They felt the need to understand the rules of the game, particularly the requirements employers were seeking, so that they could demonstrate these traits and abilities at interview.[557] Brown and Hesketh describe these applicants as those 'willing to "act the part" with all its theatrical connotations. They constructed story lines that conveyed their competence and promoted their employability.'[558] Those who took this approach recognised that, by marketing themselves in this way, employers were seeing 'packaging that was distant and distinct from the authentic self.'[559] Although aware of the risk that they

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Assessment: A "Multisaturation" Perspective on Faking as Performance', *Human Performance* 24 (2011): 302–21.

[551] Bill and Melchers, 'Thou Shalt Not Lie!', 23.

[552] Tett and Simonet, 'Faking in Personality Assessment: A "Multisaturation" Perspective on Faking as Performance', 303.

[553] Phillip Brown and Anthony Hesketh, *The Mismanagement of Talent: Employability and Jobs in the Knowledge Economy* (Oxford University Press, 2004), 116–45.

[554] Brown and Hesketh, 124–25.

[555] Brown and Hesketh, 125.

[556] Brown and Hesketh, 126.

[557] Brown and Hesketh, 127.

[558] Brown and Hesketh, 130.

[559] Brown and Hesketh, 134.

would be viewed as fake or deceptive, they did not believe they would be caught out.[560] These interviewees invested considerable time and effort in perfecting their game strategy and prepared extensively before attending interviews.

In contrast to the game-playing of the 'Players', graduates whom Brown and Hesketh identified as 'Purists' saw the recruitment process as analogous to a puzzle, with the goal of finding a good fit between the needs of the organisation and the skills of the applicant.[561] While they were still keen to offer a positive version of themselves, this stemmed from a desire to fully convey who they were and what they could bring to the role. They believed in the integrity of the process, trusting that employer and potential employee were exploring together whether they were the 'right' person for the job.[562] Brown and Hesketh describe this group's approach as 'characterised by "take me as I am," which in turn involved the presentation of the "authentic" self, as opposed to the "competent" self, packaged by Players.'[563] These applicants often expressed concern about how they could convey the reality of who they are and what they could offer when they felt nervous in the artificial environment of an interview.[564] They questioned how possible it was to be authentic and explore their potential under such pressure.

Candidates in my research wrestled with similar concerns about authenticity and self-presentation when participating in the Stage Two interviews. Some (like the 'Players' described by Brown and Hesketh) were particularly aware that assessors would be reporting on them based on the Qualities Grid, and sought to tailor their answers and behaviour accordingly. For example, Brenda described reading through the Qualities in preparation for the Stage Two Panel thinking 'these are the things I've got to prove to someone else,' and Lewis identified examples to evidence each of the Qualities during his interviews. Others approached the process more like 'Purists,' assuming that advisors would be looking to see the real person and to assess their fit with the role of ordained minister. This was epitomised by Nathan who commented: 'I want people to know this is [Nathan]. This is what *I* think. Because if I'm just trying to be something that I'm not to get through a process,

[560] Brown and Hesketh, 132.
[561] Brown and Hesketh, 125 and 141.
[562] Brown and Hesketh, 141.
[563] Brown and Hesketh, 142.
[564] Brown and Hesketh, 142.

I don't believe that's good for anybody.' While neither approach is inherently duplicitous, there was a clear consciousness among all candidates of what it might mean to perform the self for the benefit of the interviewers at the Stage Two Panel.

9.2.2 Performance in Sociology

Philosopher, Charles Taylor, describes the current sociohistorical context as an era in which self-expression is prized and work is expected to be 'spiritually fulfilling, self-esteem boosting, perpetually challenging and eternally edifying.'[565] The need to gain this kind of job through a competitive process leads sociologists to explore the job interview as a site of tension between authenticity and performance. David Shulman highlights that there are sociological influences active throughout the process of recruitment, including who is selected for interview and how they subsequently perform, including personal demographics, socioeconomic status, and cultural capital.[566] It is therefore not straightforward to urge someone simply to 'act naturally' or to 'be yourself' in an interview, as this assumes they can externally display aspects of themselves in ways that others will correctly interpret through their own social lenses.[567] While there is anxiety about whether acting or performing during an interview will appear fake, ironically, 'to give convincing performances means taking steps to appear authentic.'[568] Aware that interviewers will be alert to any sign of superficiality, candidates recognise the need to prepare carefully for this performance, knowing that every answer and gesture may be construed as indicative and symbolic.[569]

To explore this task of preparation and performance more deeply, Shulman turns to Erving Goffman's seminal work, *The Presentation of the Self in Everyday Life*. First published in 1953, Goffman proposes a 'dramaturgical' sociological perspective on human interaction with a particular focus on the workplace.[570] Developing a theatrical analogy, Goffman explores how individuals seek to manage the impressions others form of them through the performance they give.[571] This involves conveying a character who will be perceived

[565] Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 477.
[566] David Shulman, *The Presentation of Self in Contemporary Social Life* (SAGE, 2017), 62–63.
[567] Shulman, 2.
[568] Shulman, 24.
[569] Erving Goffman, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (Penguin Books, 2022), 204.
[570] Goffman, ix.
[571] Goffman, 1.

positively by the audience and sustaining this impression, so that the interaction plays out in expected and predictable ways.[572] While Goffman acknowledges the potential for performance to be deliberately deceptive, he distinguishes between an 'honest performer [who] wishes to convey the truth' and 'a dishonest performer [who] wishes to convey a falsehood.'[573] The issue, as Goffman sees it, is not with performance itself, but the motivation behind it. He challenges the common assumption that performative behaviour is inherently duplicitous or that it is possible to encounter another person without any element of performance. For Goffman, 'life is a dramatically enacted thing,'[574] and all interpersonal interactions involve the playing out of roles as we can only know ourselves and others through the roles we inhabit.[575]

This hypothesis has been dismissed as a 'liquidation of self into a set of demarcated areas of role-playing'[576] by philosopher, Alasdair MacIntyre, who argues that it represents an overly individualistic account of selfhood, isolating the person from others and detaching them from their historical and social context.[577] Having explored narrative identity influenced by MacIntyre in the previous chapter and now considering a performative motif in the present one, I suggest that this incompatibility between perspectives is only problematic if one is taken as the sole means of understanding selfhood, rather than as alternative lenses through which to explore human nature and interaction. In my research, candidates interpreted their sense of call narratively, but also recognised the need to externalise this vocation performatively so that it could be tested. It is impossible to separate the storytelling and performative aspects of their experience as they often described performing their story when discussing vocation with others.

Goffman further develops his dramaturgical theory by exploring the time and effort spent in preparing for performance. He posits that, just as a theatre has a front stage on which the drama is enacted and a backstage area where actors rehearse and don costumes, so too performers require spaces where they can retreat from public gaze to prepare.[578] While

[572] Goffman, 1.
[573] Goffman, 48.
[574] Goffman, 53.
[575] Goffman, 3.
[576] MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 205.
[577] MacIntyre, 221.
[578] Goffman, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, 93.

backstage may be seen as a place of safety where 'the performer can reliably expect that no member of the audience will intrude,'[579] Goffman concedes that trusted experts may enter this space to support preparations for front stage roles.[580] He describes such 'training specialists' as those who 'have the complicated task of teaching the performer how to build up a desirable impression while at the same time taking the part of the future audience.'[581] There appear to be some parallels here with the role of the DDO, who indicates to candidates the necessity of exploring together aspects of life usually kept hidden, and presents this as one way of helping candidates prepare for the final performance of the SDP at the Stage Two Panel.

9.2.3 Performance in Theology

While performance has been fruitfully explored in relation to recruitment and sociology, theology has long had an ambivalent, even hostile, relationship with the idea that Christian faith might be conceived in performative terms. Jonas Barish traces this 'antitheatrical prejudice' back to Plato and Socrates, who viewed theatre as merely imitative of reality.[582] By the first century AD, theatrical performances were 'wildly popular' across the Roman Empire but also associated with pagan religious practices, prostitution and sexual exhibitionism.[583] In this context, the church 'chose...to ally itself with the philosophers *against* myth, *against* the theatre, *against* the free play of the imagination, and *against* masks, time, ambiguity and play-acting.'[584] Theatre was seen as too closely connected with pagan religion and as encouraging unethical, immoral behaviour.[585] Like Plato and Socrates, the early Church Fathers such as Tertullian and Augustine were concerned about the falsehood involved in actors portraying themselves as someone else, and expressed a desire for Christians to be captivated instead by 'the much more magnificent world theatre of creation and salvation history,' rather than the fleeting dramatic energies of actors on stage.[586] Although the church's attitude toward theatre has mellowed over the centuries,

[579] Goffman, 94.
[580] Goffman, 138–39.
[581] Goffman, 138.
[582] Jonas Barish, *The Antitheatrical Prejudice* (University of California Press, 1981), 5–6; Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Theo-Drama*, vol. 1 (Ignatius Press, 1988), 91–93.
[583] Barish, *The Antitheatrical Prejudice*, 41–42.
[584] Don Cupitt, *What Is a Story?* (SCM Press, 1991), x.
[585] Cupitt, x; Balthasar, *Theo-Drama*, 1:95.
[586] Balthasar, *Theo-Drama*, 1:96; Jennifer A. Herdt, *Putting on Virtue: The Legacy of the Splendid Vices* (University of Chicago Press, 2008), 61–66.

movements condemning Christian engagement in the dramatic arts for these reasons have persisted.[587] Traces of this antitheatrical perspective remain in contemporary language, for example in the contrast between responding calmly and 'making a scene,' or between authenticity and 'play-acting.'[588]

Alongside suspicion about the appropriateness of the theatre, there has also been particular nervousness about falsehood and dramatic religiosity among Christian leaders, traceable to Jesus' strong words against the performative religion of the Pharisees (Mt 6:1-18; Mt 23:1-36). Jesus' use of the word *hypokritēs* (meaning 'actor') conveyed his denunciation of the Pharisees in dramatic terms.[589] Drawing on an otherwise neutral theatrical analogy, he highlighted the risk of religious leaders deceiving themselves about the coherence between their external presentation and their inner life, condemning their concern for religious appearance in front of an audience.[590] This raises the question of whether Jesus' indictment of religious performance underlies a continuing reticence to discuss the performative elements of the vocational discernment process for fear of encouraging falsehood. However, Kevin Vanhoozer argues that Jesus' stern words in Matthew 6 and 23 were not directed against the Pharisees because they were 'bad actors' but against the inconsistency between their outward display and inner devotion.[591] The concern, then, is not with performance as such, but the integrity and motivation of the performer. These themes of authenticity and coherence will be explored further later in this chapter, but it is worth noting here that anxiety about external displays of religiosity and the self-advancing desire to lead has been present since Jesus first pointed out this tendency in the religious leaders of his day.

Despite this complex history, recent years have seen something of a 'theatrical turn' in theology.[592] As noted in the previous chapter, a similar claim has been made regarding the influence of narrative, and these two motifs are closely connected. Samuel Wells, whose interpretation of Stanley Hauerwas' narrative theological perspective was discussed earlier,

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[587] Balthasar, *Theo-Drama*, 1:101–5.
[588] Wesley Vander Lugt, *Living Theodrama: Reimagining Theological Ethics* (Ashgate, 2014), 1.
[589] France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 236; Kevin J. Vanhoozer, *The Drama of Doctrine: A Canonical-Linguistic Approach to Christian Theology* (Westminster John Knox Press, 2005), 365.
[590] France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 236–37; Vanhoozer, *The Drama of Doctrine*, 365–66.
[591] Vanhoozer, *The Drama of Doctrine*, 365.
[592] Lugt, *Living Theodrama*, 2.

turns to an improvisational dramatic analogy in his own ethical work, arguing that 'narrative becomes an inadequate category for interpretation' when considering the centrality of community life in ethical decision-making.[593] The need for active decision-making, he suggests, means that 'narrative is appropriately subsumed under the more comprehensive and appropriate designation of drama.'[594] Wesley Vander Lugt further emphasises this shift, proposing that while narrative focuses on understanding and interpreting the past, drama encompasses storytelling and 'orients theology toward faithful performance in the present.'[595]

Like narrative theology, theatrical theology encompasses a wide range of approaches. Some systematic theologians, including Hans Urs von Balthasar and Kevin Vanhoozer, focus on how a theatrical motif illuminates the enacted aspects of God's creative and redemptive purposes.[596] Vanhoozer suggests that a theo-dramatic approach to doctrine highlights the communicative aspects of God's interactions with creation and emphasises the centrality of 'the Bible as an authoritative script that calls not merely for intellectual assent but for *live performance*' enabled and empowered by the Holy Spirit.[597] Tom Wright, Samuel Wells, Craig Bartholomew and Michael Goheen develop a theatrical hermeneutic for reading scripture, presenting the biblical narrative as a play of five or six acts in which there is coherence and direction, along with an invitation to participate in the unfolding drama.[598] The appropriate form of this dramatic participation is explored in relation to ethics by Samuel Wells and Wesley Vander Lugt,[599] and in connection to Christian Leadership by Simon Walker.[600] The theatrical motif has also been used by James K. A. Smith and Shannon Craigo-Snell to highlight the formational role of enacted ritual and liturgy in worship as a particular dramatic act which ordained ministers craft and lead.[601]

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[593] Samuel Wells, *Improvisation: The Drama of Christian Ethics* (Baker Academic, 2018), 43.
[594] Wells, 43.
[595] Lugt, *Living Theodrama*, 8.
[596] Balthasar, *Theo-Drama*; Vanhoozer, *The Drama of Doctrine*.
[597] Vanhoozer, *The Drama of Doctrine*, 236.
[598] N. T. Wright, *The New Testament and the People of God* (SPCK, 1997), 139–44; Wells, *Improvisation*, 31–37; Craig Bartholomew and Michael Goheen, *The Drama of Scripture: Finding Our Place in the Biblical Story*, 3rd edition (Baker Academic, 2024), xxiv–xxv.
[599] Wells, *Improvisation*; Lugt, *Living Theodrama*.
[600] Simon Walker, *The Undefended Leader* (Piquant, 2010).
[601] James K. A. Smith, *Imagining the Kingdom: How Worship Works* (Baker Academic, 2013), 127–28; Shannon Craigo-Snell, 'Command Performance: Rethinking Performance Interpretation in the Context of Divine Discourse', *Modern Theology* 16, no. 4 (October 2000): 480.

Given the breadth of theatrical theology, I will engage in depth with the contribution of Wesley Vander Lugt in his book *Living Theodrama: Reimagining Theological Ethics* to explore its relevance for interpreting the performative aspects of the discernment process. As the subtitle suggests, Lugt's work considers the implications of a dramatic perspective for ethics, but his focus extends beyond ethical decision-making to explore more broadly what it means for Christians to live well. Of particular relevance to the questions posed at the start of this chapter, Lugt addresses the challenge of authenticity and performance for theodramatic perspectives on Christian faith. In the next section, I will explore how central themes in *Living Theodrama* offer fresh insight into the performative aspects of the SDP and how they might be interpreted within this theological framework.

9.3 Authenticity and Performance: Wesley Vander Lugt's *Living Theodrama*

Wesley Vander Lugt is an American theologian whose PhD from St Andrew's University focused on theology, imagination, and the arts. He has served as Lead Pastor of a Presbyterian church in North Carolina, and his wife is also an ordained Presbyterian minister. He has held various teaching and professorial roles, including at Gordon-Conwell Seminary, where he is currently Acting Director of the Leighton Ford Initiative in Theology, the Arts and Gospel Witness.[602] Lugt has been a key figure in developing theological thinking that engages with theatre to explore the performative nature of Christian faith. In 2014, with Trevor Hart, he co-edited *Theatrical Theology: Explorations in Performing the Faith,* a collection of thirteen essays demonstrating the breadth of the 'theatrical turn' in contemporary theology.[603] In 2018, he co-wrote the 'Afterword' for a new edition of Samuel Wells' *Improvisation: The Drama of Christian Ethics,* evaluating its contribution to theatrical theology since its original publication in 2004.[604] Lugt's own monograph on the subject, *Living Theodrama: Reimagining Theological Ethics,* makes a distinctive contribution to the field. In the 'Foreword' to *Living Theodrama*, Wells describes the book as 'a significant milestone in the analogy of theology and theatre; an opportunity for looking back at how far

[602] 'Wesley Vander Lugt: About', https://www.wesleyvanderlugt.com; 'Gordon Conwell Theological Seminary: Adjunct Faculty', https://www.gordonconwell.edu/faculty/adjunct/wes-vander-lugt/.
[603] Wesley Vander Lugt and Trevor Hart, eds., *Theatrical Theology: Explorations in Performing the Faith* (Cascade, 2014).
[604] Wells, *Improvisation*, 199–212.

we have come and to look forward to what may lie ahead.'[605] Lugt has clearly established himself as a central voice in the emerging field of theatrical theology.

In *Living Theodrama*, Lugt offers his own constructive contribution to theatrical theology, building on the work of others. His methodological approach moves beyond using theatre as a metaphor or analogy towards presenting a theatrical model for exploring theological knowledge and Christian practice.[606] Lugt works in an interdisciplinary manner, engaging with a variety of theatrical theories and practices, seeking to engage comprehensively with these dramatic traditions on their own terms, rather than using theatre as a source of superficial metaphors to illustrate pre-existing theological claims.[607] In particular, he draws on the work of Bertolt Brecht and Konstantin Stanislavski to explore how differing theoretical theatrical approaches might contribute to a theatrical theological framework. These two influential figures prompt Lugt to explore concepts such as *disponibilité* and 'fittingness,' as well as a broader theodramatic model in which God is identified as playwright, protagonist, and producer.[608]

In what follows, I explore these central features of Lugt's proposed theatrical theological model and consider their implications for performance within the vocational discernment process. First, I outline the concept of *disponibilité* and its relevance for interpreting performance as formational. Second, I examine Lugt's exploration of authenticity through the theatrical principle of 'fittingness'. Finally, I engage with Lugt's description of the triune God as the one in whom and through whom all performance occurs. For each of these elements, I reflect on their relevance to the performative aspects of the SDP.

9.3.1 Performance, Formation and Disponibility

The defining purpose of theatre is performance before an audience. All the energy and time of those involved in theatre is directed towards this goal. For actors, this means a continuous cycle of rehearsal, formation, and performance, where 'formation refers to the preparation, development, and growth of actors towards excellence and a readiness for

[605] Samuel Wells, 'Foreword', in *Living Theodrama: Reimagining Theological Ethics*, by Wesley Vander Lugt (Ashgate, 2014), ix.
[606] Lugt, *Living Theodrama*, 20–28.
[607] Lugt, 25–26.
[608] Lugt, 203.

particular roles and performances.'[609] Lugt notes that theatrical formation gains shape, direction, and purpose only when directed towards performance.[610] In rehearsal, actors develop the skills and habits required for live performance, and through reviewing and reflecting on their performance, recognise the need for ongoing training and practice. The vulnerable unpredictability of live performance demands that actors draw on the 'continual formation of theatrical skills, habits and attitudes' to respond in the moment.[611]

This cycle of formation and performance is especially evident in improvised drama. While improvisation may appear spontaneous and unprepared, such performance depends on high levels of skill and preparation. Improvisors must respond intuitively and imaginatively to one another, developing the action collaboratively and drawing on deep experience and insight into how characters may react in given circumstances.[612] This is only possible through prior preparation that cultivates the habits, skills, and character needed for improvisation.[613] Wells draws on the games and formational practices used by actors to prepare for improvisation as a way of exploring how Christians might develop the habits required to live faithfully and imaginatively in an unpredictable world.[614] It is through preparation and training that people are equipped to participate fully in performance.

Building on this, Lugt compares the differing approaches to formation advocated by two giants of theatrical theory. Constantin Stanislavski's influential 'system' emphasised character formation and the pursuit of realistic, naturalistic performance, drawing on the actor's own life experiences and emotions.[615] By contrast, Bertolt Brecht urged actors to maintain distance from the characters they played and to develop the external skills (*gestus*) needed to convey their parts effectively to the audience.[616] Lugt suggests that these differing approaches are not in opposition, but complimentary, highlighting the need for both inner character development and the external skills necessary for a performance that connects with the audience.[617] Relating this to a theodramatic understanding of formation, Lugt

[609] Lugt, 29.
[610] Lugt, 29–30.
[611] Lugt, 30.
[612] Lugt, 30; Wells, *Improvisation*, 46–48.
[613] Lugt, *Living Theodrama*, 30; Wells, *Improvisation*, 56.
[614] Wells, *Improvisation*, 65.
[615] Lugt, *Living Theodrama*, 33.
[616] Lugt, 33–34.
[617] Lugt, 34.

argues that Christians have often been more comfortable focusing on formation as inner character development subsequently expressed through external action, mirroring Stanislavski's approach.[618] However, he also notes a growing recognition in Christian theology of the formational impact of action, worship, and community participation, echoing Brecht's emphasis on learned skills.[619] Rather than waiting for emotional or spiritual readiness, this perspective affirms the active work of growing into the ability to live faithfully within the drama of Christian life.[620] Lugt concludes that 'theodramatic formation is the preparation, development, and growth of individuals and the church toward Christ-likeness, along with the readiness for particular roles and performances in the theodrama.'[621] Healthy formation, he suggests, involves both the inner work of character development and a cycle of formation through external action and performance.[622]

Framing formation in this way offers helpful insight into how the performative aspects of vocational discernment can have a two-way formational impact on candidates. In interviews, candidates expressed feeling that articulating their vocation helped clarify and define what had previously felt nebulous or intangible. It was through repeatedly externalising and acting on their inner sense of calling in conversation with others that they were able to deepen their understanding and examine their own readiness for ordained ministry. Many candidates also described how active participation in lay ministry and mission prompted reflection on whether God was gifting and calling them to ordained ministry. Gaining such experience helped them develop the skills and character traits necessary for ministerial life. This reflects the cyclical or spiral pattern described by Lugt as theodramatic formation, in which the performance of vocation in speech and action both affirms calling and prompts reflection on the need for further formation. Although this chapter began by identifying the Stage Two Panel as the definitive moment of performance during which candidates need to externalise and demonstrate evidence of the Qualities for ordained ministry, Lugt's theodramatic approach challenges this view of the Stage Two Panel as the sole moment of performance. Instead, it highlights the performative nature of the entire SDP, in which conversations and experiences serve as opportunities for rehearsal,

[618] Lugt, 31–32.
[619] Lugt, 32.
[620] Lugt, 32.
[621] Lugt, 30–31.
[622] Lugt, 32–33.

preparation, and practice – as well as contributing meaningfully to ongoing formation for ministry.

Alongside emphasising this spiral process of formation through rehearsal, preparation, and performance, Lugt also explores the significance of the theatrical concept of *disponibilité* in the formation of actors. Although an unfamiliar concept outside of theatre theory, *disponibilité* is described as 'the core of theatrical formation'[623] and refers to the need for actors to approach one another with openness, receptivity, and readiness to respond to whatever the interaction may hold.[624] It also involves the willingness to follow the guidance of the director or playwright and to submit to the external constraints of the script, story, or staging.[625] *Disponibilité* is not simply acquired or learned; rather, it is cultivated as a habit through regular rehearsal and grows as actors learn to trust one another.[626]

For ease, Lugt transliterates the term into English as 'disponibility,' proposing this 'multi-dimensional receptivity' as foundational for his theodramatic model.[627] This model calls for openness and responsiveness to the triune God, scripture, the Church, oneself, tradition, unbelievers, and local context.[628] Recognising the complexity of these influences, and that the Christian life is lived out performatively, Lugt writes, 'Disponibility is a condition that creates a readiness to perform, but it is also a condition that matures throughout and as a result of performance.'[629] Formation is possible only when one's attitude is disponible towards God, and open to being shaped and changed through encounters with others.[630] With such an approach to life and faith, people remain open to discovering new things about themselves and to performing whatever role they are called to fill by God and the church.[631]

A disponible attitude does not imply dispassionate or mechanical obedience to a director's arbitrary whims.[632] Rather, theatrical disponibility acknowledges that actors bring their

[623] Lugt, 34.
[624] Lugt, 34–36.
[625] Lugt, 35.
[626] Lugt, 35.
[627] Lugt, 36.
[628] Lugt, 36.
[629] Lugt, 40.
[630] Lugt, 40–41.
[631] Lugt, 37.
[632] Lugt, 42.

whole selves – including their character, life experiences, and concerns – into their performance, and that they are shaped in turn by these performative encounters. Lugt incorporates this understanding into his theodramatic model, commenting that 'disponibility is inherently biased, arising out of passionate action and involvement in theodrama.'[633] While disciples of Jesus must remain open and available to the surprising call of God and the prompting of the Spirit, any 'prideful self-assertion' is moderated by the need to remain disponible to community, context, and scripture.[634]

Candidates in my research demonstrated an awareness of the need to be attentive and responsive to God's calling, even when this would be personally costly for them and their families. They also expressed a willingness to be open with others during the discernment process and to learn from these encounters. However, several factors made it difficult for some candidates to be fully open and vulnerable with those tasked with testing their vocation. Lugt describes the church as a 'company of actors' who develop 'relational disponibility' as they grow together in 'relational awareness, attention, responsiveness, openness, availability, and trust.'[635] Candidates appeared to recognise that DDOs and advisors were not simply fellow members of the 'company' with whom they could develop trust over time, but more akin to participative audience members before whom they felt a need to perform. The ways in which these dynamics of power and trust challenge candidates' ability to be fully open and vulnerable during the SDP will be explored more fully in the next chapter.

9.3.2 Performance, Authenticity and Fittingness

A second foundational concept for Lugt's theodramatic model is 'fittingness' which is another central principle in theatrical theory and performance. In theatrical terms, 'fittingness' refers to the way components of a performance contribute to the whole.[636] For example, musical numbers or stage design may enhance the performance through fittingness or jar with the story, undermining its impact.[637] Similarly, actors can be considered 'workers in fittingness,' tasked with communicating character and responding

[633] Lugt, 44.
[634] Lugt, 43.
[635] Lugt, 115–16.
[636] Lugt, 48.
[637] Lugt, 48.

appropriately to the situation being portrayed, enabling the audience to believe in both the actor and the developing story.[638] Once again, Lugt considers the differing approaches to fittingness advocated by Brecht and Stanislavski to show how these dynamics are worked out in practice. For Stanislavski, fittingness involves 'role identification,' where the actor fully inhabits and expresses themselves through emotional connection with their part.[639] For Brecht, by contrast, there is greater 'role distance' between actor and character.[640] His goal is not emotional connection within the actor but to help the audience engage reflectively and be transformed through the performance.[641]

This contrast prompts Lugt to explore their significance for a theodramatic model in which faithful formation enables roles to be performed fittingly. He acknowledges the significant difference between theatrical performance, where the actor adopts a temporary fictional role, and life, where 'theodramatic roles actually constitute personal identity.'[642] True identity is not found offstage while performance remains mere pretence; rather, 'in the theodrama...everything is on-stage, and human identity is wrapped up in the roles we play, whether in relationship with God, each other, or the rest of creation.'[643] The central concern, then, is the extent to which integration between the self and the roles played is possible, as well as the risk of inauthentic or faked performance.

To explore these questions of authenticity, Lugt argues that Stanislavski's 'role identification' and Brecht's 'role distance' together offer valuable insights into what it means to perform authentically in the theodrama. Stanislavski's emphasis on coherence between inner motivation and outward action highlights the potential for religious performance to drift into hypocrisy.[644] Yet in our contemporary context, where self-expression and self-discovery are highly prized, this kind of coherence between motivation and performance can be misinterpreted to imply that the only kind of authenticity is when what is expressed externally is an exact representation of what is felt internally. Lugt summarises Stanislavskian authenticity as an 'ideal fusion between feeling and doing,'

[638] Lugt, 49.
[639] Lugt, 49.
[640] Lugt, 131–34.
[641] Lugt, 133.
[642] Lugt, 136.
[643] Lugt, 136.
[644] Lugt, 137–38.

critiquing this as overemphasising feelings, which are fleeting, and self-understanding, which is partial.[645] He contrasts this with a Brechtian approach, which recognises the distance between what might currently be felt internally and the role one is called to play.[646] Rather than waiting for inner emotional and spiritual maturity before acting (an approach Lugt calls 'existential authenticity'[647]), Brechtian authenticity involves choosing to act in ways that are appropriate to the role while acknowledging that this is challenging and transformative.[648] In this approach, actions precede emotions, and the individual grows into the character they choose to enact. This mirrors Paul's description of virtue development as an active decision to 'put to death' behaviours commensurate with an old way of life and instead 'clothe yourselves with the new self' (Colossians 3:9-14).[649] Over time, the gap narrows between chosen behaviours and instinctive responses.[650]

By bringing together Stanislavskian and Brechtian approaches, Lugt contributes fresh insight into what authenticity might look like in vocational discernment. Drawing on the theatrical concept of fittingness, authenticity is presented not as the accurate expression of an inner emotional reality, but as an attitude and approach. In a cultural context where authenticity is often equated with self-expression and full alignment between the hidden self and public presentation, this suggests that discernment must also allow space for exploration and experimentation in trying out a new role to discover whether there is a good fit. This might include encouraging candidates to engage in ministerial tasks, such as leading intercessions, preaching, or leading teams, to see whether fittingness is evident in their performance of these roles. Likewise, DDOs and advisors should be encouraged not to seek perfection, but to recognise and value tangible signs of growth and learning, with an imaginative extrapolation of what might be possible in the future through training and further experience.

It is appropriate for DDOs and advisors to be wary of candidates who may seek to cover up issues, hide areas of concern, or present a false front. However, such 'unfitting

[645] Lugt, 137.
[646] Lugt, 137.
[647] Lugt, 137.
[648] Lugt, 137.
[649] Lugt, 137–38; Herdt, *Putting on Virtue*, 1, 82, and 355.
[650] Lugt, *Living Theodrama*, 138.

performance'[651] is rarely a deliberate attempt to deceive. Discernment of fittingness will require sensitive exploration of motives and careful attention to whether the candidate demonstrates humility, love for others, and a willingness to serve, rather than a desire for praise or status. These attributes are nebulous and difficult to identify in another person, which is why McChlery emphasises the need for those engaged in discernment to listen carefully throughout the process, both to the candidate and to God.[652] In the following chapter, I will explore the relational dynamics which can further complexify this task. In the next section of the present chapter, however, I turn to a final component of Lugt's model in which God, depicted as playwright, protagonist and producer, is active in every aspect of the theodramatic performance.

9.3.3 God as Playwright, Protagonist and Producer

Theatrical analogies in theology risk becoming overly simplistic when they seek to specify too precisely who fills each role in a performance. Lugt acknowledges, for example, that the question of who comprises the audience in the theodrama is complex, since all human beings are both participants in the drama and observers of others' performances.[653] This complexity increases when considering what it means for this to be a *theo*drama and how God's role might be understood within such a model. Returning to his discussion on the nature of the audience, Lugt argues that portraying God as the one before whom the play is performed unhelpfully distances God from the action and fails to recognise divine involvement in what occurs on stage.[654] Instead, he suggests an analogy that draws on the theatrical roles of 'playwright, protagonist, and producer,' all of which are participatory in the performative action.[655]

As playwright, God is the instigator and source of the theodrama.[656] God not only 'create[s] the theodramatic stage' and determines the broad parameters of the storyline, but also weaves together the improvised contributions of human actors in an act of 'creative authorship' through partnership and participation.[657] Lugt highlights that this requires

[651] Lugt, 138.
[652] McChlery, *How Do You Know It's God?*, 203.
[653] Lugt, *Living Theodrama*, 163.
[654] Lugt, 163.
[655] Lugt, 62.
[656] Lugt, 67.
[657] Lugt, 67–68.

'developing disponibility to God the Father as playwright [and] the awareness that we are not the authors of our own existence.'[658] God also joins in the theodramatic performance as the 'protagonist-Son' around whom the whole story revolves.[659] Jesus' 'preeminent performance'[660] offers the perfect model of life lived with disponibility and fittingness, and invites others to be formed as fellow-actors 'given the responsibility and privilege of re-enacting the shape of Jesus' masterful performance.'[661] This re-enactment is possible only through the ongoing guidance of God the Holy Spirit as 'producer-director.'[662] The Spirit mediates the playwrights intentions, translating them into concrete action by the actors on stage.[663] This multidimensional role includes developing actors' gifts, selecting suitable roles for each to play, and offering stage direction to enable the cast to work together.[664] Drawing again on theatrical theory, Lugt stresses that the 'producer-Spirit' is not a deterministic director who imposes a particular vision on the actors, nor a detached director who offers no boundaries or guidance.[665] Rather, the Spirit acts dialogically, without '[moving] people like chess pieces or [letting] them control the board'.[666] As a dialogical director, the Spirit draws out and enables each individual's gifts for fitting performance, and provides the prompts and guidance to which disponible actors can respond with creative improvisation.[667]

Lugt acknowledges the risk that presenting God as playwright, protagonist, and producer might imply that each task belongs uniquely to one person of the Trinity, rather than recognising that 'the action of the triune God is indivisible [so] any role or action ascribed to one Person is also performed by the other Persons.'[668] Nevertheless, his theatrical analogy allows for recognition of the multifaceted way in which the triune God is actively at work, directing and shaping human participation in theodramatic performance. By depicting God as playwright, protagonist, and producer, Lugt challenges overly deterministic models of

[658] Lugt, 68.
[659] Lugt, 63.
[660] Lugt, 71.
[661] Lugt, 76.
[662] Lugt, 80.
[663] Lugt, 81.
[664] Lugt, 82.
[665] Lugt, 63.
[666] Lugt, 82–83.
[667] Lugt, 84.
[668] Lugt, 62.

providence and reflects on the implications of a theodramatic approach in which God creates the conditions for action, models a life of disponibility and fittingness, and guides, enables and directs human actors in their performance. Although he does not explicitly apply this model to vocation, Lugt clearly emphasises the importance of human agency and highlights how God calls and enables such performative participation.

In Chapter Two, I identified a tension between models of vocation and providence that emphasise either God's particular will for the individual or God's perfect plan for creation. I referenced Rowan Williams' observation that vocation is often framed in highly dramatic terms with God imagined as the casting director arbitrarily selecting individuals for the parts they play in life.[669] Lugt's theodramatic presentation offers a reinterpretation of this dramatic framing for vocation. Rather than focusing solely on casting, God is understood to set the stage, provide the model performance, and invite and enable human participation. This broader theodramatic perspective extends the performative aspects of the vocational discernment process beyond the Stage Two interviews to encompass the whole of life.

9.4 Concluding Remarks and Recommendations

In this chapter, I have explored the element of performance in the SDP. Arising from my interviews, I identified three key questions about performance in the process, and explored these drawing on sociological perspectives and theatrical theology, with particular focus on the work of Wesley Vander Lugt in *Living Theodrama*.

My first question concerned the ways in which diocesan components of the SDP prepare candidates for a definitive moment of performance at the Stage Two Panel. Engaging with Lugt's reframing of the theatrical concept of disponibility, I have argued that performative elements are present throughout the process and are not focused simply on preparing candidates to perform convincingly at the Stage Two Panel. Rather, I have highlighted how multiple opportunities for rehearsal and performance contribute to candidates' ongoing formation for future ministry as well as their immediate preparation for interview. Through interaction with others, feedback, and participation in the performance of ministerial duties, candidates are formed to inhabit, in increasingly instinctive, imaginative and improvisational ways, the role to which God may be calling them. From this, I suggest that there would be

[669] Williams, *A Ray of Darkness*, 147.

value in reframing the diocesan components of the SDP not simply as preparation for the Stage Two Panel but as an integral part of the ongoing formation and performative participation which is necessary for vocational discernment. Rather than focusing primarily on equipping candidates to perform convincingly at interview, diocesan processes might more intentionally foster opportunities for embodied participation in ministry as formative spaces in which candidates can explore and begin to inhabit the role to which they may be called. This could include encouraging candidates to engage in a range of ministerial tasks – such as leading worship, preaching, or pastoral care – not merely as a way of demonstrating competence, but as contexts for reflective learning and imaginative discernment. Advisors and DDOs might be supported to adopt a more explicitly formational approach, helping candidates reflect on these experiences not as auditions but as authentic participation in theodramatic performance through which calling is both tested and shaped.

My second question asked whether extensive preparation at a diocesan level might lead candidates to appear inauthentic during their Stage Two Panel interviews, or whether some candidates might deliberately seek to give a convincing performance which does not accurately reflect who they are outside of the interview context. In exploring the nature of theodramatic authenticity, Lugt highlights that contemporary culture often equates authenticity with self-expression – the externalising of inner emotions, feelings, and thoughts. He compares this to Stanislavski's theatrical approach, but suggests that there is also scope within theodramatic performance for Brechtian acting, which involves choice, decision, and learnt behaviours. Building on this, I argued that the theatrical concept of fittingness offers a helpful lens through which to consider authenticity in the vocational discernment process. Here, fittingness is characterised by an approach to vocation marked by humility, openness to challenge, and a desire to serve others, rather than seeking praise or self-elevation. It also involves a willingness to test and explore a sense of calling through engagement in ministerial experience to discern whether there is identifiable potential or gifting for ministry. This perspective suggests a more active and participatory understanding of authenticity in which fittingness is expressed, not only through externalisation of inner emotions, but also through practice, growth, and responsiveness to feedback. Such an approach challenges aspects of current practice within the SDP, particularly the tendency to view authenticity primarily as the expression of internal feelings – reflected in language such

as ‘we need to see the real you in the process.’ Instead, DDOs and advisors might be encouraged to adopt a broader approach to authenticity, inviting candidates to reflect on concrete ministerial experiences and the formational learning these represent. By shifting the emphasis towards vocational fittingness, demonstrated through practice, growth, and relational engagement, the process may better support candidates to inhabit their emerging vocation with integrity, while reducing the pressure to perform a polished but potentially superficial version of the self.

My final question reflected candidates’ experience that God, as the one calling them to ordained ministry, is also actively involved in enabling them to articulate that call and equipping those tasked with testing it. Lugt’s description of the triune God as playwright, protagonist, and producer resonates with this recognition, offering a theodramatic vision in which God is not simply the initiator of vocation but intimately involved throughout the discernment process. As playwright, God the Father creates the conditions in which the discernment ‘drama’ unfolds, holding the wider narrative within which each candidate’s story finds its place. As protagonist, Jesus provides the ultimate model of faithful ministry and self-giving discipleship, shaping both the pattern and purpose of ministerial calling. As producer, the Spirit equips and guides the whole company of actors, enabling candidates to respond according to their gifts and drawing the wider community into collaborative discernment. This Trinitarian framing challenges any tendency to view discernment as merely an individual journey of self-discovery or as a purely human evaluative process. Instead, it invites a deeper recognition that God is not only the caller but also the enabler of vocation, working through and within the communal life of the church to identify and affirm those called to ordained ministry for the building up of the whole body of Christ. This suggests that the SDP would benefit from a more explicit theological articulation of the vocational discernment process as a shared, prayerful practice of seeking God’s guidance. Providing clearer theological grounding in candidate materials, DDO training, and national guidance, could help ensure that all participants remain attentive to the spiritual nature of discernment and to trust in God’s leading. Such an approach may foster a deeper sense of discernment as a collaborative and prayerful endeavour, rather than as a process reliant on individual performance or human assessment.

At several points in this chapter, I have indicated that there are factors in vocational discernment which can complicate interactions between candidates and those tasked with testing their calling. These factors may inhibit candidates from feeling that they can trust DDOs and assessors sufficiently to be truly disponible as they engage in formation through the discernment process. They can also contribute to relational dynamics in which candidates feel pressure to act in certain ways or say particular things to demonstrate fittingness for ordained ministry. At the same time, the belief that God is directing and guiding individual actions within discernment can risk confusion between divine activity and human decision-making, reinforcing power dynamics in which DDOs and assessors hold god-like authority. In the next chapter, I explore factors from my interviews that may contribute to such unhealthy dynamics in the discernment process.

9.5 Summary

This chapter has explored the performative dimensions of the SDP, considering how preparation, authenticity, and divine agency intersect within vocational discernment. Drawing on sociological perspectives and Lugt's theodramatic theology, I have argued that performance can be formative, authenticity can be expressed through fittingness, and God is actively involved throughout the discernment process. However, the relational dynamics that shape performance and discernment are not neutral and candidates' ability to participate authentically may be affected by the power held by those tasked with testing their vocation. The next chapter turns to examine these dynamics more closely, considering how power is experienced, negotiated, and enacted within the SDP.

Chapter 10
Trusting the Process: Power

10.1 Introduction

In previous chapters, I have considered the theological significance of two aspects of the Church of England's approach to vocational discernment for ordained ministry. In Chapter Eight, I argued that the invitation for candidates to share their story is not merely a narrative exercise but a theological act, contributing to a vision of vocation as something dynamic and unfolding, shaped over time through relationship with God, others, and the self. In Chapter Nine, I argued that the contexts in which such storytelling occurs within the SDP, including the national panels, function as theodramatic spaces of performance where candidates externalise their sense of vocation so that it may be tested by others as part of a formational and communal discernment process. In this present chapter, I turn to the complex interpersonal and institutional power dynamics which can make it difficult for candidates to fully trust a process in which they are required to share their deepest and most personal stories with those tasked with assessing their vocation on behalf of the Church.

In my analysis of interviews with candidates and DDOs, I identified a tension inherent within the SDP as a process which seeks to both nurture individuals' sense of vocation and tests that sense of call. DDOs expressed a desire to give candidates time and space to explore whether God may be calling them to ministry, while also recognising the need to assess their vocation in order to identify those suitable for public ministry. It was apparent that DDOs and candidates often enter into conversations in which these twin aims of nurturing and testing – and the tensions between them – are not always acknowledged or made explicit. For example, in Chapter Five, I noted that DDOs frequently underplayed their influence and authority by presenting themselves as travel companions or expert guides on the vocational 'journey', while downplaying their responsibility for assessment and reporting. Although conversations between DDOs and candidates are often warm, pastoral, and supportive, there remains a clear power differential between the candidate exploring

vocation and the DDO tasked with evaluating, recording, and reporting evidence that the candidate is called to ordained ministry.

Although most candidates appreciated the relational connection that developed with their DDO, and valued how their insightful, incisive questions helped deepen their vocational exploration, many also described feeling significant nervousness about how they were perceived within this relationship, along with a fear of being misunderstood or misinterpreted by those holding influence in the discernment process. This concern was especially pronounced among candidates from backgrounds or demographics historically underrepresented in the Church of England. In Chapter Six, I identified several characteristics which may complicate candidates' experience of the SDP, including low previous academic achievement, being female, being LGBTQ+, or coming from a global majority heritage (GMH) background. Candidates from these backgrounds often worried that they would not conform to the expected 'norm' of those entering ordained ministry and feared encountering prejudice, falling short of an unspecified 'standard', or expressing themselves in ways that could be misinterpreted.

Further compounding these concerns was an awareness that the Church of England has a complex and often painful history in its treatment of people from these social groups. This was most vividly expressed in Philippa's reflection on the isolation and 'internal conflict' she experienced as a Black African woman in the discernment process. Although she described a positive relationship with her DDO, she did not feel it was safe to explore questions about the Church of England's historic colonial legacy in her country of birth, fearing such reflections might appear in the DDO's assessment report. Similarly, LGBTQ+ candidates were acutely aware that sexuality and gender identity remain contested issues in the Church of England. They often found themselves second-guessing the theological stance of those they encountered during the process and expressed distress at being required to read *Issues in Human Sexuality*, even while this document was under active review by General Synod. This prompted Claire's comment: 'my friends have been horrified that I've been prepared to offer my innermost self up for scrutiny...They can't imagine having trust in an institution in that way.'

It is clear that interpersonal interactions in the discernment process are imbued with institutional power. The authority of the DDO is understood as a delegated responsibility

from the bishop, and DDOs are seen by candidates as influential gatekeepers, acting on behalf of the wider Church through the administration of a nationally agreed process. This prompts deep suspicion among candidates who struggle to trust that an institution as large and historic as the Church of England could attend sensitively to the needs of individuals – especially those who differ in any way from the perceived norm.

Alongside reflections on the interpersonal and institutional power dynamics within the SDP, candidates were also attuned to the theological frameworks through which they interpreted their experiences, including the potential for theological concepts to be twisted to encourage acquiescence. This was evident in Brenda's comment describing the Church of England as a large organisation that justified poor working conditions for clergy by telling them, 'it's alright because you're doing God's will!' Many candidates entered the discernment process with a sincere willingness to trust and obey God, aware of the personal cost that ordained ministry might involve for themselves and their families. However, they expressed anxiety that the Church might exploit this posture of submission and sacrifice. There was also sensitivity to the fallibility of those involved in the process and concern that human decisions could be presented as definitive indicators of divine will, rather than provisional judgements within a broader process of communal discernment. While candidates were open to obeying God's call, they were careful to distinguish this from obedience to the institution itself, and wary of conflating institutional authority with divine direction.

Candidates in vocational discernment are frequently told to 'trust the process.' However, this oft-repeated adage fails to recognise the power dynamics embedded within that process. First, there are interpersonal dynamics, as candidates navigate uncertainty about how they are perceived and interpreted by those tasked with assessing their suitability for ministry. Second, there are institutional dynamics, in which candidates question whether the Church as an institution is truly willing to accept them or treat them justly. Finally, there are theological dynamics, as candidates wrestle with whether it is possible or appropriate to trust a human process as a means through which God's call is heard and God's will is discerned. These concerns raise important questions about how power is understood and handled within the SDP.

In this chapter, I examine the asymmetries of interpersonal and institutional power highlighted by my research, as well as the theological frameworks which underpin these dynamics within the vocational discernment process. The first question I will consider is: How might the interpersonal and institutional power dynamics of the SDP be healthily understood, appreciated and handled within an Anglican ecclesiology of ministry? The second question focuses more directly on theology, asking: What might be a theologically informed way of understanding the SDP which takes account of human agency and authority, as well as the divine will and call of God? These questions are clearly interrelated, and, as in previous chapters, I will not address each in turn but will draw on both interdisciplinary and theological sources before returning to them explicitly at the end of the chapter.

I begin by turning to interdisciplinary sources to explore different sources and expressions of power within the SDP from a sociological perspective. I then consider theological and ecclesial perspectives on power, including the Church of England's growing recognition of situations in which power has been mishandled and abused, particularly in pastoral and leadership relationships. Finally, I offer a detailed analysis of a recent blog post by Mike Higton on the nature of power in the Church of England, and identify some practical recommendations for how these dynamics within the SDP might be handled more wisely within a theological framework.

10.2 Power and Process: Interdisciplinary Perspectives

To explore the nature of power within the SDP is to enter contested territory which is the subject of extensive debate across multiple disciplines. Even the task of defining 'power' proves challenging, as there is little consensus on what it is, how it operates, or how its presence in a given context can be fully analysed and evaluated.[670]

In this section, I commence by outlining how sociologists have interpreted the multifaceted nature of power and highlighted the complexity of the power dynamics within interpersonal interactions in institutional settings. I then turn to differing theological conceptions of power, recognising the ways in which divine power has sometimes been equated with damaging patriarchal or clerical paradigms. Finally, I consider the relevance of these

[670] Stephen Sykes, *Power and Christian Theology* (Continuum, 2006), 5 and 93.

sociological and theological insights for the Church of England, particularly the challenge of identifying how power is experienced within this episcopal ecclesial context with its complex organisational structure. In light of recent Church of England reports, I will highlight how instances of abuse and the misuse of power have prompted increased attention to be paid to power dynamics in pastoral care and leadership, as well as the need for racial justice, effective safeguarding, and proactive inclusion. I conclude this section by identifying the need for further theological reflection on the particular power dynamics within the SDP.

10.2.1 Sociological Perspectives on Power

Power is a significant topic of sociological study, and here I will engage with two key voices – Max Weber and Michel Foucault – each of whom offers a distinctive and influential perspective. I also consider how Weber's approach has been developed by John French and Bertram Raven, and how Foucault's insights have informed the practical empowerment framework developed by Lisa VeneKlasen and Valerie Miller. Together, these approaches offer theoretical and practical tools for interpreting and analysing power in social contexts.

Max Weber's definition of power as 'the probability that one actor within a social relationship will be in a position to carry out his own will despite resistance'[671] has been highly influential in sociological discussions about power. While some critique this oppositional definition as too narrow, it has nonetheless shaped popular and academic discourse around power dynamics in interpersonal interactions over the past century.[672] Within the SDP, this Weberian perspective resonates with candidates' concerns about key gatekeepers imposing their own church tradition or expectations, thereby misunderstanding or misrepresenting candidates in the decision-making process. According to Weber, the church often functions as a 'hierocratic' organization, exercising 'spiritual imperative control'[673] by applying 'coercion through the distribution or denial of religious benefits.'[674] Candidates' anxieties, then, may not simply reflect concern about their interpersonal interactions with DDOs or advisors, but a deeper awareness of the institutional and

[671] Max Weber, *The Theory of Social and Economic Organization*, trans. A.M. Henderson and Talcott Parsons (Free Press, 1947), 158.
[672] Paul Avis, *Authority, Leadership and Conflict in the Church* (Mowbray, 1992), 20–25; Sykes, *Power and Christian Theology*, 93–103.
[673] Weber, *The Theory of Social and Economic Organization*, 162.
[674] Weber, 160.

organisational power these individuals represent, and the potential for this to be enacted in unhealthy or coercive ways.

Weber also explores how authority can be imposed by identifying three categories of influence which operate within organisations: rational authority, traditional authority, and charismatic authority.[675] All three can be applied to the role of the DDO to analyse the power dynamics operating in their interactions with candidates. 'Rational authority' refers to an individual's formal role within a structured, hierarchical system.[676] In the SDP, this corresponds to the office occupied by the DDO, and how they are expected to contribute to the overall process. This is the kind of power that can be set out on a flowchart using arrows to represent the movement of information and influence. 'Traditional authority' derives legitimacy from historical precedent, often claiming sacral or cultural significance, and concerns roles which are not simply created for pragmatic reasons, but through shared belief in the appropriateness of the order they establish.[677] This kind of authority in the SDP is most obviously embodied in the role of the bishop, who makes final decisions based on the theological and ecclesial tradition of the Church of England. While the bishop may not be present in every discernment conversation, their delegated authority undergirds the DDO's role. Finally, 'charismatic authority' arises when individuals are seen as possessing exceptional or God-given gifts.[678] One DDO expressed concern that candidates attribute this kind of spiritual ability to them, saying: 'I'm really passionate about... removing all of the mystical stuff [the belief that] the DDO has some kind of special understanding or access to God... [I do] everything I can do to lower power imbalances.' This suggests that candidates may project spiritual or charismatic authority onto DDOs in ways that complicate the dynamics of mutual discernment.

Building on Weber, recent sociologists have explored more deeply how power is exercised within interpersonal interactions, such as those in the workplace. John French and Bertram Raven proposed a taxonomy of leadership influence which identified five (later six) 'bases of power' by which a leader can bring about change through their influence over others:

[675] Weber, 334.
[676] Weber, 334–46.
[677] Weber, 347–64.
[678] Weber, 365.

'Informational, Reward, Coercion, Legitimate, Expertise, and Referent'.[679] These highlight how someone in a position of authority can require compliance from a subordinate through the provision of training (Informational), the promise of positive (Reward) or threat of negative (Coercion) outcomes, by offering a positive role model for emulation (Referent), as well as through their official position (Legitimate) or superior knowledge (Expert).[680] Each of these helps to interpret how a DDO might exercise influence in the SDP. Clearly, the DDO holds 'legitimate' authority conferred by their role, and the uncertainty of the process outcome gives them a form of decision-making or gatekeeping power which equates to the potential for 'Reward' or 'Coercion', particularly if candidates express theological or personal views which the DDO prizes or dislikes. Raven comments, 'personal approval... can result in quite powerful reward power; and a threat of rejection or disapproval... can serve as a source of powerful coercive power.'[681] This form of power is further developed with reference to 'Expert' and 'Referent' authority in which the DDO may be viewed as an expert, or interpreted as an inspirational model of ordained ministry to which the candidate should aspire. Finally, the addition of 'Informational' power to French & Raven's model, highlights the ways in which DDOs present themselves from the first meeting as those who know how the discernment process works and who will guide candidates through its various components. While the provision of information can give agency to the candidate, it is possible that it emphasises the expertise of the DDO and the unfamiliarity of an ecclesial discernment process which differs from secular recruitment practices.

Whilst the definition of power adopted by Weber and French & Raven focuses on how individuals might influence and impose their will, others have proposed alternative interpretations in which power is neutral and negotiated, rather than a zero-sum conflict between two parties. Notably, Michel Foucault challenged the prevailing Weberian perspective by offering a broader and more diffused conception. He rejected the idea that power is simply unidirectional dominance, arguing instead that power is embedded in all social relations: 'Power is everywhere; not because it embraces everything, but because it comes from everywhere.'[682] In this view, power operates not as a linear hierarchy, but as an

[679] Bertram Raven, 'The Bases of Power and the Power/Interaction Model of Interpersonal Influence', *Analyses of Social Issues and Public Policy* 8, no. 1 (2008): 1.
[680] Raven, 2–3.
[681] Raven, 3.
[682] Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, trans. Robert Hurley (Pantheon Books, 1978), 93.

interwoven web of social connections shaped by norms, expectations and institutions.[683] For Foucault, power is not inherently negative. He describes individuals as 'vehicles of power, not its points of application.'[684] Power flowing through society, organisations, and social relationships, shapes individuals even as they themselves exercise power in turn as they relate to others. Within the SDP, this perspective highlights the impossibility of eliminating power dynamics altogether and invites a more expansive view of how power circulates among participants. While some candidates may perceive power simply as an external authority imposed upon them, a Foucauldian lens suggests a more complex social web incorporating all participants, shaping them through an ongoing process of organisational and cultural normalisation. It also reminds us that those currently occupying positions of influence, including DDOs and bishops, were themselves once candidates being shaped by similar processes, just as today's candidates are being formed for ministries in which they will exercise their own authority in the future.

This more positive and productive vision of power is also evident in the work of Lisa VeneKlasen and Valerie Miller, whose empowerment framework offers a practical tool for analysing and addressing power dynamics within social institutions. Drawing on many years of activism and advocacy with marginalised groups across the Global South,[685] VeneKlasen and Miller argue that power is dynamic, relational, and unequally distributed.[686] Echoing Foucault, they define power as 'exercised in the social, economic, and political relations between individuals and groups.'[687] However, they further highlight that unequal access to 'material, human, intellectual and financial resources' often reflects and reinforces wider patterns of social exclusion and marginalisation, with control of these resources being perpetuated by social factors, institutions, and ideology.[688] To analyse these dynamics, they propose four categories: Power Over, Power With, Power To, and Power Within.[689] 'Power Over' denotes dominating or oppressive forms of power, while the other three describe

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[683] Michel Foucault, *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews & Other Writings 1972-1977*, ed. Colin Gordon (Pantheon, 1980), 98; Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, trans. Alan Sheridan (Random House, 1995), 27–28; 304–6.
[684] Foucault, *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews & Other Writings 1972-1977*, 98.
[685] Lisa VeneKlasen and Valerie Miller, *A New Weave of Power, People and Politics: The Action Guide for Advocacy and Citizen Participation* (Practical Action Publishing, 2007), 2–3.
[686] VeneKlasen and Miller, 39–41.
[687] VeneKlasen and Miller, 41.
[688] VeneKlasen and Miller, 41.
[689] VeneKlasen and Miller, 45.

more collaborative expressions of agency and empowerment.[690] Although developed in a political activism context, this framework offers a useful challenge to the SDP, especially given that candidates in my research reported feeling disadvantaged if they were women, LGBTQ+, had low academic attainment, or were from a GMH background. VeneKlasen and Miller stress the importance of active strategies that equip, embolden and educate vulnerable groups, enabling them to navigate and challenge embedded structures of power.[691]

In the context of the SDP, this kind of empowerment may be difficult for DDOs to provide directly, given their evaluative role. However, it might be facilitated by providing candidates with access to mentors who are outside the formal process. These mentors could offer a safe space for reflection, particularly when there are elements of shared experience and background between candidates and mentors. Earlier, I recounted the experience of Philippa who developed a good relationship with her DDO, but still felt unable to explore questions around her African heritage and its significance for ministry in the Church of England. In such cases, external mentoring might offer a sense of accompaniment and affirmation that strengthens a candidate's agency within the process.

The sociological perspectives explored in this section demonstrate that power within the SDP is complex, multifaceted, and shaped by both individual interactions and wider institutional structures. While Weber and French & Raven highlight how power can be imposed through authority, expertise, or influence, Foucault and VeneKlasen & Miller emphasise its relational, distributed, and formative nature. Engaging with these sociological perspectives on power highlights the challenge of fostering trust and empowerment in a process that inherently includes asymmetries of authority. However, because the discernment process is not only institutional but also theological, any faithful analysis of its power dynamics must attend to the Christian convictions and ecclesial structures that underpin it. I now turn to theological and ecclesial perspectives on power, to consider how the church might better understand and navigate these dynamics within the vocational discernment process.

[690] VeneKlasen and Miller, 45.
[691] VeneKlasen and Miller, 54.

10.2.2 Theological and Ecclesial Perspectives on Power

Theological perspectives on power must wrestle with the complex and often paradoxical picture presented in scripture and throughout Christian history. Whilst God is lauded as 'the Almighty' and the 'God of power and might,'[692] who defeats the 'powers which hold mankind in bondage: sin, death, and the devil,'[693] this triumph is accomplished through the weakness and vulnerability exhibited by Jesus in the incarnation and crucifixion.[694] This juxtaposition of power and weakness at the heart of Christian theology has compelled the church, from its earliest days, to grapple with what it means to live in the confidence of Christ's victory[695] while simultaneously embracing its own experience of weakness and powerlessness, particularly in the face of opposition and oppression.[696]

A comprehensive survey of the many ways Christian theology has interpreted power is beyond the scope of this overview. However, Steven Sykes (an academic theologian and Church of England bishop) helpfully traces many of these different approaches in his book, *Power and Christian Theology*.[697] He highlights the need for care in theological discussions of power, noting that the focus can be upon one or more of 'three theatres: the cosmic, the societal and the personal,' each echoing the redemptive story enacted in Jesus Christ and the eschatological hope of his triumphant return.[698] However, difficulties arise, Sykes argues, when these 'theatres' are conflated or confused.[699] This is evident in his analysis of theological engagement with the concept of *kenosis*, where discussions often lack clarity about the move from focusing on God's self-limitation in Christ to the implications of this kenotic example for the poor and oppressed at either a societal or personal level.[700] Feminist theologians have rightly drawn attention to the dangers of an uncritical focus on divine self-

[692] Sykes, *Power and Christian Theology*, vii and 12; Church of England, *Being Human: A Christian Understanding of Personhood Illustrated with Reference to Power, Money, Sex and Time* (Church House Publishing, 2003), 45.
[693] Gustaf Aulén, *Christus Victor: An Historical Study of the Three Main Types of the Idea of the Atonement*, trans. A.G. Hebert (SPCK, 1953), 36; Colossians 2:15.
[694] 1 Corinthians 1:25; 2 Corinthians 13:4; Hebrews 4:15; Marva J. Dawn, *Powers, Weakness, and the Tabernacling of God* (Eerdmans, 2001), 35–71.
[695] Ephesians 6:12 Sykes, *Power and Christian Theology*, 23.
[696] 2 Corinthians 12:5-10 Sykes, vii–viii.
[697] Sykes, 12–80.
[698] Sykes, 21.
[699] Sykes, 25.
[700] Sykes, 105–6; Stephen Pardue, 'Kenosis and Its Discontents: Towards an Augustinian Account of Divine Humility', *Scottish Journal of Theology* 65, no. 3 (2012): 276.

sacrifice, suffering, and humility, particularly when used to justify the suppression of women and other marginalised groups.[701] This is not to suggest that kenotic themes cannot be retrieved, but to urge caution against simplistic translations into practice without due attention to the wider societal and ecclesial context in which they are interpreted.

A similar caution is needed when reflecting on the nature of power within the church. It is all too easy to equate ecclesial structures, processes and 'mechanisms'[702] directly with the outworking of God's will, without recognising the influence of human and historical factors. Theological literature on power in the church highlights the need to grapple with institutional power, the power of leaders, the power dynamics of pastoral care, and the potential for the abuse of power. In the Church of England, these concerns are shaped in distinctive ways by its status as an established church with an episcopal ecclesiology.

The Church of England has been increasingly confronted with the need to wrestle with issues of power and its misuse, as highlighted by numerous internal and external reports investigating the unhealthy power dynamics underlying various specific instances of abuse.[703] Notably, this includes the Makin Review into the abuse perpetuated by John Smyth, and the Scolding Review into the unhealthy culture and practices at Soul Survivor with Mike Pilavachi.[704] These reviews had not been released when the research interviews for this study were conducted, and therefore did not inform candidates' perceptions and comments about institutional power. However, they have further exposed how pastoral care, spiritual direction, mentoring, and leadership can be distorted, and power abused, by those in positions of responsibility and authority within the church.[705]

Broader concerns about discrimination experienced by women, those from working class backgrounds, and/or from GMH backgrounds have also been explored in recent Church of

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[701] Annie Selak, 'Orthodoxy, Orthopraxis, and Orthopathy: Evaluating the Feminist Kenosis Debate', *Modern Theology* 33, no. 4 (2017): 529.
[702] Gabriel Fackre, *The Christian Story*, 3rd ed. (Eerdmans, 1996), 176.
[703] Including: Alexis Jay et al., 'Independent Inquiry Child Sexual Abuse: The Anglican Church', October 2020, 80–85.
[704] Keith Makin, 'Independent Learning Lessons Review: John Smyth QC', 18 October 2024, https://www.churchofengland.org/sites/default/files/2024-11/independent-learning-lessons-review-john-smyth-qc-november-2024.pdf; Fiona Scolding and Ben Fullbrook, 'Independent Review into Soul Survivor', 26 September 2024, 51, https://www.soulsurvivorwatford.co.uk/outcome.
[705] Makin, 'Independent Learning Lessons Review,' 231–34; Scolding and Fullbrook, 'Independent Review into Soul Survivor, 50-53.

England research and reports.[706] Indeed, the recommendations from these reports provided some of the impetus for reforming the discernment process. Nevertheless, studies conducted after the introduction of the SDP continue to highlight the potential for discrimination, and the need for training to help DDOs and assessors recognise and address bias and prejudice.[707] In addition, the Church of England's own acknowledgement of 'institutional racism' calls for deeper reflection on how such a large organisation functions – especially in terms of how it empowers or marginalises minority groups in recruitment, selection, and leadership.[708]

Yet power in the SDP is not only institutional. It also operates through personal and pastoral interactions where discernment is experienced as a relational and spiritual encounter. Here, questions of trust, vulnerability, and authority become particularly acute. As discussed earlier in the chapter, concerns about power dynamics in vocational discernment often stem from the dual nature of the DDO-candidate relationship. Although these conversations resemble pastoral encounters, given their deeply personal content, they are also sites of formal assessment, where judgements are made about an individual's suitability for ordained ministry. Eve Parker, a Postdoctoral Researcher in Theological Education focusing on Diversity and Inclusion, has explored similar dynamics in her research into the experiences of female ordinands. She found that many were alert to the relational power dynamics embedded in discernment and training, fearing that they would be judged 'unworthy, defective and deserving of rejection.'[709] This pressure was especially pronounced for ordinands from underrepresented backgrounds, who felt a need to conform and not complain lest they be 'reported as a "bad (potential) priest"'.[710] While pastoral conversations in other contexts may also involve elements of judgement, whether implicitly

[706] Recent examples include: Archbishops' Anti-Racism Taskforce, 'From Lament to Action' (Church of England, 22 April 2021); Selina Stone, '"If It Wasn't for God": A Report on the Wellbeing of Global Majority Heritage Clergy in the Church of England' (Church of England, October 2022); Sharon Jagger, Alex Fry, and Rebecca Tyndall, '"Let Justice Roll Down Like Waters" Exploring the Wellbeing of Working-Class Clergy in the Church of England: A Rally Cry for Change' (Church of England, October 2023); Paul Miller et al., 'Behind the Stained-Glass: A Report on the Participation of UK Minoritised Ethnic People in the Ministry and Leadership of the Church of England' (Church of England, August 2024); Graveling, *How Clergy Thrive*.
[707] Jagger, Fry, and Tyndall, '"Let Justice Roll Down Like Waters"', 27.
[708] Archbishops' Anti-Racism Taskforce, 'From Lament to Action', 11.
[709] Eve Parker, 'Bleeding Women in Sacred Spaces', 134.
[710] Parker, 134.

or explicitly, those between DDOs and candidates are unusual in combining deep personal self-reflection with a formal evaluation of character.

Although most DDOs are experienced priests, capable of engaging in sensitive pastoral conversations, this does not guarantee full awareness of the power dynamics inherent in these conversations. Anglican priest and pastoral theologian, Margaret Whipp, observes that many ministers display 'naivety about the realities of power in pastoral relationships,'[711] instead viewing friendliness, approachability, and mutuality as ways to abdicate or avoid the spiritual responsibility entrusted to them as ordained ministers.[712] Whereas counsellors and therapists establish clear boundaries with clients, pastoral care in church contexts often operates with blurred and ill-defined expectations.[713] Jan Berry, a URC minister and lecturer in Pastoral Theology at Luther King House, Manchester, argues that clarifying boundaries at the outset of a sensitive conversation is essential as it is only with these shared expectations in place that a 'space of risk and vulnerability' can be 'contained and explored'.[714]

Applying this to the discernment process, this highlights the importance of establishing clear expectations from the outset to ensure that both DDO and candidate share an understanding about the purpose of their conversations. Candidates need to know why they are being asked to disclose personal information, how this material will be recorded and used to inform decisions about their ministerial potential, and with whom this sensitive information will be shared. Whipp emphasises that, 'in the practice of pastoral care, it is the minister who bears the chief responsibility for setting, communicating and maintaining appropriate boundaries.'[715] It is therefore essential that, rather than ignoring or downplaying power dynamics, DDOs are equipped to set clear boundaries with candidates, and establish physical and emotional conditions for healthy interpersonal interaction. The onus for this lies with the DDO, rather than with the candidate.

While establishing boundaries might address some aspects of the power dynamics between DDO and candidate, it is also necessary to recognise that these interactions occur within a

[711] Margaret Whipp, *Pastoral Theology* (SCM, 2013), 144.
[712] Whipp, 146–48.
[713] Jan Berry, 'A Safe Space for Healing: Boundaries, Power and Vulnerability in Pastoral Care', *Theology & Sexuality* 20, no. 3 (2014): 204.
[714] Berry, 212.
[715] Whipp, *Pastoral Theology*, 148.

formal hierarchical structure, in which the bishop ultimately decides whether to sponsor a candidate for ordained ministry.[716] In this context, the Church of England must attend not only to institutional and pastoral power, but also to episcopal authority within the discernment process.

Many books on power in Christian leadership are written by theologians or ministers from free church or Protestant backgrounds, often with limited familiarity with episcopal ecclesiology. This can result in the role of bishops being misrepresented or underplayed. For instance, Chloe Lynch, a practical theologian and lecturer in Christian Leadership, proposes friendship as central to Christian ministry, dismissing the possibility of mutual and empowering forms of leadership within a church characterised by a 'static' hierarchical structure.[717] Similarly, Marcus Honeysett, writing from a free church background, reflects on the reality of power in Christian leadership. While his book draws on his experience mentoring leaders across various denominations, he acknowledges that it was written with 'very little personal experience of how issues of misuse of power work in episcopal or synodical settings.'[718]

One of the few texts that directly addresses episcopal power in the Anglican tradition is a chapter by the late Stephen Sykes, himself a bishop in the Church of England, in his book, *Power and Christian Theology.* Sykes identifies two key areas in which a bishop exercises authority and may be tempted to misuse it: the power to discipline clergy, and the 'substantial powers of informal patronage' by which individuals are selected for ministerial roles or favoured for advancement.[719] Drawing on *The Book of Pastoral Rule* by Pope Gregory I (c. AD 590), he underscores the necessity of humility and virtue in those entrusted with episcopal office.[720] Responding to congregationalist critiques that hierarchical authority inevitably lends itself to abuse, Sykes argues that, while all ecclesial systems carry this risk, formal hierarchies at least provide structures through which power is acknowledged and

[716] Paul Bradshaw, *Rites of Ordination: Their History and Theology* (SPCK, 2014), 32; Martin Davie, *Bishops Past, Present and Future* (Gilead Books, 2022), 650–51.
[717] Chloe Lynch, *Ecclesial Leadership as Friendship* (Routledge, 2021), 192.
[718] Marcus Honeysett, *Powerful Leaders? When Church Leadership Goes Wrong and How to Prevent It* (IVP, 2022), 5.
[719] Sykes, *Power and Christian Theology*, 136–38.
[720] Sykes, 138–52.

constrained.[721] I will further explore this kind of accountable and identifiable episcopal power later in the chapter.

There are relatively few theological explorations of interpersonal and pastoral power dynamics within the specific context of Anglican ecclesiology. While Sykes' contribution in *Power and Theology* remains significant, it was published nearly twenty years ago, prior to recent revelations of abuse and other significant developments in ministry, such as the ordination of women as bishops. This gap in the literature has prompted new initiatives, including a series of eight webinars between October 2022 and May 2023, jointly organised by the Michael Ramsey Centre for Anglican Studies at Durham University and the Department of Politics, Philosophy and Religion at Lancaster University, which explored various aspects of power in the Church of England.[722] Around the same time, in April 2023, the Society for the Study of Theology (SST) hosted a conference also focusing on power. These events led Professor Mike Higton to publish an extended blog post on his website reflecting on how power is exercised in the Church of England.[723]

In the final section of this chapter, I will engage in depth with Higton's blog post. Although it is an opinion piece rather than a peer-reviewed publication, it makes a valuable and timely contribution to current conversations about power dynamics in the Church of England. It is informed both by Higton's academic formation as a theologian and by his lived experience as an active layperson embedded in parish life. Crucially, Higton reflects on the implications of power differentials within ecclesial processes, which is precisely the dimension of power I explore in this chapter in relation to the discernment process.

10.3 Power and Process: Mike Higton's 'Power in the Church of England'

Mike Higton is a lay Anglican academic theologian based at Durham University, England, and currently serves as a churchwarden in his parish church. In his role as Professor of Theology and Ministry, he lectures students in the Theology Department, including ordinands based at Cranmer Hall, and holds responsibility for the academic validation of the Common

[721] Sykes, 150.
[722] 'Power in the Church of England', 2023, https://www.durham.ac.uk/research/institutes-and-centres/michael-ramsey-centre/power-in-the-church-of-england-webinar-series/.
[723] Mike Higton, 'Power in the Church of England', 5 June 2023, https://mikehigton.org.uk/power-in-the-church-of-england/.

Awards partnership with the Church of England. He has authored numerous books, chapters, and journal articles, and has edited several volumes, broadly in the fields of doctrine, ecclesiology, and theological education.[724] In a blog post written in 2020, entitled *Being Privileged*, Higton reflected on how he came to hold his various roles and acknowledged that it would be easy for him to downplay the influence, authority and power they confer on his interactions with others, alongside other forms of social and cultural advantage.[725] The blog post I focus on in the remainder of this chapter builds on these reflections, as Higton explores the dynamics of power in the Church of England, drawing on his experience as a theological educator and academic. It is worth noting that, in doing so, he appears to treat power and privilege as largely coterminous, attending to the ways in which both structural and interpersonal dynamics shape individual experience. While I recognise the significance of this interrelation and will discuss it in more detail later in the chapter, my concern throughout is more narrowly focused on power itself, particularly as it is exercised and experienced within the vocational discernment process.

In personal conversation, Higton described how he was motivated to initiate the *Power in the Church of England* webinar series due to a perceived mismatch between the depth of conversations about power he was having with colleagues from other university departments and the more limited discourse and practice he observed within the church.[726] His hope was that the series would foster serious theological reflection and academic engagement with the reality of power in the Anglican ecclesial context, and spark constructive discussion about how such power might be handled well. However, he expressed disappointment with the outcome, expressing the sense that the Church of England was not yet in a place where power dynamics could be explored with the same depth as in other interdisciplinary contexts. He also observed that many individuals in positions of authority seemed reluctant to acknowledge the power they held. It was from

[724] 'Durham University Staff Profile', https://www.durham.ac.uk/staff/mike-higton/.
[725] Mike Higton, 'Being Privileged', 27 March 2020, https://mikehigton.org.uk/being-privileged/.
[726] This comment, made in personal conversation and included with permission, reflects Higton's commitment to facilitating conversations between university-based academic theology and the church to deepen reflection and change practice: Mike Higton, 'Theological Education between the University and the Church: Durham University and the Common Awards in Theology, Ministry and Mission', *Journal of Adult Theological Education* 10, no. 1 (May 2013): 25–37.

this place of dissatisfaction with the theological and practical engagement with power in the Church of England that Higton decided to write this blog.[727]

In what follows, I identify key points from Higton's blog post and consider their relevance for the vocational discernment process. I begin by outlining his argument that power in the church must be redefined through an account of the church's purpose as a community of belonging. I then consider his claim that there are contexts in which power will necessarily be asymmetrical and that this reality must be acknowledged, rather than ignored or minimised. Finally, I examine his proposals for handling power dynamics in ways that promote clarity and build trust.

10.3.1 Belonging and Building: Redefining Power in the Church

Higton begins his blog by challenging the common assumption – recognisable as the Weberian perspective outlined earlier – that power consists solely in one person exerting influence over another to achieve personal goals.[728] In personal conversation, he remarked that interdisciplinary academic discussions are more likely to draw on Foucault's multifaceted conception of power, rather than Weber's more reductive definition. He expressed surprise at the realisation, during the *Power in the Church of England* webinar series, that many church discussions still treated power as unidirectional and inherently negative – something to be avoided or constrained. This reinforced his impression that the Church of England remains 'a long way behind the curve' in its engagement with contemporary academic approaches to power.[729]

In response to these limitations, Higton proposes that 'a different starting point' is necessary and calls for a reconceptualization of power within a broader appreciation of the church as a community.[730] This communal lens shifts attention away from individuals imposing their goals on others towards the shared task of shaping a common life.[731] Within such a relational framework, power is not about the imposition of a leader's vision, but about a collective purpose in which all members are invested. Drawing on the image of the church as the body of Christ in Ephesians 4:15-16, Higton emphasises the need for every

[727] Comments made during personal conversation on 17th October 2024 (included with permission).
[728] Higton, 'Power in the Church of England', 1.
[729] Personal Conversation with Mike Higton, 17/10/24. Included with permission.
[730] Higton, 'Power in the Church of England', 2.
[731] Higton, 1.

member to experience a sense of 'belonging,' knowing that their contribution is both necessary and valued for the building up of the whole.[732] This, he suggests, reframes questions about how power operates in the church by attending to 'the process by which we are, as a body, growing together into Christ.'[733]

Building on Higton's use of Pauline body imagery, I suggest that 1 Corinthians 12 further illuminates the challenges of ensuring that every person truly belongs and is recognised within the body of Christ. The Corinthian church was marked by divisions, with greater honour given to those of higher social status or with more visible spiritual gifts.[734] Paul uses the analogy of the healthy functioning of the human body to affirm both the diversity and unity of the church, along with the incongruity of any suggestion that some members are expendable or of lesser value.[735] His earlier discussion of the Lord's Supper (11:17-34) suggests that perceived hierarchy in Corinth stemmed not only from the varied distribution of the Spirit's gifts '[allotted] to each one individually just as the Spirit chooses' (12:11b), but also from entrenched social distinctions that led to some being treated as more worthy than others.[736] Paul insists that no one should be denigrated, dismissed, or overlooked; instead, the community must actively, even consciously, honour each part (12:22-26).[737] Although Higton does not directly reference this passage or explore the potential barriers to full participation in detail, he does raise pressing questions about what it means to 'belong' as a member of the church community. He writes, 'In short: I belong to this community if who "we" are depends, in part, upon who "I" am'.[738] Belonging, then, entails more than being welcomed – it requires recognition, participation, and a shared investment in the life and purpose of the whole.

This concern was echoed in many of my interviews when candidates described how aspects of their identity made them feel that they did not fully belong. Some feared that their gifts would be overlooked or that their call to ordained ministry would go unrecognised because they did not conform to the typical image of a priest. Higton's emphasis on belonging in

[732] Higton, 2.
[733] Higton, 2.
[734] Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, 609, 612–13.
[735] Barth, *Church Dogmatics IV.3.2*, 858–59; Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, 608–9.
[736] Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, 611.
[737] Fee, 613.
[738] Higton, 'Power in the Church of England', 2.

discussions of church power is a helpful reminder that inclusion alone is insufficient. Instead, intentional action is needed to identify and remove barriers, enabling individuals to participate fully in the life of the church. Crucially, this work must begin well before formal discernment. Church leaders need to actively encourage all members of the church community in lay leadership and responsibility, enabling gifts to be recognised and nurtured through experience, encouragement, and mentoring. In 2018, *The Great Vocations Conversation* sought to inspire clergy to prayerfully identify someone 'different from you' with whom to explore vocation.[739] While the extent of engagement with this initiative is unclear, it represents a welcome effort to promote intentional and inclusive vocational conversations.

Even so, good intentions and sporadic initiatives are unlikely to be sufficient for broadening participation in ordained ministry. A more sustained and theologically grounded effort is needed to understand and address the barriers that individuals from underrepresented groups continue to face – not only in discernment, but in wider church life and leadership. Further research is needed to explore these barriers more fully, attending to their structural, relational, and theological dimensions. Such work could help the church move beyond tokenistic approaches towards a deeper culture of belonging, in which diverse gifts are recognised, affirmed, and nurtured in the service of God's people.[740]

10.3.2 Position and Privilege: Acknowledging Asymmetrical Power

Higton's focus on belonging and participation within the church community might initially appear to suggest a vision of flat mutuality in ecclesial structure. However, he argues that a truly interdependent community will not be undifferentiated.[741] Not only will there be a wide diversity of God-given gifts amongst the people, but there will be a necessary role for identified leaders who equip and support the wider body. While this introduces asymmetry to certain relationships, Higton sees this as a pragmatic necessity. There are inevitably

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[739] Andrew Watson and Magdalen Smith, *The Great Vocations Conversation: A Year of Inspiration and Challenge for Ministers* (Church House Publishing, 2018), 6.

[740] Recent research on vocations among particular groups, includes: Church of England, 'Living Ministry Research', https://www.churchofengland.org/resources/diocesan-resources/ministry-development/formation/living-ministry/living-ministry-research; Jagger, Fry, and Tyndall, '"Let Justice Roll Down Like Waters"'; Cris Rogers, 'Jesus Called the Working-Class: Models for Training Working-Class Church Leadership', https://urbanmission.uk/; Stone, '"If It Wasn't for God": A Report on the Wellbeing of Global Majority Heritage Clergy in the Church of England'.

[741] Higton, 'Power in the Church of England', 3.

contexts in which 'one person is primarily giver and another primarily receiver, or one primarily teacher and another primarily learner.'[742] Crucially, though, he insists that all such asymmetrical relationships must be ordered towards the shared goal of building up the church community in love.[743]

Higton expresses concern that some of those who occupy visible positions of leadership in the contemporary Church of England are too eager to downplay the authority and responsibility they hold, perhaps due to a 'widespread reluctance to talk about positional power' and preference for the more palatable themes of equality and mutuality.[744] As a result, those in senior roles may more readily recognise power in others than in themselves, and thus fail to engage fully with the realities of their own influence.[745] Higton advocates for intentional, detailed self-reflection by Christian leaders, encouraging them to examine how their background and identity may afford them privilege in particular settings, and argues that they need to acknowledge how their formal position or role brings a decision-making authority or structural significance to their interpersonal interactions with others.[746] As previously noted, this is the kind of reflective work that Higton himself modelled in his earlier blog post, *Being Privileged*, where he examined the personal and positional aspects of his own life that enable him to enter a room with the reasonable expectation of being taken seriously.[747] A similar exercise undertaken by bishops and DDOs could help them become more attuned to the ways in which their authority shapes their interactions and the assumptions – both their own and others – that arise in those encounters.

This kind of reflection can also clarify how formal responsibility impacts interpersonal dynamics. Higton gives the example of a bishop's communication with an ordinand, noting the significant power differential involved.[748] The bishop sponsors the candidate for training and may withdraw this sponsorship at any point prior to ordination, leaving ordinands feeling acutely aware of their vulnerability and the provisionality of their situation. Highlighting the asymmetry to their interactions, Higton observes, '[the bishop] can say and

[742] Higton, 3.
[743] Higton, 3.
[744] Higton, 5.
[745] Higton, 4–5.
[746] Higton, 4.
[747] Higton, 'Being Privileged'.
[748] Higton, 'Power in the Church of England', 5.

do things that will make a sharp difference to the path the ordinand takes within the Body of Christ...That power is baked in, legally and procedurally, to the way in which our system of ordination works.'[749] This decision-making responsibility may be justified in terms of practical necessity or by appealing to Anglican ecclesiology. However, it becomes problematic if there is a lack of transparency in how decisions are made or if bishops fail to recognise the weight of their own power within conversations.

My research suggests that candidates were often unclear about how DDOs contribute to the bishop's decision-making process, and the extent to which authority is delegated to the DDO by the bishop. As discussed in Chapter Seven, DDOs themselves varied in their understanding and presentation of their role. Some downplayed their influence, emphasising that the national panel provided the decisive recommendation. Others highlighted the multiple voices contributing to the bishop's final decision in addition to their own. While most DDOs acknowledged the influence of their reports and feedback, many preferred to describe themselves as friendly companions rather than assessors. Although it is technically correct that DDOs do not make the final decision about whether a candidate enters training, their written reports are seen by both the national panel and the bishop, and their views carry significant weight. Indeed, it is only because the DDO occupies an official role within the Church's discernment process that candidates accept their right to ask them highly personal questions – questions which would otherwise be unacceptably intrusive. Clearly, candidates are sensitive to the positional power held by the DDO, and DDOs need to acknowledge this dynamic in their conversations with candidates. DDOs must recognise and reflect on the authority they hold and communicate clearly with candidates about how the information shared in discernment conversations will be used and the process by which decisions are made.

Higton's articulation of 'positional power' invites this kind of deeper examination of the asymmetries embedded within the discernment process. His concern about the reluctance among those with positions of authority to acknowledge power dynamics underscores the pressing need for greater transparency, clarity, and reflective awareness. In light of these insights, it may be valuable for bishops and DDOs to engage in intentional reflection on the

[749] Higton, 5.

power they hold and its relational effects. It would also be beneficial for candidates to receive clear, accessible information from the outset about how their personal data will be used and who will be involved in decision-making. The importance of such transparency is further developed in Higton's blog post, where he explores how trust, both in individuals and in institutional processes, can be strengthened.

10.3.3 People and Process: Increasing Trust

Higton observes that alongside a general reluctance to acknowledge positional power, there is a tendency in the Church of England to believe that asymmetrical dynamics can be neutralised simply 'by behavioural and cultural means.'[750] Returning to the example of a bishop interacting with an ordinand, he writes that 'a sponsoring bishop might...think that the approachability, friendliness, and humility evident in their behaviour, and the collegiality of the culture that they seek to cultivate, are enough to make their positional power safe, or even irrelevant.'[751] However, rather than defusing or negating the power dynamic, this well-meaning informality may actually create confusion, as the ordinand remains acutely aware of the bishop's authority and influence, regardless of their approachable demeanour.

The potential for this kind of unacknowledged dynamic to be present in interactions between DDO and candidate was evident in my research interviews. The comment from DDO1 cited earlier, in which he expressed a desire to reduce 'power imbalances' by challenging the notion that 'the DDO has some kind of special understanding or access to God,' suggests that he assumed that this was enough to establish equality in their interactions. Meanwhile, several participants in my research commented that they appreciated the warmth and friendliness of their DDOs, but remained conscious that anything said during their conversations could be reported – positively or negatively – in the formal assessment of their vocation. For instance, Philippa's comment that, 'No matter how easy-going the conversation is, there's an element of anxiety...because [the DDO's] opinion matters and it could influence the rest of your journey.' Clearly, it is good for DDOs to engage with candidates in a friendly, kind, and approachable manner, but this is not sufficient to negate the asymmetrical power dynamic between them due to the role the

[750] Higton, 5.
[751] Higton, 5.

DDO will play in writing reports and in informing the bishop's decision whether or not to sponsor the candidate.

At the heart of such interactions, Higton suggests, lies the issue of trust.[752] In relationships characterised by mutuality, trust usually develops gradually through shared experience – particularly through patterns of reciprocity, where each party learns they can depend on the other. In other words, trust is earned not presumed. However, in contexts marked by necessary asymmetry, where one person holds formal authority over another, trust cannot grow in the same way. Instead, it often depends on confidence in the broader process: the integrity of the structures involved, the accountability of those in positions of power, and the surrounding community's commitment to justice. Higton frames this positively as the need for a 'fundamental pattern of interdependence and mutuality' extending beyond the individuals to the wider community.[753] Trust, he argues, becomes possible when those who hold positional power are themselves accountable and open to challenge. He grounds this view theologically in an understanding that the Body of Christ grows together in love, whilst simultaneously recognising the reality of sin.[754]

Drawing on Higton's wider doctrinal work further deepens and develops an appreciation for the impact of sin on the interpersonal and institutional power dynamics of the process. Higton emphasises that sin goes beyond particular transgressions or deliberate wrongdoing to encompass everything that 'cuts off the circulation of love,' distorting and disordering human relationships with others, creation, and God.[755] This means that even 'unconscious or well-meaning or coerced or accidental human action'[756] can be sinful as individuals cannot escape from the wider social, historical, and cultural context in which they have been raised, live, and relate to others.[757] Recognising the pervasiveness of sin entails acknowledging that the exercising of power is always liable to distortion. In the context of vocational discernment, this means that those who hold decision-making authority, such as DDOs and bishops, may not perceive the ways in which their use of power becomes unhealthy, prejudiced, or domineering. Such distortions are not necessarily the result of ill intent, but

[752] Higton, 6.
[753] Higton, 6.
[754] Higton, 6.
[755] Mike Higton, *Christian Doctrine* (Hymns Ancient & Modern, 2008), 263.
[756] Higton, 264.
[757] Higton, 269.

the subtle influence of sin on human judgement and relationships. As Higton argues, this highlights the importance of systems of accountability that are attentive to the relational dynamics of power and the potential for sin to shape them, even when well-intended and seemingly benign.

Beyond personal interactions, Higton highlights that the effects of sin also extend to the institution, shaping systems, cultures and practices. In his book focusing on how doctrine operates in the life of believers and the church, he comments that 'the life of the church was, and is, also a sinful life.'[758] In the Church of England, this has been evident in the way it has 'engaged in persecution...been complicit in slavery and in imperialism...harboured abusers and...is marked by deep class divisions and a series of exclusions.'[759] Several candidates highlighted that they were sensitive to this historic legacy and present reality, with Max describing how difficult it appeared to be for the Church to wrestle 'with power and with risk and with reputation and institution.' While Nathan attributed such failings to the fact that the Church is made up of fallible people, Higton argues that these individuals are collectively shaped by 'teachings and practices that do harm' and that it is necessary to acknowledge that sin pervades institutions, as well as individuals.[760]

Recognising that sin distorts even the best intentions in interpersonal and institutional interactions means that trust cannot simply equate to blind acceptance of ecclesial authority. As Higton describes, 'the trust to which I am called is not...an uncomplicated acceptance of all that you say and do, nor an uncomplicated acceptance of all that the church permits and sustains.'[761] Trust depends, instead, on transparent structures of accountability and the possibility of critique of those in positions of power.

Within the SDP, however, such transparency and accountability are not always apparent. For instance, little information is provided to candidates about how they might appeal decisions, raise concerns about the process, or challenge the behaviour of those with formal authority. While guidance for candidates attending Stage Two Panels notes that concerns may be raised through a candidate's DDO or bishop,[762] there is little information about how

[758] Mike Higton, *The Life of Christian Doctrine* (T&T Clark, 2022), 84.
[759] Higton, 17.
[760] Higton, 211.
[761] Higton, 'Power in the Church of England', 6.
[762] National Ministry Team, 'Stage 2 Discernment Panel - Information for Candidates', March 2022, 14.

one might contest a bishop's final decision or lodge a complaint against a DDO or bishop. This ambiguity is partly due to Anglican ecclesiology, which understands the bishop to be the primary decision-maker about vocations to ordained ministry. Yet this contributes to a lack of clarity about where candidates might turn if they experience the process as unjust.

Many candidates in my interviews recalled being encouraged to 'trust the process' – a phrase likely intended to reassure by pointing to the collaborative and prayerful nature of discernment. However, several expressed scepticism about placing trust in a system governed by an institution they perceived as complicit in the marginalisation of certain groups.[763] Additionally, being urged to 'trust the process' appears potentially manipulative if it is presented as placing faith in an institution and its systems, rather than in God, particularly if that institution is inattentive to the reality of sin.

These concerns suggest that trust in the process is compromised when accountability is opaque, and the power held by DDOs and bishops is not openly acknowledged or subject to challenge. Higton's closing words are particularly apt: 'Do not expect to be trusted where you cannot be held to account.'[764] Until clearer lines of accountability are established and transparent mechanisms for raising concerns are put in place, it is likely that candidates will continue to struggle to trust a process that appears to lack the features which make trust possible.

10.4 Concluding Remarks and Recommendations

This chapter began by outlining why it is essential to reckon with the power dynamics operating in the SDP, drawing on the experiences of candidates who shared concerns about their vulnerability in the process and the requirement to trust those with decision-making authority. Through sustained engagement with interdisciplinary sources, including sociological theories of power, as well as theological reflection, particularly Mike Higton's blog on *Power in the Church of England*, I have offered a deeper account of how power functions within the SDP. Engaging with these sources has illuminated aspects of power – especially in interpersonal relationships and institutional structures – which are often under-recognised or insufficiently addressed. In doing so, this chapter has moved beyond

[763] Factors which complicate ordinands' ability to 'trust the process' are also explored in: Parker, *Trust in Theological Education.*
[764] Higton, 'Power in the Church of England', 6.

critique to offer practical and theological recommendations for how power might be better understood and more responsibly handed within vocational discernment.

The first question I identified at the outset of this chapter concerned the extent to which candidates could be expected to trust a human and institutional process as a faithful means of discerning God's call. My analysis has shown that such trust is challenged by multiple factors. These include the Church of England's ongoing struggle to reckon with its historical legacy which continues to shape unspoken norms around who is seen as a 'suitable' priest. As a result, candidates from underrepresented backgrounds often feel exposed and uncertain about whether their gifts will be recognised or misinterpreted through the lens of unconscious bias or prejudice. Higton's theological account of trust, which holds together a vision of the Church as a community of mutual belonging with a sober acknowledgement of sin and brokenness, proves particularly helpful here. Trust, he argues, cannot be presumed, it must be made possible through transparency and accountability.[765] For this reason, I have argued that if the Church expects candidates to trust the discernment process, then it must first demonstrate trustworthiness. This includes offering clarity from the outset about how decisions will be made, who will be involved, what kind of information with be shared with others, and how that information will be used. Recognising that the outcome may not necessarily cohere with the candidate's personal sense of calling, this needs to be communicated clearly, yet with appropriate humility, acknowledging that while the Church seeks to discern under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, its judgements remain provisional and fallible.

The second question posed at the beginning of the chapter asked how power dynamics in the SDP might be handled in a way that is both appropriate and healthy within an Anglican ecclesiology of ministry. Here, I drew on both interdisciplinary and theological sources to highlight the multifaceted nature of power within the discernment process. I described power in the discernment process as unavoidable, encompassing a complex social web of institutional and interpersonal dynamics which form and shape individuals over time. In particular, I considered how the episcopal structure of the Church of England vests decision-making responsibility in the bishop, mediated through the reports and recommendations

[765] Higton, 6.

provided by DDOs and national panels. This means that candidates enter conversations vigilant to their significance, although the power held by these gatekeepers is often underplayed or unacknowledged. I described how DDOs appear to anticipate that being friendly and approachable helps candidates feel at ease and able to trust them, while candidates are never able to forget that DDOs will record and analyse their interactions. Drawing on Higton's account of positional power, I argued that DDOs and bishops must engage in intentional reflection on their own roles – not to disown their authority, but to steward it transparently and responsibly.

In light of this, I offer three recommendations. First, there must be explicit and early communication with candidates about the purpose of each stage of the process, the boundaries of the relationships involved in the process, and clear expectations about how decisions will be made. Second, DDOs and bishops should receive training which encourages theological and reflective engagement with their own power to ensure they are better equipped to acknowledge and handle asymmetrical power dynamics in their interactions. Third, the SDP requires greater procedural transparency, including clear mechanisms through which candidates can raise concerns or appeal decisions – particularly in cases where those in positions of authority may themselves be implicated. These recommendations reflect the argument throughout this chapter that power in the SDP is not an unfortunate aspect of the process, but an inherent part of its structure and operation. Rather than denying or disguising this reality, theological and practical integrity require that the Church engage with power reflectively, honestly, and accountably – so that those who participate in the discernment process may do so with greater trust, clarity, and confidence.

10.5 Summary

In this chapter, I have reflected on candidates' experiences of both interpersonal and institutional power within the SDP, identifying several aspects of the current process that warrant critique and reform. Drawing on interdisciplinary insights and theological perspectives, I have argued that greater accountability and transparency are essential – not merely as procedural improvements, but as theological commitments. This is not a shift towards managerialism for its own sake, nor an attempt to flatten authority, but rather a call for the church to embody more fully its vocation as the body of Christ: a community in

which each member is recognised as loved, valued, and called. Within such a vision, power is not denied but stewarded faithfully and accountably, each member is loved and valued, and the diversity of gifts is received as a blessing that builds up the whole.

Part 4: Summary

Part Four develops a theological interpretation of the Shared Discernment Process by reflecting on key three themes identified from interviews with participants: narrative, authenticity, and power. Together, these chapters offer a theological lens through which to view how the Church of England discerns vocation.

In the chapter on narrative, I concluded that a theological understanding of story both resists and problematises individualistic accounts of identity in favour of a theologically rooted understanding of vocational discernment as a shared practice within the life of the church.

In the chapter on authenticity, I drew on theatrical theology to challenge accounts of authenticity which focus solely on expressing an inner self, arguing instead for a theological understanding of performance that affirms its formational potential and recognises God's active involvement throughout the discernment process.

Finally, in the chapter on power, I developed a theological account of the interpersonal and institutional power dynamics of the process, offering a vision of discernment grounded in shared participation in the Body of Christ, while acknowledging the reality of sin.

Together, these reflections show that vocational discernment is not simply a procedural or rational assessment of suitability for ministry, but a deeply embodied, relational, and theological process. By engaging in theological reflection on key themes from participants' experiences of the SDP, I have demonstrated the need to attend to the theological dynamics in this process as the Church seeks to identify those called by God to ordained ministry.

In the Conclusion which follows, I draw together the theological reflections and practical recommendations in Part Four and across the whole thesis. I assess the contribution made to both theological understanding and ecclesial practice, considering how this theological and empirical analysis might inform vocational discernment in the Church of England.

CONCLUSION

Conclusion

In this thesis, I have presented a theological analysis of the vocational discernment process towards ordained ministry in the Church of England. Through empirical research into the lived experience of participants in the Shared Discernment Process, and reflection on key theological themes, I have reframed theological approaches to vocation and offered practical recommendations for improving discernment practice. This concluding chapter begins by revisiting the original purpose of this research and my approach to addressing the central research question. I then summarise the key features of the argument set out in the thesis, before evaluating the contribution I have made to theological understandings of vocation and the development of discernment practices. Finally, I acknowledge the study's limitations, propose avenues for future research, and offer some concluding reflections on my own development as a researcher and the broader significance of this thesis.

Research Purpose and Methodological Approach

In the early sections of this thesis, I highlighted how the practical necessity of identifying suitable candidates for church ministry can overshadow the theological dimensions of vocational discernment, and I argued for the necessity of deeper theological reflection on this topic. I identified vocation as an interesting area for theological study because it focuses on the nexus between God's activity and human response.

Hence, in Part One (*The Theological Dynamics of Vocation*), I examined the dynamic theological tensions which often underlie conversations about vocation and considered the questions these raise for the Church of England's vocational discernment process. These included how God's call and gifting for ordained ministry might be recognised in an individual's life, how to navigate the tension between an inner sense of calling and the church's responsibility to test that call, and how to appropriately handle the power dynamics involved in an ecclesial process of vocational discernment. I argued that further theological research was needed into the lived experience of participants in the process, and emphasised that this study would address both practical issues in vocational discernment and the deepening of theological understandings of vocation.

Having established the need for this research, I identified my research question and objectives. The central research question was: *What empirical and theological analysis might be made of the vocational discernment process towards ordained ministry in the Church of England?* To address this, I articulated three objectives. First, to provide a thick description of the SDP focusing on participants' experience and understanding of the process. Second, to explore how aspects of the SDP could be interpreted theologically, and how this might expand, deepen or challenge current theological approaches to vocation. Third, to offer practical recommendations for developing and improving vocational discernment in the Church of England.

In Part Two (*Methodology and Methods*), I outlined my approach to addressing this question, guided by the objectives above. I evaluated the research design and qualitative methods used to gather and analyse data on the SDP. This comprised interviews with DDOs to understand how they explained the process to candidates, followed by interviews with candidates to explore their experiences of engaging with it.

I presented the findings from these interviews in three chapters in Part Three (*Data Analysis*), examining how DDOs and candidates experienced hearing, discerning, and testing God's call to ordained ministry. These chapters provided a rich and detailed account of the SDP, providing deeper insight into the complexities of how participants perceive and navigate the process. Using Reflexive Thematic Analysis, I identified three key themes from the interview data which required careful theological reflection to be fully understood. These themes focused on narrative, performance, and power in the discernment process. I explored these in dialogue with interdisciplinary and theological sources across the three chapters of Part Four (*Theological Reflection*). In each chapter, I made a case for the theological significance of my analysis and identified practical recommendations for the further development of vocational discernment practice in the SDP. Rather than repeating these recommendations in detail, I will now summarise the key outcomes before evaluating the overall contribution of my thesis to both theology and practice.

Theological Themes and Recommendations

The first theme I identified from my interviews focused on narrative in vocational discernment. In Chapter Eight (*Storying the Self: Narrative*), I examined how storytelling

functions within the SDP both as an indication of calling and a means by which vocation can be explored. I reflected on the role narrative plays in vocational discernment, drawing on psychological approaches to storied identity formation and on Stanley Hauerwas' narrative theology. I highlighted the potential for self-deception and self-justification in interpreting one's own story, and argued that storytelling in vocational discernment must move beyond self-reflection to emphasise the role of the wider church community. I also recommended some linguistic changes to the way vocational discernment is presented in order to emphasise its open-ended nature in which the destination may not be the one anticipated at the beginning of the process.

Closely related to narrative, the second theme I examined was that of authentic performance. In Chapter Nine (*Preparing to Perform: Authenticity*), I described how candidates are required to externalise and articulate their call during national panel interviews, and observed that both DDOs and candidates regarded these moments as 'performances' requiring careful preparation. I noted a particular nervousness about performative religion among Christian leaders, along with a concern that interviewees might present an inauthentic mask to interviewers. Drawing on interdisciplinary sources from recruitment studies and sociology, and in conversation with Wesley Vander Lugt's theatrical theology, I challenged narrow views of authenticity as merely the outward expression of an inner reality. Instead, I argued for recognition of the formational potential of repeated rehearsal and performance in the discernment process as the individual grows through their encounters with others. I recommended that candidates be encouraged to gain a wide range of ministerial experiences during the discernment process to enable them to 'try on' a new role to assess whether it 'fits' well.

The third theme focused on the power dynamics which can make it difficult for candidates to trust that their stories will be heard and their performances recognised as being authentic. In Chapter Ten (*Trusting the Process: Power*), I analysed how power operates in a process which seeks both to nurture and test vocation. Candidates described feeling vulnerable in disclosing deeply personal aspects of their lives, often without clarity on how this information might be used or shared. DDOs, meanwhile, appeared to assume that power could be neutralised simply by presenting themselves as friendly and approachable companions in the process. Drawing on sociological perspectives on power and Mike

Higton's blog post on how power operates in the Church of England, I offered a critical analysis of the power dynamics in the SDP. I called for greater transparency around boundaries, expectations, and accountability from the outset of the process, and recommended that DDOs and bishops be more attentive to the power they hold, recognising that a friendly approach is insufficient to negate the asymmetries of power in interactions with candidates. I also proposed the introduction of peer mentoring to offer a context in which candidates can explore vocation without fear of evaluation.

By bringing together empirical data with theological and interdisciplinary insights, this thesis offers a theologically grounded critical analysis of the Shared Discernment Process. I have shown that narrative, performance, and power are central to how vocation is discerned, explored, and tested – and that each of these themes raises significant theological and practical questions. My analysis not only challenges assumptions about how vocation is recognised but also makes a case for more communal, formational, and transparent approaches to discernment. In doing so, I have offered practical recommendations that have the potential to reframe aspects of how the Church of England approaches vocational discernment. Building on these findings, the next section evaluates the distinctive contribution this thesis makes to theological scholarship on vocation and to the evolving practice of vocational discernment in the Church of England.

Theological and Practical Contribution

Throughout this thesis, I have emphasised the importance of theological reflection on the process of vocational discernment. I have argued that formal ecclesial processes both express and shape underlying theological commitments, and that empirical research into participants' lived experience enables critical and constructive analysis of this embedded theology by offering both practical and theological insights. Rather than evaluating the efficacy of the process or gathering feedback on whether participants found the process satisfying or unsatisfying, my research has focused on what participants' experiences reveal about the theological dynamics at work within the process itself. Fundamentally, this study seeks to engage with deeper theological questions by recognising that the process rests on a shared expectation that God is somehow at work in vocational discernment. Not only is this one of the first studies to investigate the new discernment process introduced by the

Church of England in 2021, I am not aware of any other research that approaches the SDP with a primary focus on its theological rather than procedural dimensions.

Practical theologians will be interested in the empirical and theological approach I have taken to analysing an ecclesial process. As a discipline, Practical Theology tends to focus on the habitual practices of individuals and communities, rather than formal institutional processes established for a defined purpose. This study demonstrates the constructive potential of theological reflection on how church institutions operate, and how these systems and processes are experienced and interpreted by those who participate in them. There is scope for further methodological development in the discipline of Practical Theology into how best to undertake theological research into the formational effect of such ecclesial processes.

I recognise that some aspects of this study could have been undertaken using theoretical or doctrinal methods – for example, by analysing the Church of England's liturgy or formal documents to understand how it articulates the necessary qualities for ordained ministers, or by reviewing literature advising potential candidates how to approach discerning a vocation to ordained ministry. However, my decision to prioritise the voices of DDOs and candidates, and to explore the theological themes arising from their experiences, has proved fruitful. Listening attentively and analytically to participants' accounts enabled me to move beyond normative assumptions about how the discernment process 'ought' to operate, uncovering instead the joys, tensions, and complexities of a process in which individuals grapple with how the call of God can be discerned. Viewing the SDP through this practical theological lens has illuminated previously unexamined aspects of the discernment process and opened avenues of enquiry that would not have emerged without the empirical dimension of this study.

My interdisciplinary and theological reflection on components of the SDP will be of particular interest to DDOs, candidates and others involved in vocational discernment. While there remain aspects of the process which I have not explored, empirical research enabled me to identify storytelling, performance, and power as central to participants' experience, yet often overlooked or under-recognised. I argued that it is necessary to develop an account of practices which goes beyond an uncritical importing of psychological and sociological theories into vocational discernment, and I offered a theological reframing

of storytelling, performance, and power in the SDP that is congruent with the expectation that God is active throughout the process. Arising from this interdisciplinary and theological analysis, I made several practical recommendations for the further development of vocational discernment, set out in Chapters Eight, Nine, and Ten. While these recommendations are focused on the Church of England, those involved in discernment processes in other denominations may also find them a useful prompt for theological reflection on their own practices.

This thesis also contributes to theological scholarship on ecclesial practices and the theology of vocation. In Part One, I outlined several theological tensions that shape contemporary understandings of vocation – including the distinction between a general call to follow Christ and a specific call to a particular ministry; the relationship between God's purposes for the individual and for the church; and the challenge of speaking about obedience and sacrifice in a social context that prioritises personal freedom and fulfilment. Rather than providing a tidy 'solution' to these tensions, I have offered a theologically grounded account of how they are experienced and navigated within the discernment process. Through sustained engagement with interdisciplinary sources on narrative, performance, and power, I brought these tensions into dialogue with the theological work of Hauerwas, Lugt, and Higton. In Chapter Eight, I developed an underexplored dimension of Hauerwas' narrative theology in relation to ministerial formation. In Chapter Nine, I evaluated my study's contribution to Lugt's theatrical theology, presenting it as an illustrative case study for his theodramatic approach. In Chapter Ten, I extended Higton's reflections on asymmetrical power dynamics beyond his focus on ordinands during training, to consider the implications for vocational discernment.

Taken together, these contributions strengthen the case for theological enquiry that begins with lived experience and interrogates how vocation is practised, perceived, and theologically shaped within institutional systems. Through this theological analysis, I have made a constructive contribution to ongoing theological conversations about vocation, offering critical evaluation, further development, and fresh application of the work of Hauerwas, Lugt, and Higton in relation to an ecclesial process of vocational discernment. By showing how vocational discernment involves communal storytelling, embodied rehearsal, and complex power dynamics, this thesis offers both a theological reimaging of the SDP and

a constructive resource for the church as it seeks to discern the call of God with greater attentiveness, integrity, and care.

This thesis opens up new directions for theological reflection on vocation and the church's discernment practices. At the same time, the scope and design of the study involve certain limitations. The following section reflects on these limitations and proposes ways in which further research might deepen and expand its contribution.

Research Limitations and Further Development

Throughout my doctoral study, I have held roles in which I have often had occasion to mention my research on vocational discernment. While it has been gratifying to hear candidates, ordinands, DDOs, and theological educators affirming the importance of this work, it has also been instructive to observe how assumptions about the study's focus and outcomes often reflect individuals' own experiences and perspectives. Ordinands and curates who found the process difficult or inflexible assume I will critique its flaws, while those who had a positive experience hope I will articulate how it deepened their faith and strengthened their sense of calling. DDOs and incumbents frequently highlight the administrative burdens of the SDP and express hope that my research might prompt reform of these aspects of the process. Others, particularly those disillusioned by the Church of England's leadership or safeguarding failures, have urged me to use my thesis to expose institutional shortcomings. These conversations have been invaluable in refining and clarifying the focus of my study. They have helped me articulate and defend my decision to examine the discernment process through an interdisciplinary and theological lens, with the aim of making a contribution which is both practical and theological. At the same time, they have underscored the inherent limitations of this study and its necessarily narrow scope. Future research could build on the theological foundations laid in this thesis to explore other aspects of vocational discernment that these different stakeholders regard as significant.

As noted earlier in this chapter, my central research question was a theological one, and other approaches could have been taken to explore the underlying theology of the SDP – for example, through liturgical or textual analysis. However, it would also be beneficial for research to evaluate the efficacy of the process itself. This could address pragmatic

concerns, such as the administrative burden on DDOs or the considerable volume of written material required from candidates and referees. Research might also investigate barriers that disproportionately impact candidates from underrepresented backgrounds and explore how these might be reduced.

Further research could also investigate more deeply how bishops, DDOs, and candidates understand and experience their respective roles in the process. For instance, future studies could explore how bishops interpret their role in vocational discernment within the ecclesiology of the Church of England and how the SDP informs their decisions. Researchers might also examine DDO practice in greater detail, either through in-depth interviews or observational studies, to understand how DDOs approach discernment and make judgments. With candidates, future research could explore what aspects of the process they find helpful or unhelpful, and how the process might be developed in ways that remain robust but are also experienced as fair and formational. Vocational discernment also offers a valuable lens through which to consider broader questions about power and accountability within the Church of England, particularly in light of recent reports into poor practice and abuse.[766]

Although this study has focused specifically on experiences of vocation discernment within the formal process for ordained ministry in the Church of England, a wider perspective could be fruitful. Future research might examine how lay people are recognised and encouraged in their gifts within the local church community, and how potential ordinands are identified prior to entering the formal discernment process. It could also consider the longer-term formational impact of the SDP – both on ordained ministers' reflections on their own calling and on how they support others in discerning vocation. Comparative research with other denominations or across the Anglican Communion could also offer valuable insights into how vocational discernment is approached in different ecclesial contexts.

In addition to making practical recommendations, my research contributes to developing, deepening, and challenging theological perspectives on vocation, and there remains further theological work to be done. This might include systematic theological research into the tensions identified in Part One, such as the relationship between general and specific

[766] Including: Makin, 'Makin Review'; Scolding and Fullbrook, 'Independent Review into Soul Survivor'.

calling, discerning divine purposes for the individual and the church, and human obedience and freedom. Building on my theological engagement with narrative and performance, and with attention to the dynamics of power, future research could engage more fully with theologians whose systematic or doctrinal work addresses vocation, explicitly or implicitly.[767] Such engagement could evaluate the extent to which existing theological frameworks – whether systematic, biblical, or pastoral – provide resources for articulating how God is at work in the discernment process, not only at the level of individual experience but through the social, relational, and institutional dynamics that shape the process. This would test how well different theological traditions account for the complexity of lived experience, and where they might need further development or clarification.

Building on this study of the SDP, future theological and practical research may open up new possibilities for reimagining vocational discernment. It could challenge the church to develop processes that are not only practically effective, but more explicitly and deeply aligned with the theological vision they are intended to serve.

Concluding Reflections

At several points in this thesis, I have highlighted the formational impact that participation in the SDP has on candidates. As I come to this concluding section, I want to acknowledge that undertaking this research has also been formational for me. Over the past seven years on the DThM programme, I have grown in theological understanding of the discernment process, in line with the early sense that a distinctive feature of my own ministerial practice would be a focus on vocation. This journey has shaped not only my knowledge of vocational discernment but also my own sense of calling as a practical theologian committed to exploring how theological reflection can engage deeply with the lived experience and practices of the church. In particular, this project has allowed me to further develop my interest in interdisciplinary methods, discovering the theological fruitfulness of drawing social science approaches into theological study. Alongside this academic journey, I have moved into new ministerial roles as a theological educator and, more recently, as a Director

[767] For example, vocation is acknowledged to be an underexplored aspect of the work of Bonhoeffer and Barth. Lori Brandt Hale, 'Bonhoeffer's Christological Take on Vocation', in *Bonhoeffer, Christ and Culture*, ed. Keith Johnson (IVP, 2013), 180; Paul Nimmo, 'Barth on Vocation', in *The Wiley Blackwell Companion to Karl Barth*, ed. George Hunsinger and Keith Johnson, Wiley Blackwell Companions to Religion (Wiley Blackwell, 2020), 317.

of Ministry. The insights from this research have profoundly shaped the way I accompany candidates, ordinands, and curates in their discernment and formation. Looking to the future, I hope that this research will continue to bear fruit – not only in my own discernment practice, but also in how I contribute to the ongoing national conversation about vocations in the Church of England.

As I have attended to the themes of narrative, performance, and power in vocational discernment, I have come to recognise that there is a dynamic interplay between what can be told, what must be performed, and how power is negotiated in the relationships that structure the discernment process. These are not merely sociological or psychological features of a system of recruitment and selection. Rather, they are expressive of a theological commitment to discern and test the call of God on behalf of the Church. Vocational discernment, then, is a shared and prayerful act of faith through which the church is called to engage in the ongoing task of recognising and affirming God's call, empowering individuals to step into their vocation within the body of Christ.

Appendices

Appendix 1 – Interview Questions
Appendix 2 – Participant Paperwork

Appendix 1
Interview Questions

Semi-structured Interview Schedule for DDOs

Introduction

- Introduce myself
- Brief outline of research
- Review Participant Information Sheet (particularly emphasising confidentiality and right to decline to answer questions)
- Answer any questions regarding participation
- Verbal confirmation of consent (inc consent to recording of the interview)

Recognise that original intention was to review documents given to candidates explaining the process, but that very few dioceses appear to give written information, therefore goal of this interview is for me to hear how the DDO usually explains the process to candidates (ie "hear their patter"). As far as possible, I would like you to explain it to me just like you would explain it to a candidate.

Questions

Talk me through the first meeting with a candidate. How do you explain the process?

Follow-up questions may include: purpose of discernment process, groupwork, role of Bishop, role of DDO, other people involved in process, national components of SDP (inc Stage One/Stage Two Panels), Qualities Grid, paperwork, written information

Is there anything else that a candidate might hear as part of your explanation of the process that you haven't mentioned?

Debrief

- Debrief document – Summary of findings will be made available
- Reiterate confidentiality of interview data – anonymised for analysis, direct quotes will be used with a pseudonym, will not include anything which might identify you
- Any questions?
- Thank you

Semi-structured Interview Schedule for Candidates

Introduction

- Introduce myself
- Brief outline of research
- Review Participant Information Sheet (particularly emphasising confidentiality and right to decline to answer questions)
- Answer any questions regarding participation
- Verbal confirmation of consent (inc consent to recording of the interview)

Questions

Vocation

- Can you tell me a bit about how your sense of call has developed through the process?
- Have there been some key moments which were significant in your sense of being called to ordained ministry?

Discernment

- What aspects of the process have been most helpful in discerning your vocation?
- When in the process have you experienced God's guidance or involvement most strongly?
- What role have other people played in your discernment process? (eg Bishop)
- In what ways have you become aware that your gifts match what is needed in ordained ministry? (eg Qualities?)

Process

- How do you explain the discernment process to other people?
- Have there been any challenges in exploring a call to ordained ministry so far?
- How did you first find out what was involved in the vocational discernment process?
- Has the process been what you were expecting?
- What are you expecting from the Stage 2 Panel? What did Stage 1 add to the discernment process?

Other

- If you had to sum up your experience of the process in a single word, what word would you choose and why?
- What advice would you give to someone who is just about to enter the discernment process?
- Is there anything else you'd like to tell me about the vocational discernment process which you haven't had a chance to say?

Debrief

- Demographics – age, church tradition, diocese, ethnic background, sexuality, highest educational qualification
- Debrief document – Summary of findings will be made available

- Reiterate confidentiality of interview data – anonymised for analysis, direct quotes will be used with a pseudonym, will not include anything which might identify you
- Any questions?
- Thank you

Appendix 2
Participant Information Sheets

Participant Information Sheet: DDOs

Project title: How do candidates experience and interpret the vocational discernment process for ordained ministry in the Church of England?
Researcher: Cara Lovell
Department: Theology and Religion
Contact details: cara.f.lovell@durham.ac.uk
Supervisor name: Philip Plyming and Gavin Wakefield
Supervisor contact: cranmer.warden@durham.ac.uk / gavin.wakefield@durham.ac.uk

You are invited to take part in a study that I am conducting as part of my Doctorate in Theology and Ministry at Durham University. Before you decide whether to agree to take part it is important for you to understand the purpose of the research and what is involved as a participant. Please read the following information carefully. Please get in contact if there is anything that is not clear or if you would like more information.
This information sheet is in two parts. Part 1 will help you decide whether you may want to participate and Part 2 gives you further information about the study.

PART 1
What is the purpose of this study?
You will be aware that the Church of England has recently reviewed the discernment process for ordained ministry and that a new process was implemented in Autumn 2021. I am exploring the theology of vocation which informs the design of the new discernment process and how this is interpreted and understood those who take part in it. I hope that this will be helpful for the Church of England as it continues to reflect on ordained ministry and the process by which we discern God's call in the lives of a diverse range of candidates.
The research for this study will be carried out between September 2021 and August 2022. My thesis is due to be submitted by September 2024.

Why have I been invited to take part?
I will be interviewing candidates for ordained ministry in your diocese and I need to understand the shape and design of the discernment process they will have experienced. I am also going to carry out Qualitative Content Analysis on the information candidates receive which explains and describes the process to them.

Some of this information will be presented to candidates in verbal form and some in document or emails.

I have already asked you to provide me with copies of any written documentation or standard emails you send to candidates explaining the discernment process. This interview is an opportunity for me to hear from you any verbal explanations you give to candidates and to clarify elements of your discernment process.

Do I have to take part?
Your participation is voluntary and you do not have to agree to take part. If you do agree to take part, you can withdraw at any time without giving a reason. Your rights in relation to withdrawing any data that is identifiable to you are explained in the accompanying Privacy Notice.

What will the study involve?
If you agree to take part, please email me to say that you are willing to participate and send me a photo or scan of the completed consent form. We will then agree a convenient time and date for an interview over Zoom. The interview will last less than an hour and will be video or audio recorded.

Are there any potential risks involved?
I have not identified any risks involved in this study.

What is the benefit to me?
There is no direct benefit to you in participating in this study, although I hope that you will find the outcomes of my research interesting as you continue to reflect on and implement the new discernment process.

PART 2

Will my data be kept confidential?
All information obtained during the study will be kept confidential. The recordings and transcripts from the interviews will be stored securely in a password protected file accessible only by me and will not include your name or diocese. If I refer to direct quotations from our interview in my write-up, I will give you a pseudonym and will avoid including anything which would make it possible to identify you.
All research data and records needed to validate the research findings will be stored for 10 years after the end of the project. Storage of data will be password protected and anonymised. Full details about how your data will be stored and handled are included in the accompanying Privacy Notice.

What will happen to the results of the project?
The information gathered will be stored and analysed electronically to find out what we can learn from the interviews I conduct. My findings will be submitted as part of my doctoral thesis for the Doctorate in Theology and Ministry through Durham University and may inform the planning of new studies or future research.
It is hoped that the findings from this study will help the Church of England reflect theologically on the vocational discernment process for ordained ministry. Therefore, the findings may be published in theological journals, books, or websites, and they may be presented at online or in-person conferences or training days. Your identity

will not be revealed in any publication or presentation and all data will be anonymised.

Durham University is committed to sharing the results of its world-class research for public benefit. As part of this commitment the University has established an online repository for all Durham University Higher Degree theses which provides access to the full text of freely available theses. The study in which you are invited to participate will be written up as a thesis. On successful submission of the thesis, it will be deposited both in print and online in the University archives, to facilitate its use in future research. The thesis will be published open access.
If you are interested, you can obtain a summary of the study's findings by requesting this from me at the end of our interview or by email.

Who is the lead researcher for this project?
My name is Cara Lovell. I was ordained in 2018 and I serve as Associate Minister at St Mary Hampton in South West London. I work at St Mellitus College as a Lecturer in Theology and I am a Formation Tutor for a group of ordinands based in the London centre.

Who has reviewed this study?
This study has received ethical approval from the Ethics Committee of the Theology and Religion Department at Durham University.

Who do I contact if I have any questions or concerns about this study?
If you have any further questions or concerns about this study, please speak to Cara Lovell (researcher) or my supervisors (Philip Plyming and Gavin Wakefield). Contact details are provided above. If you remain unhappy or wish to make a formal complaint, please submit a complaint via the University's Complaints Process.
The rights and responsibilities of anyone taking part in Durham University research are set out in our 'Participants Charter':
https://www.dur.ac.uk/research.innovation/governance/ethics/considerations/people/charter/

Thank you for reading this information and considering taking part in this study.

Participant Information Sheet

Project title: How do candidates experience and interpret the vocational discernment process for ordained ministry in the Church of England?
Researcher: Cara Lovell
Department: Theology and Religion
Contact details: cara.f.lovell@durham.ac.uk
Supervisor name: Philip Plyming and Gavin Wakefield
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What is the purpose of this study?
You may be aware that the Church of England has recently reviewed the discernment process for ordained ministry and that a new process was implemented in Autumn 2021. I am exploring the theology of vocation which informs the design of the new discernment process and how this is interpreted and understood those who take part in it. I hope that this will be helpful for the Church of England as it continues to reflect on ordained ministry and the process by which we discern God's call in the lives of a diverse range of candidates.
The research for this study will be carried out between September 2021 and August 2022. My thesis is due to be submitted by September 2024.

Why have I been invited to take part?
I am interviewing candidates in five dioceses and you have been invited to take part in this project because you have undertaken the vocational discernment process in one of these dioceses. I am focusing my study on candidates for stipendiary / incumbency ministry and I am keen to speak with candidates of different genders, ethnic backgrounds and from a range of theological traditions.

Do I have to take part?
Your participation is voluntary and you do not have to agree to take part. Your DDO will not be told whether or not you have chosen to participate. If you do agree to take part, you can withdraw at any time without giving a reason. Your rights in relation to withdrawing any data that is identifiable to you are explained in the accompanying Privacy Notice.

What will the study involve?
If you agree to take part in the study, please email me to say that you are willing to participate. We will then agree a convenient time and date for an interview. This will either be conducted on Zoom or in person, depending on which you would prefer. The interview will last less than an hour and will be video or audio recorded.
The interview will take place after you have completed most of the discernment process, but before you attend the Stage Two Assessment. I will ask some starter questions about your experience of the discernment process and your thoughts and feelings about the call to ordained ministry. If there are any questions you do not wish to answer, please feel free to indicate this and we can miss those questions out.

Are there any potential risks involved?
I have not identified any risks involved in this study. If you find participation in the interviews or thinking about your experiences of vocational discernment distressing, you are welcome to discuss this with me, your DDO, or someone you trust in your own church community. However, it is not anticipated that the questions asked will go beyond the depth or scope of what you will have already covered in the discernment process so far.

What is the benefit to me?
There is no direct benefit to you in participating in this study, although you may find it helpful and interesting to reflect on your experiences of vocational discernment as you prepare to attend the Stage Two Assessment.

PART 2

Will my data be kept confidential?
All information obtained during the study will be kept confidential. The recordings and transcripts from the interviews will be stored securely in a password protected file accessible only by me and will not include your name. If I refer to direct quotations from our interview in my write-up, I will give you a pseudonym and will avoid including anything which would make it possible to identify you.
All research data and records needed to validate the research findings will be stored for 10 years after the end of the project. Storage of data will be password protected and anonymised. Full details about how your data will be stored and handled are included in the accompanying Privacy Notice.

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It is hoped that the findings from this study will help the Church of England reflect theologically on the vocational discernment process for ordained ministry. Therefore, the findings may be published in theological journals, books, or websites, and they may be presented at online or in-person conferences or training days. Your identity will not be revealed in any publication or presentation and all data will be anonymised.

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My name is Cara Lovell. I was ordained in 2018 and I serve as Associate Minister at St Mary Hampton in South West London. I work at St Mellitus College as a Lecturer in Theology and I am a Formation Tutor for a group of ordinands based in the London centre. If you are considering training at St Mellitus College, please indicate this to me and I will ensure that I am not involved in your admissions process to avoid a conflict of interests.

Who has reviewed this study?
This study has received ethical approval from the Ethics Committee of the Theology and Religion Department at Durham University.

Who do I contact if I have any questions or concerns about this study?
If you have any further questions or concerns about this study, please speak to Cara Lovell (researcher) or my supervisors (Philip Plyming and Gavin Wakefield). Contact details are provided above. If you remain unhappy or wish to make a formal complaint, please submit a complaint via the University's Complaints Process.
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Thank you for reading this information and considering taking part in this study.

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