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UNIVERSITY OF SOUTHAMPTON

Through the Looking Glass :

**A biographical study of the experiences of candidates
undergoing discernment of vocation to ordained ministry in the
Church of England**

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Thesis submitted in partial fulfilment of the degree of
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ABSTRACT

FACULTY OF SOCIAL SCIENCES

SCHOOL OF EDUCATION

Doctor of Education

Through the Looking Glass :

**A biographical study of the experiences of candidates undergoing
discernment of vocation to ordained ministry in the Church of England**

By Jane Mason

The Church of England is facing a human resource crisis, arising from a discrepancy between the numbers of clergy retiring from full-time stipendiary ministry and those entering training. The discernment of potential vocations to ordained ministry is therefore a pertinent issue, with the system for discerning such vocations being subject to much change and development over the last ten years. Although the Ministry Division of the Church of England has conducted several reviews during that period, none has approached the discernment process from a specifically experiential perspective. Equally, no research prior to this study has considered discernment of vocation to priesthood in its entirety, from the emergence of personal intuition of calling, through the various diocesan procedures, to the national Selection Conference.

This study employs a biographical approach to examine the experiences of a group of candidates for ordination training who attended national Selection Conferences during the year 2000. It is argued that, as a type of biographical enquiry, discernment of vocation requires a profound appreciation of the ramifications of socio-cultural context, and the role of pre-understandings in human interactions. It is shown that, where such awareness is lacking, personal bias may affect interpretations of the highly individualised experience of calling to ordained ministry. The findings suggest that enhancement of the training offered to discernment personnel, both in practical inter-personal skills, and in raising awareness of the assumptions underpinning their own world-views, would benefit all concerned. The study concludes that considered implementation of some of the theoretical approaches and practical skills of secular vocational guidance could enrich the discernment process, and could mitigate the negative experiences recorded by some participants in this study.

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Definitions and Abbreviations

ABM Advisory Board of Ministry of the Church of England
(previously Advisory Council for the Church's Ministry,
ACCM).

Bishops' Selector

Person authorised by the House of Bishops to conduct selection interviews of candidates for ordination. May, or may not, be ordained themselves.

Churchmanship

Preferred style of worship and doctrinal orientation on a continuum from Reformed, 'low' church to Anglo-Catholic, 'high' church.

Conference Conference moderator, responsible for oversight of conference.

Secretary Facilitates and monitors Selectors' deliberations, but does not conduct interviews him/herself. Is trained to administer and interpret psychometric assessments, and writes test reports.

DDO Diocesan Director of Ordinands. Responsible for preliminary interviews with candidates at local diocesan level. May be closely involved, having discussions over a period of time, before putting a candidate forward for a Selection Conference, or may regard Selection Conference as the main instrument of discernment of vocation.

Ecclesiology Pertaining to the style of organisation, government, liturgy and ritual of different Christian Churches.

Education Selector

One of selection team, responsible for interviews concerning educational potential.

Incumbent Clergy person with legal responsibility for administering a parish, with the right to the 'living' from that parish.

Living Church office to which certain benefits attach, for example, income and house.

Ordinand A person in training for ordained ministry.

Pastoral Selector

One of selection team, responsible for interview concerning personal life and qualities of candidates.

Sacrament A rite in the Christian Church instituted as an outward and visible sign of an inward and spiritual grace.

Senior Selector

Always a clergy-person, whose role is to lead selector team, and conduct interviews concerning vocation and spirituality.

Vocations Adviser

Clergy person with part-time responsibility, in own diocese, for advising on options for ministry. May see this as pertaining only to ordained ministry, or to all forms of service. May be considered as part of recruitment functions in their diocese, or be categorically separate, depending on diocesan policy.

Chapter 1

Introduction

*I did say yes
O at lightning and lashed rod;
...
I am soft sift
In an hourglass – at the wall
Fast, but mined with a motion, a drift,
And it crowds and it combs to a fall*

G.M. Hopkins 'The Wreck of the Deutschland',¹

This thesis examines the experiences of eleven people exploring their religious vocation, specifically their sense of calling to priesthood in the Church of England. Their stories portray the emotional roller-coaster which characterizes the process of opening one's innermost self to the scrutiny and assessment of others, particularly those with power to deny or authenticate the vocation. In common with the poet-priest, Gerard Manley Hopkins, the tale is at times one of personal anguish, of confusion and conflict, trial and testing, but it is also one of resolve, integration, and joy. It is an uncomfortable experience of sifting - by God, by the community of the Church, and not least, by the candidates of themselves.

Although, for some candidates, the story of their calling begins many years before it is vocalised, this study focuses on the period during which the intuition of a vocation to priesthood is submitted for assessment by church authorities tasked with discerning and assessing such vocations.

Commensurately, this study is also an account of an institutional process - the selection of suitable candidates for ordination training - but that is not to say that it is an evaluation of the effectiveness of the procedures in accomplishing organisational goals. Rather, this study examines the experiential implications of the selection system for the individuals subject to it, but in so doing the system itself inevitably comes under scrutiny.

¹ Gardner, H., (ed), 1953, *Gerard Manley Hopkins: Poems and Prose*, Middlesex, Penquin Books

The last twenty years have witnessed an overall decline in the numbers of full-time stipendiary priests, 'due to the high number of retirements of people who were ordained in the early 1960s, and those who were ordained in middle life in the 1970s and 1980s' (Archbishops' Council, 1999b:3). The current rise in numbers training for nationally ordained ministry (the largest increase being in female ordinands) is not predicted to offset this decline, despite augmentation by new diocesan strategies to train locally ordained ministers and lay workers (ibid:3,4), who usually undergo *local* selection procedures. As the discernment of potential vocations to nationally ordained ministry is such a pressing issue for the Church of England, this study concentrates on the experiences of candidates who underwent the *national* selection process.

The system for discerning priestly vocations has been subject to much change and development over the last ten years. Although the Ministry Division of the Church of England has conducted a number of procedural reviews during that period (for example, Advisory Board of Ministry, 1993, 1995, 1996, & 2001), none has considered the entire process of discernment of vocation to priestly ministry, from local diocesan investigations to the national Selection Conference (which is outlined in Chapter 2). Further, no research prior to this study has focussed specifically on the ways in which the discernment process impacts on the lives of the candidates. It would be difficult for the Church itself to conduct such research since, as the *Review of Selection Procedures* (ABM, 1995:49) indicates, candidates often feel diffident about giving honest feedback when they are still under assessment, or may be so in the future. There is a case, therefore, for an independent biographical study.

The timing of this study is particularly propitious, for two reasons. Firstly, a new format for the national Selection Conference was introduced in 1997, tightening the Selection Criteria defined in 1989 and introducing a questionnaire on personal interests and values, plus two cognitive tests. The three years elapsing prior to the commencement of this study have allowed time for the 'bedding down' of the new format, making a study from the candidate's perspectives apposite at this point. Secondly, in October 2001, the *Data Protection Act* (1998), came into force for the Church. This precipitated a

fresh evaluation of the selection system and the handling and storing of data on candidates. This study brings a complementary, experiential perspective to the procedural reviews already undertaken by the Ministry Division.

The Research Approach

Since the focus of this research is on subjective human experience, the paradigmatic stance is almost entirely qualitative. It is first and foremost an *auto/biographical* study, the implications of which are explored in Chapters 3 and 4. Although the study includes fieldwork observation of three national Selection Conferences, the emphasis is on *personal narrative* rather than prolonged observation of activities. The stories were told in personal interviews with a sample group of eleven candidates drawn from two of the three selection conferences observed.

It is possible to view discernment of vocation to ministry as a specialised type of career guidance; both are quintessentially *biographical* enterprises, each being dependent on the telling and interpretation of personal stories to facilitate the exploration of vocational aspirations. While it is unrealistic – and unnecessary – to expect either process to incorporate the full rigours of formal biographical research, some of the underpinning principles may be fruitfully applied (see Law, 2003, Reid, 2003 and West, 2003). Specifically, it is argued that an awareness of the ramifications of socio-cultural context, and of the assumptions underpinning the use of language, are essential to the ethical conduct of both biographical research in general, and of discernment of vocation to ministry in particular. Attention is therefore paid to the significance and functions of hermeneutics and discourse theories in relation to this study, and to the relationship between the two. Neither term is used, in this context, to denote a defined methodological approach or model: *hermeneutics* refers to the way human experience and social interactions are interpreted, while *discourse* connotes exploration of the ideologies and pre-suppositions underlying our interactions in given social contexts (Van Dijk, 1997:2). Without some understanding of these cross-currents, it would be difficult to portray accurately the meaning and significance of the experience of discernment of vocation for ordination candidates.

The Research Questions

The seminal paper, *Call to Order* (Advisory Council for the Church's Ministry, 1989:144) effectively poses the question central to this thesis:

How is God's calling to ordained ministry experienced, and what is the relationship between this feeling and the church's role of recognition, nurture and ratification?

The two halves of this question provide the structural framework for this study, as it moves between exploration of the ways in which calling to ordained ministry is personally experienced and understood, and consideration of the dynamics operating at the interface between individual and institution, as that call is tested in the discernment process.

The Underpinning Assumptions

The primary assumption underlying this thesis is that studying individual lives and experiences has the potential to illuminate and elucidate social systems or processes. Erben (1998:4) argues the case for biographical research as a means of understanding the wider society, on the grounds that 'individual lives are part of a cultural network'; the one must be understood in relation to the other. He specifically mentions the world of work as suitable for biographical research into the 'routes by which individuals become teachers, nurses, prostitutes, librarians, actors' – or, indeed, priests. Studying the experiences of individuals undergoing a particular social process may confirm or contradict prior theoretical assumptions governing the associated practices, and in so doing present a fresh perspective on the process itself, thereby generating new theories or adjustments to existing ones. Macpherson (2001:32) states that 'The continual interaction of theory and practice [is] able to produce new understandings' which may also provide insight into the ways in which systems impact (or will potentially impact) on the individuals subject to them.

A second, complementary assumption is rooted in the 'Person-centred' standpoint (developed by Carl Rogers in the 1950s - 60s) of my professional training as a careers adviser, for which current theories place increasing emphasis on personal narrative (Reid, 2002). The 'Person-centred' approach is essentially humanistic in that it assumes progression towards a personally

defined end-goal, through increased self-knowledge. The activities involved in Person-centred guidance require particular skills and knowledge, and a clear understanding of the ethical dimensions of human interactions.

Some Notes on Semantics and Pre-suppositions

The literature relating to the selection of clergy evidences considerable confusion and misunderstanding in the use of the associated terminology. Before proceeding, therefore, some explanation of the semantic issues relating to this terminology, particularly as it is used throughout this thesis, is required.

The phrase 'discernment of vocation' is used, as it is in church documents, to denote the formal, corporate processes of assessing an individual's calling to ordained ministry. This includes the candidate's own personal discernment of the inner promptings of God. As the study reveals, the breadth of the activities encompassed by the phrase 'discernment of vocation' is problematic because of the disparate functions and disciplines involved.

Recommendation at the end of a selection conference only applies to the next stage of the discernment process, theological training. It does not extend to the ultimate - hoped for - outcome of ordination itself, which occurs when the Bishop receives final recommendations from the training college and the Diocesan Director of Ordinands at the end of theological training. For clarity, therefore, I refer to recommendation for ordination *training*, and for the purposes of this study, the processes of discerning a vocation ends when the candidate receives the report of the Bishops' Selectors recommending (or not recommending) him or her for theological training.

Candidate refers to people who are sponsored by their Bishop to attend a three-day national Selection Conference for ordination training. The church's preference for the term *candidate* rather than 'applicant' highlights the difference between this selection process and other job applications. *Applicant* tends to be used of people applying for a particular post, whereas *candidate* has connotations of a course to be run or hurdles to be jumped (as in 'examination candidate'). It is also suggestive of the involvement of others in nomination or

sponsorship to a position of honour (as in candidature for political election). Dictionaries note the Latin root, ‘candidatus’, meaning ‘white-robed’, a significant point in relation to priestly ministry.

The terms priest and priesthood are used more commonly in this study than the equivalent terms ‘minister’ or ‘ministry’, because the former are not associated with broader aspects of religious service, nor are they encumbered with secular meanings, and are therefore more precise. It is acknowledged, however, that ‘priest’ has Catholic overtones, which can present difficulties for those of a strongly Reformed persuasion, but when this arises as an issue, it is directly addressed and the terminology clarified. To cover this problem, the encompassing phrases ‘ordained ministry’, or ‘priestly ministry’ are used.

It is not the intention of this study to examine the claims that God exists or that He can make His specific purposes known in and for the lives of individual believers. These claims are taken as *a priori* assumptions. Neither does the study aim to question the *outcomes* of the process of discernment of vocation for individual candidates (ie. the Selectors’ decisions). Rather, the focus is on the impact of the selection system on *individual biography*, and on the dynamics operating at the interface between the institution and the candidates.

The full implications of all these terms as they occur in the literature and throughout the study will be examined in greater depth, both in Chapter 2, and at other relevant points in this thesis.

Thesis Structure

This thesis explores the biographical experiences of candidates for ordination training in the Church of England. Chapter 2 considers the contextual setting of these experiences, examining the historical influences which impact on the discernment process, and the current situation with regard to policy and practice. Chapter 3 views the process of discernment of vocation as a form of biographical enquiry and, as such, examines it from the theoretical perspectives of hermeneutics and discourse. The potential of an approach which synthesises Gadamer’s ideas on hermeneutics, and Foucault’s notion of discourse is

explored. Chapter 4 discusses the suitability and limitations of auto/biography as a research method in relation to this particular study. The influence of the researcher's own biography is considered, and issues relating to fieldwork observation, sampling and biographical interviewing are addressed. Chapter 5 presents the participants' stories, while Chapter 6 offers interpretations in the light of the foregoing theory. Chapter 7 summarises the research, drawing conclusions about the relationship between the experience of feeling called to ordained ministry, and 'the church's role of recognition, nurture and ratification' (ACCM, 1989:144).

Chapter 2 Only Connect: A Review of the Field

*Only Connect! That was the whole of her sermon.
Only connect the prose and the passion, and both will be exalted.*

E.M. Forster, *Howards End*¹

Forster's famous aphorism, '*Only connect*' is the epigraph of a novel which concerns the potential for reconciliation between opposites; 'the prose and the passion, the seen and the unseen, the practical mind and the intellectual, the outer life and the inner' (Stallybrass, 1973:x). As such, it provides an apposite dictum with which to approach the field of religious vocation, and the examination of a process which, itself, seeks to reconcile opposites: theoretical and practical, fact and feeling, personal and institutional, traditional and contemporary, secular and spiritual. This is particularly so at the beginning of a new millennium, when a 'vigorous debate about ministry and priesthood' is being conducted, 'which reflects some of the major tensions in western culture' (Redfern, 1999:ix). Understanding these tensions is foundational to the full appreciation of the experience of submitting one's sense of calling to priesthood, in today's Church of England, to the discernment of Church authorities.

In its endeavour to incorporate and harmonise a broad spectrum of belief, the Anglican Church necessarily absorbs a wide variety of traditions and values, which has implications for the emergence and discernment of priestly vocations. The danger is that these various traditions lead to individual pre-judgements, which could engender distortions in the interpretations that candidates and Selectors place on one another's words and actions. The various understandings of the nature of priestly ministry need, therefore, to be elucidated.

This review approaches the field of discernment of vocation to ordained ministry from two main perspectives. Firstly, the influences shaping contemporary understandings of priestly vocation are considered from the twin

¹ Forster E.M., 1910, *Howards End*, Abinger Edition, 1973, London, Edward Arnold: Ch 22

standpoints of the historical issues affecting current ideas of ministry, and the language used to define and convey these ideas. Secondly, the policies, processes and procedures relating to the discernment system itself are examined. The final section summarises the issues which this review raises for the study of candidates' experiences of the discernment process. Necessarily, the presentation is 'broad-brush', as the confines of this thesis prohibit a more detailed approach, but the development of ideas which is traced illuminates the formative structures which underpin and impinge on the experience of 'calling', and the processes of discernment of vocation.

Socio-Historical Issues Affecting Priestly Vocations Today

Collins (1992:3) perceives 'a sense across almost all churches that something substantial is unresolved about ministry and that the churches are hurting'. In 1985, the General Synod Board of Education succinctly defined the issues, arising from the historical evolution of the Church of England from its Roman Catholic roots, through the Protestant Reformation, to the current 'broad church' which attempts to contain and balance all shades of opinion. The paragraph is quoted in full because it so clearly portrays the complexity of the environment in which the current processes of 'discernment of vocation' are embedded:

Yet there remains an unresolved theological division in the Church of England...This concerns a differentiation between the priesthood of all believers, into which all Christians enter through baptism, and the sacramental priesthood which is the special calling of some particular members of the Church. Some Anglicans hold firmly to a belief that the Church of Christ is a Mystical Body, into which we are incorporated by baptism, and in which priests are sacramentally distinct from other members of it. Others hold, with the same strength of conviction, that clergy differ from laity only in function: they are simply set apart by the Church as teachers and pastors of the Christian community, equipping it for its ministry in the world. Again, some believe that priests depend for their call and for their authority solely upon God, while others maintain that the authority for priesthood comes not only from God, but derives also from members of the Church in whose name such individuals are set apart. Still others would take an intermediate position. They believe both that ordained priests are fully part of the common royal priesthood of all the People of God, and that they also receive a call to exercise a particular and sacramental priesthood. The authority for this special priesthood rests partly on a call from God, but also upon a clear recognition of this call

by the general members of the Church, who acknowledge representative authority in particular people from amongst their number.

(Archbishops' Council, 1985:5)

Clearly, understandings of the spiritual nature and practical function of priesthood impact radically on perceptions of priestly vocation.

As Towler and Coxon (1979:90) found in their study of the social history of Anglican priesthood, 'it would be gravely misleading to treat ordinands as a single group'. Further, they contend that the conflicts and differences between them can only be understood by first understanding the histories which underlie these differences. While Towler and Coxon justifiably traced their study from the Middle Ages, the social changes most pertinent to this study began in the eighteenth century, when the Enclosure movement enabled parish clergy to buy once 'common land', thereby facilitating their transition from the lower classes to the emergent 'gentleman class'. Thus ordained ministry became a respectable means of earning a living for the sons of gentry. This newly elevated social standing was to have lasting influence on notions of the essential characteristics required for Anglican priesthood.

A second seminal change occurred during the nineteenth century, with the secularisation of university education. This led, inevitably, to the question of training for priesthood, since up to that point clergy education had not differed from that of other gentry, as all education was founded in divinity. The new phenomenon of non-'Oxbridge', and non-theological degrees necessitated the establishment of special colleges to provide graduates entering ordained ministry with the requisite theological training.² The result was a factionalisation of the colleges along party lines reflecting divisions already existing within the Church. While these factions had been inescapable at university, where ordinands were forced to mix and debate with those of contrary religious outlooks, the new theological colleges attracted students with

²Until 1932, when Durham University was founded by the Church of England, the only universities whose degrees were accepted automatically as qualification for ordination were Oxford and Cambridge,

similar viewpoints. As Towler and Coxon (1979:20) comment, 'Certainly the issue of churchmanship would never have assumed the proportions it did without the help of the theological colleges and their partisan stance'. Thus, if party lines were perpetuated amongst the clergy graduating from partisan colleges, who ultimately became involved in selecting successive generations of ordinands, the evolving selection process itself had the potential to become partisan. This could operate to the detriment of ordination candidates holding alternative perspectives to their selectors, a potential which continued to cause concern throughout the twentieth century. In 1995, the Review of Selection Procedures (ABM, 1995:3) recorded 'anxieties about churchmanship bias' in the selection process, although the report also notes that research 'has shown that there do not appear to be grounds for thinking there is discrimination in recommendations'.

Until the twentieth century, the pre-requisite of a university degree precluded the lower classes from ordination training, since their social and financial standing barred them from university entrance, effectively maintaining the status quo of the 'gentleman' cleric. In 1908 a recruitment crisis prompted an enquiry into the 'advisability or the reverse, of seeking ordinands from different social grades' (House of Bishops, 1908:14). Little changed in the class basis of the Anglican clergy, however, until the 1960s, when regional courses emerged intended for the part-time training of working ordinands. Despite this facility, candidates from working-class backgrounds were rare (Hodge and Mantle, 2001), and the English clergy remained staunchly middle-class. In 1989 Dewar (2000:23) reported that some people of working-class origins were experiencing 'discouragements' in 'seeking ordination', while as late as 1995, the *Review of Selection Procedures* (ABM, 1995:4) noted 'the relative lack of candidates from socio-economic classes 4-6'. This report highlights the 'dangers of patronising candidates from backgrounds such as the inner city by unfounded assumptions about inability to cope in a setting such as a Conference' (ibid.), and the need to take account of personal context in relation to concepts of vocation is emphasised.

One of the most profound revolutions in understandings of vocation since the Reformation was brought about by the Act of Synod, in 1993, permitting the ordination of women in the Church of England, since when over twelve hundred have been ordained priest. Dewar (2000:23) notes that official recognition does not, however, ‘guarantee the wholehearted acceptance of [women’s] ministry’, a fact which Furlong (1998:2) attributes to a ‘tribal mentality’ in the Church of England, which belies its essential nature as ‘an adoptive community’. This has been sustained, according to Kuhrt (2001:13), by ‘cultural factors of patriarchy, inadequate biblical translation, and theologies which included fear of sexuality...which oppressed women and strictly limited the exercise of their gifts and abilities’.

The history of women’s ministry in the Church of England raises questions which are pertinent to this study, since, as Dewar (2000:23) suggests, some women still experience ‘quite strong discouragements’ to candidature for ordination. The 1993 Act ensured that *Selectors* who are opposed to women’s ministry must be accommodated by the periodic provision of Selection Conferences for only male candidates. Such a policy, many argue (see Furlong, 1998, Rees, 2002, Shaw, 1998) not only accommodates, but authenticates and prolongs gendered discourses of priesthood. Interestingly, this accommodation is not afforded to male *candidates* opposed to women priests. They are required to accept being interviewed, if it so falls, by a female clergy interviewer, which raises the converse concern that male candidates could experience reverse ‘normalisation’ through a newly-feminised clerical discourse (Francis and Robbins, 1996).

While acknowledging the huge import of the ordination of women, Rees (2002:16) nevertheless points out a common misconception that gender is *the* predominant issue in today’s Church of England. It is assumed that opinions are evenly divided between those for and against, whereas, in truth, those against the ordination of women are now in a minority of about ten per cent (ibid.). Other, sometimes inter-related, issues also have considerable impact on the discernment and testing of vocations to ordained ministry.

One such issue is that of sexuality, both in respect of gay and lesbian candidates, and those divorced and remarried.

Theologically there is a particular reason why these questions could hardly be more sensitive...They concern the way Scripture and Tradition are understood, and the authority which these are to have in matters of human living. (House of Bishops, 1991: 1)

It is not currently the Church's policy to ordain to the priesthood homosexual men or lesbian women living in sexually active partnerships (see House of Bishops, 1991, para 5.17). The policy on divorce and remarriage has changed in recent years to allow the candidature, under certain conditions, of men and women who have been divorced and remarried.³ Candidates are expected to be open to discussion with selectors regarding issues of human sexuality generally, and their own lives in particular, although Selectors are instructed not to probe areas which have already been examined by the Archbishops (ABM, 1995).

Another area of difficulty which faces the Church of England, is one for which, though essentially a socio-cultural issue, the western Church bears some theological and historical responsibility; that problem is 'racism'. Traditionally, a white, male, middle-class, university-educated hegemony has dominated ministry in the Church of England, resulting in practices which have effectively excluded ethnic minorities from the priesthood. In times past Scripture has been used erroneously to justify these practices, thereby generating racist discourses invested with the authority of divine ordinance. As Hicks (1994:7) notes, 'the historic churches have substantial numbers of black people', but they are not commensurately represented in the ordained ministry.

In 1976 the *Race Relations Act* officially rejected racism, and, unlike the *Sex Discrimination Act* (1975), the Church of England subscribes to it without reservation. It is noteworthy, however, that the *Statistics of Licensed*

³ Any candidate who has been divorced and remarried requires a Faculty under Canon 4.3, which prohibits the ordination of divorcees whose former spouse is still living (House of Bishops, 2000, *Divorce and Remarriage*). The process of gaining such a Faculty, or permission, is lengthy and inquisitorial, and involves both Archbishops.

Ministers, annually collated on behalf of the Archbishops' Council, have never included any indication of the ethnic profile of the clergy. While this could be due to a fear that ethnic monitoring might, in itself, be tantamount to discrimination, the argument is tenuous in that the annual statistics include classification by age and gender; the Church clearly feels such concern is unnecessary in respect of these two personal attributes. Whatever the reasons for lack of ethnic monitoring, Russell (1994) believes that it may be symptomatic of a misguided attempt to assimilate racial differences into a normative view of priesthood which is essentially white.

One further practical issue which impacts on discernment of vocation to priesthood concerns age and health, where consideration of pension implications for the Church of England finances may dictate the outcome of selection processes (either at diocesan or national level) for older candidates, or those with a medical history. The *Review of the Selection Procedures* (ABM, 1995:4) notes evidence of older candidates being disadvantaged, and asserts that financial considerations should not be allowed to affect the discernment process.

Notwithstanding the social and theological anxieties which affect clergy selection today, or the declaration of Towler and Coxon in 1979 that the Anglican priesthood is, sociologically speaking, redundant, the clergy survive, but the nature of their role is in flux. A perceptual gap has arisen between traditional notions of ministry and current social and institutional reality, which has implications for understandings of the nature of *vocation* in the processes of discerning a priestly calling today.

The Language of Vocation

Palmer (2000) points to the Latin roots of the word 'vocation', which refer to 'call' (*vocare*) and 'voice' (*vox*), suggesting something both heard and verbalised; hence the close association of ideas between *vocation* and *profession*, which stems from the Latin *profiteri*, to avow or confess. The historical inter-dependence between concepts of *calling*, *vocation* and

profession were unproblematic until the secularisation of education and diversification of professions began in the eighteenth century. The religious connotations of vocation persisted, however, into the early twentieth century such that Weber (1903) still perceived vocation in predominantly religious terms. Since then, the idea of vocation has become increasingly secularised, in a process which Clark (1996:68) believes has generated contradictory and divisive discourses:

‘Vocation’, as a once potent religious concept, has been hijacked in two destructive ways. On the one hand, it has been ‘commercialised’ by being limited to only those forms of work which can lead to paid employment...On the other hand, an elitist dimension of ‘vocation’ still lingers on when it is applied to the so-called professions – teaching, medicine, law and the church (meaning only the clergy of course) – set aside as special and respected forms of public service located within the particular institutions concerned. These interpretations of vocation are both debilitating and divisive.

Clark maintains that the Church must reclaim *vocation* ‘for the whole ministry of the whole people of God’ (ibid). The problem, identified in *A Climate of Encouragement* (ABM, 2000:2), is that in reclaiming *vocation*, its acquired ‘secular baggage’ has also been incorporated, along with the vague and often conflicting ideologies which underpin the concept:

We wanted to consider whether or not words such as ‘recruitment’ and ‘career’ should be appropriated by the Church in its encouragement of vocations...Clearly, these terms have been absorbed to some extent into the culture of the clergy and laity alike, but we suggest that in the face of their ability to lead us into a world of meaning which is not necessarily our own, the Church should remain cautious without losing confidence in its own language of vocation.

However, the Church’s ‘language of vocation’ is often no less ambiguous than its secular counterparts. Indeed, much of the Church’s literature and documents pertaining to vocation displays considerable imprecision in the language used; terms such as *leadership*, *management* and *professionalisation* are adopted without elucidating the particular meanings ascribed to them, or defining their relationship to *vocation*, which can be conflicting (see Bates, 2001, Eaton, 1999, Harpham, 2001). Oliver (2001:17) talks of ‘vocation to pastoral leadership’, noting ‘a tension built into the very idea’. The authors of *A Climate of Encouragement* (2000:14) express concern that vocation has been devalued

under the impact of 'modernism, consumerism and secularisation, which question not only the value of vocations, but even their "efficiency"'. They note a retreat of vocational roles 'into a creeping professionalism', whose regulation and 'language of rights' undermines the 'language of duty' and the 'intuitive assumptions' which historically underpinned 'old-fashioned' concepts of both vocation and profession (ibid.).

Eaton (1999:10) suggests that the Church's emphasis 'has moved from personal pastoral ministry to corporate management...priestly ministry is valued less for its own sake and more for what it means to the survival of the organisation'. This is likely to present problems for ordination candidates whose self-perceptions are oriented, as Towler and Coxon (1979) found, more towards pastoral and teaching qualities than administration and organisation. The way current ordination candidates articulate their 'calling' may provide clues as to whether they have changed their understanding of vocation in line with the Church's organisational requirements, or whether their self-concepts are still governed by 'old-fashioned' ideas of 'vocational service' (ABM, 2000:15).

The Language of Calling

Experiences of God are self-evidencing to the participant. They operate within their own integrity, follow the logic of their own experience and require no external authority to validate them: they validate themselves... The difficulty that faces people who believe they have experienced God or have been captured by the possibility of God is that their experience is incommunicable to others.

(Holloway, 1997:15-16)

In researching religious biographies the difficulty of describing such an intensely subjective experience as sensing God's call to a particular ministry quickly becomes evident. Most descriptions focus on the rational, on facts and events which were seminal in providing direction and/or confirmation that the person was 'on the right track'. Penny Jamieson (1997), for example, the first female bishop in New Zealand, talks of people and places that most influenced her spiritual journey. She identifies the root of her particular calling to ordained ministry in her discovery of the 'feminist critique of Christianity', which led to theological study, and ultimately to ordination as a priest, when 'cause became

call to some extent' (Jamieson, 1997:180). She recounts what she *did* to clarify her calling, but the associated *feelings* seem indefinable:

Eventually my Christian commitment got deeper and I sensed that God wanted me to change direction. I continued to pray and read my Bible...I also took days on retreat, often driving out into the countryside, taking my Bible and notebook, and listening to God. ...I have a notebook with me always, and I write down anything which I think is meant directly for me. (ibid.)

Dewar (2000:18-19) describes experiences which people have narrated to him over the course of his work in religious vocational guidance, but the inadequacy of language in this realm is clear. People talk of 'hearing' God, of 'understanding what my life was for', of being 'unmistakably drawn', without defining the sensation further. Those who manage to convey something of the feelings of divine calling speak of 'feeling angry with God', followed by 'an inner sense of rightness'. One woman tells of 'a sudden unexpected silence, almost audible,' in the midst of an emotional outburst, 'as though everything was aware that God would enter'. For many, calling is a gradual emergence of a desire to do something, which grows to an imperative. Palmer (2000:24) describes this as being 'something I can't not do, for reasons I'm unable to explain to anyone else and don't fully understand myself but are nonetheless compelling'. Thorne (1998:31) echoes this, conceiving vocation as 'a sense of one's own meaning and purpose' being fulfilled as one is 'drawn slowly and irresistibly towards the illumination of one's own destiny'. Holloway (1997:16) believes poetry to be 'about the only form of expression that comes close to capturing the immediacy of transcendence in a way that communicates its intensity'.

The difficulty in communicating the epiphanal experience of calling to ordained ministry raises questions concerning the evaluation of such a calling by the Church. The danger exists that any assessment will result in 'reductionist interpretations of mystical or spiritual experiences', which deny them 'any reality beyond the materialist explanation' (Holloway, 1997:15). Holloway offers an essentially hermeneutical solution to this problem, which faces Bishops' Selectors charged with assessing such experiences:

It is only because others have also encountered these mysteries that some kind of mutual understanding is possible between people when they try to discuss spiritual experience. (ibid:16)

Notwithstanding these difficulties, the practical necessity of choosing suitable candidates for ordination training has required the formulation of a coherent strategy for testing their sense of calling, and the definition of clear criteria against which to judge them. An understanding of the structure and operation of this system is important insofar as it shapes candidates' experiences, and assists in comprehending 'the self-understanding of another world in relation to (its) praxis' (Kogler, 1999:210; original parenthesis).

The Process of Discerning Vocations to Priesthood

Historically, the ultimate spiritual authority for the selection of suitable candidates for ordination has always rested with the Bishops, but this resulted in marked disparities across the dioceses in the procedures for selection, and in the quality of the candidates. In order to develop a more cohesive and uniform national strategy, the Central Advisory Council of Training for the Ministry was established in 1912, to act in an advisory capacity to the Bishops, monitoring the supply of ordinands and promoting best practice in training. By 1951 the 'Bishops' Selection Board' was well established, later to become the current three-day national Selection Conference, organised by the Ministry Division of the Archbishops' Council.

The process of discerning vocations to ordained ministry begins in the dioceses, when a prospective candidate consults his or her parish priest or chaplain, whose recommendation is required by the Diocesan Director of Ordinands (DDO). The candidate may or may not choose to, or be required to, consult the diocesan Vocations Adviser (VA), if such a person exists within that particular diocese. Increasingly, the role of VA is diminishing, with the function being incorporated into that of the DDO. Candidates are interviewed by several Examining Chaplains, and four personal references are required, from the candidate's Incumbent or Chaplain, from a lay person who knows the candidate's ministry, an educational referee and an occupational one. In the event of health problems, medical reports are also required, including one from

the doctor appointed by the Ministry Division. If the consensus indicates that the candidate may have a priestly vocation, he or she is sponsored to attend a national Selection Conference. The candidate may see his or her sponsoring Bishop before the conference, but this is not always so.

Preliminary research in this study, across a number of dioceses, revealed marked differences in the way candidates are assessed and prepared for the Selection Conference, and in the care they receive in their dioceses post-Conference, a problem also identified in *A Climate of Encouragement* (ABM, 2000). Some dioceses require ordination candidates to undertake multiple interviews, lengthy reading lists, and a 'mini-selection conference', while others offer minimal evaluation and preparation. The Report states that:

Dioceses have reported a variety of procedures for the recruitment and selection of candidates at diocesan level which leads us to observe that not all dioceses apply the same level of rigour...prior to Selection Conference. (ABM, 2000:99)

Kuhrt (2001:289) sees 'little evidence of dioceses learning from each other' which 'is a serious weakness'. Each diocese continues to operate in a largely autonomous fashion, which means that candidates arrive at a national Selection Conference in unequal states of preparedness.

The current national Selection Conferences are residential, usually situated at diocesan retreat houses, in order to emphasise the religious context of the selection process (ABM, 1995). They last three days for the candidates, and four to five days for the Selectors, allowing time for them to confer and write their reports, which are *advisory* to the Bishop sponsoring each candidate. (The Bishops may choose to ignore this advice, but in the main, the decisions of Selectors stand.) The Conferences are organised by The Ministry Division based at Church House, Westminster, who supply a moderator for each Conference (known as The Conference Secretary). The role of the Secretary is to 'provide the administrative functions of a single Conference both before and after' (ABM, 1996:56); s/he is trained to administer and mark the psychometric assessments, acts as consultant to Selectors, and oversees the Selectors' assessment discussions, ensuring that the Criteria have been properly applied

and that reports are appropriately written. The significance of this latter function has increased since the implementation of the *Data Protection Act* (1998) for the Church in 2001, which has dictated that all reports on candidates must be open for their perusal, and must therefore be framed accordingly. Until that date, Conference reports were deemed confidential to the sponsoring Bishop and the DDO (ABM, 1997a), and could not be shown to candidates.

Since 1983 the Conference structure ‘has reflected the Assessment Centre method of selecting candidates widely favoured by those in the recruitment field’ (ABM, 1995:33). In addition to the three one-to-one interviews lasting fifty minutes each, the conference programme incorporates a number of individual and group exercises, including a written exercise, a simulated committee meeting, a Personal Inventory questionnaire, and two cognitive tests assessing verbal and non-verbal reasoning. The written exercise is ‘designed to give evidence in the area of a candidate’s ability:

- to understand and respond to a complex human situation,
- to show an appropriate pastoral response,
- to communicate in writing in terms appropriate to the context.’

(ABM, 1996b:43)

The Selectors are instructed to assess candidates’ performance in this task from the perspective of that candidate’s particular context, using it ‘to inform their individual assessment’ of the candidate (ibid.).

For the group exercise the candidates are divided into two groups, with each group carrying out the same task simultaneously, while being observed and assessed by the same Selectors responsible for interviewing that group of candidates. The exercise, which takes the form of some kind of committee meeting, lasts two hours in total, with each candidate being allocated fifteen minutes to act as group leader. Selectors are ‘looking for evidence of the candidates’ ability...to present a situation’, to apprehend and respond to relevant issues and ‘to work collaboratively with others’ (ABM, 1996b:44).

The Personal Inventory is ‘a series of open-ended questions drawn up by professional psychologists’ (ABM, 1995:102):

It is not a personality test and it is not marked. The aim is to help candidates offer information on their understanding of themselves, their background and their capacities, Selectors receive a copy of this and it forms the basis of a discussion in interview. (ibid.)

The two cognitive tests measure verbal and non-verbal reasoning ability. The intention of psychometric assessments is that they ‘allow an assessment of intellectual capacity which is fair for all candidates’ (ABM, 1995:103):

This can be a help to candidates without a traditional educational background in assuring them that their potential is being properly assessed. (ibid.)

The aim of all the tests and exercises is to provide a ‘clearly integrated process in which each element supplements the other and the whole is greater than the sum of the parts’ (ABM, 1995:33). Reviewing the process after five years, however, the authors of *A Climate of Encouragement* (ABM, 2000) feel that the secular Assessment Centre model fails to embrace the uniqueness of each vocation to ordained ministry; that it relies on ‘tried and tested routes’, as if there were some ‘blueprint’ to which candidates must approximate (ibid:68). The report implies that something has been lost in current approaches to discernment of vocation:

We have sought to suggest a return to our broad and theological roots...It follows therefore that any revised system for testing vocations needs to be generous in its vision of how God tailors vocations with absolute precision and distinctiveness, how he “speaks bespoke”. (ABM, 2000:70)

Percy (1996) identifies the problem with all attempts to convey or assess individual experience as one of imprecision, because experiential language is metaphorical and symbolic. The danger, as Gadamer (1960) asserted, is that where a community of meanings and underpinning assumptions is taken for granted misinterpretations and distortions in judgements may occur. In a process designed to evaluate a person’s life-commitment, the results can be devastating.

Concerns were raised recently, at a consultation for Diocesan Directors of Ordinands and Diocesan Vocations Advisers (2003) that the language used in

the discernment process is too inclusive, insufficiently defined and its connotations apprehended differently by different users. The theoretical issues which this raises are discussed more fully in Chapter 3, but at this point it is worth considering the need to clarify assumptions underpinning the use of language specifically in relation to the published *Criteria for Selection for the Ministry* (ABM, 1996b, see Appendix 1 for summary). Selectors are instructed to produce criterion-based evidence to support their assessments of candidates (see Selectors' Handbook, 1996:100), but concern was voiced at the above-mentioned DDOs' consultation that over-stringent application of the Selection Criteria could engender what one Selector termed 'a monochrome priesthood, without room for eccentrics'. This anxiety, however, may be ill-founded, since the Criteria are, in the main, interpretive-conceptual rather than objective-factual. Interpretive difficulties have already been noted with regard to ideas surrounding priesthood and the assessment of *Vocation*, but Criteria such as *Spirituality and Faith*, or *Leadership and Collaboration* are equally problematic in a post-modern culture which uses the terms very loosely. Selectors are instructed to exercise flexibility and apply the Criteria intelligently (ABM, 1993:78), according to candidates' circumstances as they understand them, but this leaves much space for projecting idiosyncratic interpretations onto the Selection Criteria in relation to the qualities and attributes of individual candidates.

The panel of Selectors at a national Selection Conference normally consists of four ordained and two lay Selectors. They are organised into two teams, with each team responsible for interviewing up to eight candidates. The team is led by a Senior Selector, who is always an experienced clergy-person, and who is responsible for the interviews relating to *vocation* and *spirituality*. The other two selectors in each team are tasked with interviewing candidates regarding *educational* and *pastoral* issues, respectively.

The Ministry Division has no role in the selection of the Selectors. The Bishops retain this responsibility, since the Selectors are officially their representatives (ABM, 1996b). Many Selectors have relevant professional experience in personnel interviewing, but many others are not so qualified. Similarly, at the

diocesan level, few personnel involved in the discernment process are trained in guidance and interview skills, or understand the ethical implications of operating across multiple discursive fields (issues which are addressed more fully in Chapter 3). The *Review of Selection Procedures in the Church of England* (ABM, 1995:5) expresses concern ‘about the competency of Selectors...[and] their need for training’. Although the Ministry Division provides some training for new Selectors, time (since all Selectors are voluntary) and financial constraints restrict this to one day, which concentrates on procedures, rather than the skills and ethics of interview practice. The Conference Secretary is required to exercise ‘a training role in being able to consult with Selectors about interviewing style etc.’ (ABM, 1995:56), but that assumes that the Secretaries are commensurately trained themselves.

The time-lapse between the end of the Conference and the Bishop receiving the Selectors’ report is normally ten days. The Bishop or the DDO then usually telephones the candidate to impart the decision, and arrange a meeting to discuss the report and its implications. Receiving feedback on the Conference report can be stressful, even if a candidate has been recommended for training, since the report may contain ‘points of reservation, indicate areas of uncertainty, and suggest where some further help might be needed’ (ABM, 1997b:168). Where the decision is negative, ‘the disappointment ...is often severe’, and there are ‘complex emotional reactions involved in such an experience’ (ibid:169), which require sensitive pastoral handling. Though the term ‘non-recommendation’ is intended to convey the specificity of the verdict in relation *only* to ordained ministry, it is commonly experienced as utter rejection – a ‘rejection of the whole self’ (Butler, 1994, Thorp, 1995). This sense of rejection is exacerbated ‘when there is a mismatch between the candidate’s self-image and the image that is fed back from the selectors’. It is an experience described as ‘devastating’, ‘crushing’, ‘the most painful experience I have ever had’ (Butler, 1994: 8 and 3). As Butler notes,

Those in the fall-out zone in the aftermath of non-recommendation may unexpectedly find themselves on the receiving end of uncontrollable rage, or witness the kind of grief more easily associated with sudden death. (ibid:3)

As the *DDO Handbook* (1997a:169) states, ‘The pastoral care of such candidates is, therefore, a sensitive matter and one in which the DDO should be willing to have a crucial part to play’, a part which demands great skill in both listening and ensuring that the recipient has fully understood all that has been imparted. Thorp (2001:118-120) suggests that clear preparation for the possibility of non-recommendation *before* the Selection Conference is essential, with the close involvement of the Vocations Adviser to consider the wider elements of vocation, and the implications of not becoming ordained. She feels it is unrealistic ‘to put the full weight of pastoral care on the diocesan director of ordinands or parish priest’, and sees an on-going role for the Vocations Adviser. The authors of *The Care of Candidates* (ABM, 1997b) suggest the possible involvement of spiritual directors and counsellors to help candidates through the aftermath of non-recommendation. Butler (1994) points to the obvious loss to the Church when people with valuable skills and experience, who are willing to offer their service wholeheartedly, are not positively redirected towards other avenues of ministry.

As *A Climate of Encouragement* (ABM, 2000) asserts, those tasked with the on-going review and development of the system for discerning vocations to priesthood are keen to distil and synthesize the best practice from past experience and from relevant professional fields, such as Human Resource Management, and Advice, Guidance and Counselling. However, such a synthesis can present problems, the theoretical implications of which are considered in the next chapter.

Chapter 3 If You Take My Meaning: hermeneutics and discourse in biographical enquiries

The search for meaning involves meshing a life story with its preoccupations and projects into the communal effort to ensure survival and cultural self-realization of the group.

(Savickas, 1997:3)

The meaning and significance of the ‘preoccupations and projects’ of individual lives can only be fully appreciated in the context of the society in which they are enacted. As Erben (1998:4), asserts, studying human experience not only generates ‘greater insight into the nature and meaning of individual lives or groups of lives’, but has the capacity to elucidate the dynamics of ‘the wider society’, because ‘individual lives are part of a cultural network’. This study examines the ‘nature and meaning’ of a particular type of individual experience (calling to priesthood), as it occurs within the ‘cultural network’ of the Church of England, focusing on the interactions between the individuals concerned (candidates for ordination training) and their assessors. The experiences recorded provide ‘greater insight’ into the operational effects of a particular aspect of the ‘communal effort to ensure survival and cultural self-realization’ (Savickas, 1997:3) of the Anglican priesthood, namely, the system and processes for discerning vocations to ordained ministry.

In biographical studies, this ‘insight’ is gained through an iterative process of data generation, interpretation and enlightenment, in which ‘piled-up structures of inference and implication’ (Geertz, 1973:7) engender ‘thick descriptions’ of life events. This process requires not only factual knowledge about a given life, its events and social setting, but an interpretive sensitivity to the ‘webs of significance’ which we spin, and in which we are all suspended (Geertz, 1973:5). Biographical study is therefore inherently *hermeneutical*, as it aims to interpret human actions and interactions within the context of the world-views and the society in which they are embedded. Here, the term ‘hermeneutic’ recognizes the close involvement of the interpreter, denoting ‘a consciousness that recognizes that interpretive understanding must proceed from one’s own preunderstanding’ (Kögler, 1999:196), and that this must be elucidated for the

effective and ethical pursuit of any biographical enquiry. Since the task of discerning another's vocation to priesthood is essentially a biographical enterprise, with profound implications, it can be argued that a basic understanding of *hermeneutic* principles is essential to the integrity and effectiveness of the discernment process as a whole.

However, since the mutual construction of meaning which constitutes our cultural 'webs of significance' (Geertz, 1973:5) is largely communicated through the signifying properties of language, with its burden of pre-assumptions and associated power structures, awareness of the influence of *discourse* is equally important. In this context, *discourse* refers to 'bodies of ideas, ideologies, or other symbolic formulations...also working attitudes, modes of address, terms of reference, and courses of action suffused into social practice' (Gubrium and Holstein, 2000:493-494). In this chapter, it is argued that an appreciation of the normalising power of discourse in social systems, *combined with* a hermeneutical understanding of the shaping forces of tradition, is required when seeking to explicate the impact of a social system on individual experience - or in this case, to elucidate the point of interface between the internal experience of divine calling and the external processes for discerning and ratifying that call. It is therefore pertinent to consider the implications of both hermeneutics and discourse theories for this study, and the problematic relationship between the two.

Limitations of space and purpose prevent a full review of the wider debates concerning hermeneutics and discourse theories. This chapter, therefore, focuses on the two seminal theorists, Hans Georg Gadamer, and Michel Foucault, and (notwithstanding the objections each would have raised to being yoked together) considers the application of their ideas to the biographical processes in question. First, the implications of Gadamer's conception of *hermeneutics* are examined in relation to this study, then the possibilities and limitations of Foucault's ideas on *discourse* are discussed with respect to the ways the selection process, as a social system, might impact upon those subject to it. Using Kögler's (1999) notion of 'Critical Dialogue', a synthesis of hermeneutics and discourse theories is proposed, not as a defined methodology,

or a prescriptive model for biographical enquiry, but as an aid to the gathering and interpretation of biographical data, which incorporates the best insights of Gadamer and Foucault, while taking cognizance of their inherent contradictions.

Gadamer, Hermeneutics and Biographical Processes

All scholars are caught in the circle of interpretation. They can never be free of the hermeneutical situation. (Denzin, 1989b:23)

Biographical research is, axiomatically, interpretive; 'the hermeneutical investigation of the narrative accounts of lives and selves' (Erben, 1996:160). The facts and events of a life are rendered significant by virtue of the *meanings* imposed on, or interpreted into them, first, by the individuals who tell the story, and second, by those who listen, reformulate it, and pass it on. In turn each interpretation and attribution of meaning influences the formulation of further interpretations to make a 'hermeneutic circle' in which 'the repeated return from the whole to the parts, and vice versa, is essential' (Gadamer, 1996:190) for an authentic portrayal of the life or events in focus.

This involves a reciprocal relationship in which an understanding is reached concerning 'something' (an art-work or text, for example, or in this case, a narrative), where a 'fusion of horizons' (Gadamer, 1960: 305-7) occurs between the interpreter and the object of interpretation, which generates a fresh apprehension of 'the thing' in focus. A hermeneutical approach acknowledges that this new understanding is not a finite, objective entity, but a fluid 'horizon of the present which is continually being formed' (Gadamer, 1960:306) as we continually test and adjust our prior conceptions, in a process where 'the interpreter's meaning enters in as well' (ibid:576). This circularity and reciprocity makes defining the boundaries of interpretation (its beginnings and endings) difficult, and necessitates 'a kind of "leap" into the hermeneutical circle [so that] we understand the whole and the parts together...to operate at all, the hermeneutical circle assumes an element of intuition' (Palmer, 1969:87). In this intuitive-interpretive sense, discernment of religious vocation is a truly hermeneutical activity, since it involves a complex encounter between multiple horizons. The particularities of a person's spiritual experience need to

be understood in relation to their contextual setting and the broader aspects of the life, but in the final analysis the act of *discernment* itself is an intuitive leap.¹

A major constituent of the process of discerning priestly vocation is *conversation*, which Gadamer (1996) conceived in the same light as written texts, where the interplay between the 'text' and the reader is 'dialogical'. Thus, if the narrative of a lived experience (whether presented orally or in writing) is construed as a 'text' (Erben, 1996:160), it may be similarly interrogated. But the knowledge derived therefrom can only ever be partial and perspectival; a life, like a work of art, is unique, mysterious, never fully understandable by another. As Gadamer (1996:43) says,

The work of art distinguishes itself in that one never completely understands it. That is to say, when one approaches it questioningly, one never obtains a final answer that one 'knows'. Nor does one take from it relevant information, and that takes care of that!

Hence, the whole business of attempting to discern a vocation to priesthood could appear misguided, in hermeneutical terms, since it assumes the possibility of understanding the text of a life at a deep level, of *knowing* (at least, in relation to the call of God). 'Relevant information' is taken and (for many ordination candidates), that does indeed 'take care of that'. The ultimate answer is very final, despite the Church's acknowledgement that 'wherever there is interpretation, there is also the possibility of misinterpretation. How, then, can I be sure... that I, or you, or we, have rightly discerned God's will?' (ACCM, 1989:8).

Although hermeneutics alone cannot solve this conundrum, application of its principles can help mitigate potentially negative effects arising from the interpreter's subjectivity, by exposing and questioning unconscious attitudes.

¹ It is noteworthy, here, that contemporary hermeneutics evolved from Schleiermacher's approach to theology in the early nineteenth century, which emphasised the role of feeling and intuition in religious experience and the interpretation of scripture.

Gadamer's (1960) inter-related concepts of the *hermeneutical circle* and the *historically effected consciousness* are particularly useful in this respect, both being (theoretically) operative in biographical study generally, and in the processes of discernment of vocation, in particular. Accumulated interpretations from a variety of data sources build upon one another to generate progressively refined understandings of the lives/experiences in question. Auto/biographical research draws not only on interview data supplied by participants, but on a whole raft of supplementary data supplied by other 'key personnel', literature, observation, audio and video data, and so forth. Similarly, in the process of discerning priestly vocations, candidates undergo a series of interviews and assessment procedures which should generate increasingly 'refined understandings' in an iterative, circular movement between the whole and the parts of the process. However, hermeneutical investigation is more than merely accumulating evidence; it is a matter of 'knowing differently' (Usher, 1996:19), of developing a new perspective on a matter. But, unless the intra-subjective quality of this hermeneutical circle is brought into conscious awareness and interrogated, the accuracy and refinement of the 'different knowing' may be questionable.

As Kögler (1999) observes, the hermeneutical circle is inescapably grounded in preunderstandings that are formed by tradition, and Gadamer's emphasis on the 'situatedness' of understanding highlights the way it is 'oriented by the concerns and vantage point of the observer' (Warnke, 1987:73). This, Gadamer acknowledges (1960), presupposes a certain degree of prejudice and subjectivity, but he challenges the negative connotations of 'prejudice' as being themselves products of a prejudice born of Enlightenment obsessions with 'objectivity' (ibid:270). Prejudice, he believes, must be accepted as an inevitable product of tradition and heritage. In this, Gadamer is not suggesting that the *effects* of prejudice should be dismissed as irrelevant, neither does he advocate a phenomenological stance requiring "neutrality" with respect to content [or] the extinction of one's self' (Gadamer, 1960:269). Rather, he proposes a 'fore-grounding and appropriation of one's own fore-meanings and prejudices' (ibid.) as a foundational premise for interpretation.

Gadamer suggests that if held in conscious awareness, such ‘pre-judices’ simply become ‘pre-judgements...made before all the evidence has been adequately assessed’ (Warnke, 1987:76). From this perspective, scope remains for later re-evaluations and corrections, weighing preconceived ideas in the light of current evidence and interpretive possibilities. ‘The important thing’, he says, ‘is to be aware of one’s own bias, so that the text can present itself in all its otherness and thus assert its own truth against one’s own fore-meanings’ (Gadamer, 1960:269). Those seeking to apprehend the experience of others, whether as researchers, or in specific roles such as Bishop’s Selector, must therefore be prepared to examine their own prior assumptions, to develop a ‘historical consciousness’ which ‘is aware of its own otherness’ (ibid:306), and its formative traditions, being thereby enabled to discern and ‘foreground’ horizons different from their own.

Notwithstanding Gadamer’s arguments for the potentially positive aspect of prejudice in providing a preliminary ground of ‘pre-judgement’, a negative connotation of bias and subjectivity remains. Gadamer’s (1960) response is not entirely convincing: despite his assertion of the inherently practical nature of hermeneutics (‘Hermeneutics is above all a practice’, he says in Hahn, 1996:17), he fails to define exactly *how* one dissects the helpful effects of personal prejudice from the potentially harmful (Warnke, 1987). Part of his answer is that the accumulated wisdom of history and tradition counterbalances the arbitrariness of individual subjective interpretation: Warnke explains Gadamer’s position thus:

Historical experience limits the potential arbitrariness of my understanding for, in so far as my understanding of a given object is rooted in a whole history of interpretations of that object, I am protected from an entirely idiosyncratic interpretation of it...the force and influence of prejudice and tradition constrain the willfulness of a purely “subjective” interpretation. (Warnke, 1987:80-81)

This would be the position taken by many discernment and selection personnel, in relation to the authority of ecclesiastical tradition, but Foucault (1969:166) vigorously refuted this understanding, regarding the assumption of historical coherence as no more than ‘a heuristic rule’. The literature review in the

previous chapter tends to support Foucault, indicating that the ordering force of tradition may bolster rather than constrain 'subjective interpretation'.

Geertz (1973:89) describes the pervasive power of this need to perceive order, defining 'world-view' as 'the picture [people] have of the way things in sheer actuality are, their most comprehensive idea of order'. Tradition has a profound impact on world-view (in respect of gender or churchmanship, for example), and exerts a force over those who belong to it, 'so that even in rejecting or reacting to it they remain conditioned by it' (Warnke, 1987:79). A *historically effected consciousness* (Gadamer, 1960) is required to explicate the effects of tradition; a 'self-understanding', which means more than 'turning oneself into an object, but in German idiom, "knowing one's way around" a certain matter' (Weinsheimer & Marshall, 1999:xvii), in this case, one's religious-cultural identity.

Every encounter with tradition that takes place within historical consciousness involves the experience of a tension between the text [the other] and the present. The hermeneutic task consists in not covering up this tension by attempting a naïve assimilation of the two but in consciously bringing it out. (Gadamer, 1960:306)

Searching introspection is required to assess the implications of one's heritage and its power to shape ideas and expectations, and thereby, experience, and to apprehend its profound influence on one's interpretation of the experience and meaning of others.

The problem remains, however, that despite prior self-reflection, the *initial* assumptions in any dialogue are - almost inevitably - unconscious until the hermeneutical processes of understanding another's experience begins. The interpreter is enclosed in a 'certain "conceptual prison"...a principally determinate and delimited space for thought, discourse, and experience' (Kögler, 1999:93). The only way to overcome this is to be what Kögler (1999:27) terms 'dialogically open': in the hermeneutical enterprise of interpreting human experience, 'what one has to exercise above all is the ear, the sensitivity for perceiving prior determinations, anticipations, and imprints that reside in concepts' (Gadamer, 1996:17). In the enterprise of discernment

of vocation, individual usage and meaning of concepts such as 'leadership', 'spirituality', 'quality of mind', or 'vocation' itself, which constitute criteria against which candidates are assessed (ABM, 1993), need elucidating.

Despite Gadamer's assertions to the contrary (Gadamer, 1960:306), the practical outcome of his hermeneutic approach is that it tends to integrate the other person's meaning into the interpreter's self-understanding and world-view, the 'will to judgement' always privileging the prejudgments of the interpreter (Kögler, 1999:161). Thus, Gadamer's concept of a 'fusion of horizons' is, ironically, untenable methodologically in that his endeavour to work out the '*commonality between other and self*' (Kögler, 1999:144) actually undermines his intention of achieving fresh perspectives; the danger is that the other appears only as a projection of oneself. As Holloway (1997:5-5) notes,

We see, not necessarily what is there, but what we observe; and what we observe is always affected by who we are and by the width of the lens through which we gaze.

Our own pre-understanding should not 'be taken as the harmonious-coherent (back)ground of truth, the validity of which we fully accept so long as nothing is proved to the contrary' (Kögler, 1999:200). This stance, as Kögler says, is 'practically unavoidable', but it is a dangerous premise to hold when confronting another's meaning in any form of biographical enquiry, because of our tendency to assume that other people are the same as ourselves, and measure their 'rationality' by the extent to which they share our assumptions. It is essential, therefore, to adopt a sceptical posture towards these assumptions, especially in a field of biographical enquiry which has an *evaluative* intention, such as assessing suitability for a job or role.

Gadamer (1996:26), himself, condemns all approaches which insufficiently reflect upon their ideological assumptions, even those underlying a 'critique of ideology'.² He identifies the 'broader dimension' in which all pre-assumptions, paradigms and ideologies are embedded, as the 'fundamental

² In a direct attack on the French 'post-structuralists', Gadamer names Derrida, but by association Foucault could be implicated in his criticism.

linguisticity of human beings.’ Here, he is not referring to language merely as an objective entity, a collection of signifying words; ‘language’, he says, ‘is a medium, an element’, it is ‘the element in which we live, as fishes live in water’, the element which gives form and shape to understanding (Gadamer, 1996:22). In emphasising this amorphous, pervasive quality of language, however, Gadamer opens hermeneutics to the accusation of ‘groundlessness’, and endless circularity in which the ‘inherent arbitrariness of interpretation’ is revealed (Dreyfus and Rabinow, 1982:107).

Hermeneutics, according to Foucault (1967:189), fails because ‘interpretation is a never-ending task...because, when all is said and done, underneath it all everything is interpretation’. For Foucault, the determining force of our history is constituted in ‘relations of *power*, not relations of meaning’ (Foucault, 1976:116, italics added), an issue which Gadamer’s approach fails to address. If a genuine understanding is to be attained on which to base judgements in biographical study generally, or in the particulars of discerning another’s religious vocation, it seems inescapable that attention must be paid not only to the inherent hermeneutical implications, but also to the ideologies which govern the dialogical transactions and impact on the experiences of those involved - in other words, to *discourse* (McLeod, 1999).

Despite the theoretical antagonism of Gadamer’s and Foucault’s approaches to social enquiry, Kögler (1999: viii) identifies in them a fundamental inter-relatedness, when he says,

If hermeneutic reflection on the premises of interpretation is pushed far enough,...the social sources of meaning and understanding – thus the question of power as well – becomes unavoidable for hermeneutics itself. Alternatively, if social critique is to be pursued in an adequate and methodically reflective manner, the ineluctable situatedness of every possible critique within a specifically shaped cultural preunderstanding must be taken into account conceptually.

His notion of ‘Critical Dialogue’ (examined later in this chapter) is an attempt to synthesise hermeneutics and discourse in social enquiry, but before this can be considered the implications of Foucault’s conceptualisations of discourse

must be explored, for biography and the processes of discerning priestly vocations.

Discourse is described by Dant (1991:99) as both ‘an empirical phenomenon recognizable without a particular theory, and at the same time a theoretical object that is amenable to analysis’. The position taken in this study veers towards the first definition in the sense that the ‘empirical phenomenon’ of discourse in the discernment processes needs to be explicated, but the full rigours of linguistic discourse analysis would be neither possible, nor appropriate to the purpose of this research.

Roberts (2002:119) criticises the utilisation of discourse theory in biographical research, partly because it has certain methodological connotations – which, as stated above, are not implied in this study - and partly because, ‘where discourse analysis draws on Foucault...there is an underlying socio-political theory concerning the conditions and nature of power relations’. While it is agreed that a methodological focus on ‘specific instances of language use as reflecting discourse’ (Roberts, 2002:119) can detract from the overall meaning and significance of biographical experience, in this study some attention to the effects of discourse is necessary precisely because of the implications of the power-relations inherent in an overtly hierarchical and political process, such as that for discerning priestly vocations in the Church of England. Further, it is my contention that an understanding of the power-relations inherent in the biographical research process itself is essential to the ethical pursuit of the study.

Foucault, Discourse and the Discernment System

Discourses, in Foucault’s conception are ‘diverse and elastic ways of talking about the world’ (Bevir, 1999:348); they are ‘the means through which a field “speaks” of itself to itself’ (Danaher *et al*, 2000:33); they define a group in relation to fields outside it, from which it distinguishes itself (Danaher *et al*, 2000:36), creating the ‘them and us’ scenario. Discourse ‘plays a major role in the operations’ (Kögler, 1999:96) of given fields of human interaction because it shapes the governing concepts, the shared ideas of ‘truth’ which, in a reflexive

loop, are used to validate and perpetuate the discourses – political parties or professional bodies are prime examples. Even within groups or organisations, sub-divisions, departments, committees, and such like can differentiate themselves discursively from the organisation at large. The Church is one such example, having its own defining discourses which separate it from the secular world, but within the institution there are multiple sub-discourses associated with, and defining, different departments and groups.

The Ministry Division of the Church of England is a department differentiated from the rest of the organisation by its own set of discourses associated with education, psychology, guidance, management, recruitment, and selection practices, discourses which cross the secular-religious divide, linking the work of the Ministry Division to professional discourses outside the Church in ways which are often not clearly apprehended (ABM, 2000). These discourses affect the manner in which those involved in discerning vocations to ministry communicate and understand one another, how they conceive of different aspects of the system, how they design and operate it, and how they ultimately evaluate it.

The Report, *A Climate of Encouragement* (ABM, 2000:2) raises concern that terminology belonging to secular professional practices may lead the Church into a foreign ‘world of meaning’, which is not necessarily appropriate. A prime example is the seminal phrase ‘discernment of vocation’, which elides disparate functions in a multi-faceted process. On the one hand, *discernment* belongs to the discursive world of pastoral care and spiritual direction, or, in a broader sense, the field of vocational advice and guidance, all of which are focused on the needs, feelings, experiences and aspirations of the *individual*. On the other hand, *selection* for ordination training belongs to the world of human resource management, which is *organisation*-centred. The *Review of Selection Procedures* (ABM, 1995) acknowledged this in highlighting the need for the selection function to be differentiated from the pastoral function. The continued conflation of discourses is evident, however, in the *Handbook of Selectors* (ABM, 1996:2), when the authors state that, ‘*Selectors* are asked to undertake the work of *discernment* on behalf of the Body of Christ’ (italics added).

Pastoral discourses compete, potentially, with managerial ones, the person-centred vies with the organisation-centred, while the whole is enmeshed in the spiritual-secular dichotomy.

The problem with co-opting multiple discourses into anomalous situations is that what is considered meaningful in each discourse is based on differing, possibly opposing, views of what is 'valid' (Reid, 2002:53). The Church's criteria for *Leadership and Collaboration*, for example, which were added at the 1993 revision of the Selection Criteria, in order 'to take account of shifts in emphasis required by current patterns and needs in ministry' (ABM, 1996b:1), are highly influenced by contemporary management discourses, as evidenced in current debates about priesthood (see for example, 'Ministry', Vol. 2, Ed. 9, Summer 2001). However, this presents ideological difficulties for selection personnel or candidates who perceive priesthood as quintessentially pastoral, and feel that secular ideas of leadership are not 'valid' in relation to priestly vocations.

Understandings of 'truth' or 'validity' in given contexts are, according to Foucault, self-justifying and self-perpetuating through a feed-back mechanism which he termed a 'game of truth'. He defined this as 'a set of procedures that lead to a certain result, which, on the basis of its principles and rules of procedures, may be considered valid or invalid' (Foucault, 1984:297). The system for discerning vocations to ministry could, therefore, in Foucauldian terms, be viewed as 'a game of truth', particularly as it so aptly fits his conceptualisation of *truth* (which he emphasised was a proposition, not an assertion):

"Truth" is to be understood as a system of ordered procedures for the production, regulation, distribution, articulation, and operation of statements.
(Foucault, 1976:132)

This mechanism is observable in the history of the selection processes for ordination, whereby it became accepted 'truth' that certain qualities (white, male, middle-class, educated) were necessary for priesthood in the Church of England, so only people with those qualities were ordained. These people were

later involved in devising systems for selecting and training other similar people, thus perpetuating the underlying 'truth statements', ad infinitum.

Foucault's term 'statement' designates more than a grammatical entity, referring to the very particular meaning deriving from the statement's context, or its 'enunciative field', every statement being 'always part of a network of statements' (Foucault, 1969:111). Thus, the particular statements associated with the discerning of priestly vocations are connected to a set of other statements concerning psychometric assessment, selection interviewing, group facilitation and so forth, while the entire procedure is suspended in a wider web of theological and ecclesiological statements.

Foucault draws attention to the relationship between 'truth statements', and the power of symbol and imagery to construct discourse and define social reality for those involved. Freeman (2000:128-9) demonstrates this mechanism in a pertinent example concerning the all-pervasive symbol of the mono-theistic God, whose perceived masculinity 'has shaped the domestic and political structures of the societies that believe in *Him*', and has certainly shaped ideas concerning Christian priesthood. Walsh (2001:166), quoting Robson (1988), describes the powerful effects of 'truth statements' in relation to the ordination of women:

Women in the Church...[historically] appeared to have been evaluated according to a set of vocational norms, emphasising 'service', 'self-giving', 'self-effacement', 'empowerment of others', and *lack* of interest in worldly forms of wealth and prestige, while men were judged according to a set of middle-class professional norms, stressing 'status', 'preferment', 'stipends', 'job-descriptions', etc.

The problem with 'truth statements', which form the foundational knowledge of discourses, is that the underlying epistemologies and their assumptions have become so accepted that they are no longer visible or readily examinable, and are therefore rarely questioned. One example of this dynamic is given by Walsh (ibid.), who believes that 'differently gendered lexical sets have persisted into the post-ordination period' (ibid.), causing women to exchange 'exclusion and subordination for marginalisation'. Although it falls beyond the remit of this

thesis to fully excavate the ‘discursive formations and events that have created the fields of knowledge and games of truth by which [the Church] has governed itself’ (Danaher *et al.*, 2000:36), awareness of their existence is necessary because of the profound impact they may have on assessments of candidates’ suitability for ordained ministry, an impact rendered all the more powerful by the covert, and often ambiguous nature of the underlying statements. Research by Francis and Robbins (1996:28) illustrates this, finding that ‘implicitly or explicitly the selection procedures seem...to value feminine personality characteristics in male clergy and to value masculine characteristics in female clergy’. The discrepancy between this and findings from earlier research (eg. Robson, 1988) suggests that changes in the ‘field of knowledge’ are generating contradictory ‘truth statements’ in a transitional period, which makes discernment of vocation all the more fraught, and understanding of the underlying assumptions all the more important.

In Foucault’s view *truth* appears to be synonymous with *knowledge*, a ‘field of knowledge’, by definition, excluding those not party to its specific knowledge/truth basis, thereby having (in some measure) the effect of *power* (Dant, 1991). Power is therefore implicated in all attempts to know, making the will to truth ‘already a will-to-power’ (Merquior, 1991:108), its effects being manifest in the intimate relationship between knowledge and ‘regimes of truth’ (Usher, 1996:36). Foucault (1976:132) defined a ‘regime of truth’ as:

a circular relation with systems of power that produce and sustain it [truth], and the effects of power which it [truth] induces and which extend it.

All job/role selection systems make claims to at least a degree of ‘truth’, of ‘knowing’ in their final analysis, who is and is not suitable for a particular post, and power is implicated in that selectors’ accounts of ‘truth’ are necessarily privileged over that of candidates. When this is set in the hierarchical context of the Church of England’s discernment system, which could in Foucauldian terms be construed as a ‘game of truth’ set within an institutional ‘regime of truth’, the multi-layering of the system incrementally increases the power imbalances, with the weight (and power) of ‘truth’ resting almost entirely with the discernment authorities (cf. Percy, 1996).

Reid (2002:54) provides a useful description of the interaction between discourse (truth statements) and power:

Discourses are the means by which power is propagated and the means by which power is legitimised. In this we recognise that some discourses are more powerful than others, both in terms of their significance for the individual and the way they validate a particular view of the world over another... These more powerful discourses tend to be viewed as universal understandings of the way things are, and should be, whereas they are located within a particular cultural or institutional context.

Foucault (1981) hypothesised that truth/knowledge and power effectively work together to categorise people (for example as 'normal' or 'deviant') in a dynamic he termed 'biopower'. The potential for injury to the subordinate, or excluded (ie. 'abnormal') party is self-evident, and is exacerbated where the full significance of the power interests is not acknowledged (Foucault, 1976). Of concern in any type of biographical enquiry is the extent to which the inherent power relations are open to examination and, if necessary, challenge (including the research process itself). If a system set up to evaluate people's life experience and character is not open to challenge from those subject to it, as is the case with the selection process for ordination training, then the power vested in the selection authorities becomes absolute.

However, not all power is necessarily negative in effect; it can be productive, and generative of change, coming from below as well as from the above. Power 'needs to be seen as a productive network which runs through the whole social body, much more than as a negative instance whose function is repression' (Foucault, 1976:120). Foucault came to see power as 'a general matrix of force relations at a given time, in a given society', a matrix which enmeshes all those involved in that society in ways they do not control 'in any simple sense' (Dreyfus and Rabinow, 1982:186).

We must not understand the exercise of power as pure violence or strict coercion. Power consists in complex relations: these relations involve a set of rational techniques, and the efficiency of those techniques is due to a subtle integration of coercion-technologies and self-technologies. (Foucault, 1980:162-163)

In this Foucault identifies the essential reciprocity in power relations. On the one hand lies the social necessity to exercise power (in management, for

example, or recruitment and selection), and the individual pleasure in so doing (for good or ill). On the other hand lie the responses which make power effective – collusion or co-operation, active resistance or passive resentment, or simply fear (Jamieson, 1997), some or all of which might appear in a process such as discernment of vocation to ministry.

These ideas led to what Dreyfus and Rabinow (1982:187) identify as Foucault's 'most provocative proposal about power', namely, that its operation is always calculated and intentional. They contend that the logic he discerns in the practices of power is problematic insofar as he talks abstractly of intentionality without an identified intender, and strategies of power without a strategist; a 'push towards a strategic objective, but no-one is pushing' (ibid.). Foucault's conceptualisation of power is 'extraordinarily diffusive; ... profoundly pessimistic;...[and] points to the endless fragmentation of power' (Jamieson, 1997:11). However, in a conversation with Dreyfus and Rabinow, Foucault sought to clarify his viewpoint on this amorphous social phenomenon: 'People know what they do [*calculated*]; they frequently know why they do what they do [*intentional*]; but what they don't know is what what they do does [*diffusive*]' (Dreyfus and Rabinow, 1982:187, italics added). This describes a fundamental problem concerning many interactions in the fields of vocational guidance and human resource selection, generally. Practitioners are usually clear about what they do and why, but are often less clear about the social impact of the assumptions which underlie their words and actions (cf. Usher and Edwards, 1998, Colley, 2000). As *A Climate of Encouragement* (ABM, 2000:17) intimates, the same problem affects personnel involved with discernment of vocation to ministry, since the words used 'are not understood in the same way by all concerned'.

Fraser (1981) highlights a major flaw in Foucault's thinking, one which draws a clear differentiation with Gadamer's (1996) hermeneutics: namely, Foucault claims 'normative neutrality'. Fraser (1981:230) argues that

[Foucault] fails to appreciate the degree to which the normative is embedded in and infused through language at *every* level and the degree to which, despite himself, his own critique has to make use of

modes of description, interpretation, and judgement formed within the modern western normative tradition.

The root of this flaw lies in Foucault's apparent belief that he, as observer, could 'bracket' his own world-view out of the study, and that social norms 'can be neatly isolated and excised from the larger cultural and linguistic matrix in which they are situated' (Fraser, 1981:30), a view which undermines his assertion of the pre-eminence of context and the 'enunciative field'. If the *normative* effects of the discourses which frame the outlooks of both observer and observed are dismissed as irrelevant, it is possible for the former to similarly dismiss the effects of his or her own cultural ties, and indeed, to refute any links between him or herself and the society or individual observed. This stance has the potential to undermine any biographical enquiry, in that it ignores the impact of the enquirer's own worldview on the interpretations made, both during the dialogue itself, and in framing the subsequent conclusions.

Kögler (1999) amplifies this criticism in relation to Foucault's methodological approach to explaining the content of 'discursive events' through the exposure and analysis of 'truth statements'. This approach fails to demonstrate how such statements may be uncovered and understood *without recourse to our own pre-understandings*, firstly, of the overall event, and secondly, of the content of the statements, since pre-understanding is the only (initial) reference point available to us. In assuming a neutral stance, 'the subjective side of meaning' is placed in abeyance, which leaves Foucauldian analysis standing 'within a space of bewildered irrelevance' (Kögler, 1999:193-4). Further, Foucault's approach runs the risk of reducing the breadth and subtlety of meaning in experience to power alone (Kögler, 1999), erroneously 'conveying the sense that discourses fully detail the nuances of everyday life' (Gubrium and Holstein, 2000:501). In the study of human experience, however, 'a more interrelationally sensitive analytics of discourse' is required, which acknowledges that people 'build up their shared realities in diverse, locally nuanced, and biographically informed terms' (ibid.). In other words, an understanding of the inter-relationship between

hermeneutics and discourse is necessary, in which '*meaning*, not power, [is] the fundamental concept' (Kögler, 1999:175).

Just as *hermeneutics* fails to explicate the power relations in dialogical events, so also *discourse* analysis fails to explicate how the power relations it uncovers are experienced and interpreted by those involved. Discourse theory fails to explain or account for the *values* and *significance* people assign to their understanding of symbols, events, experience and power; this requires a 'hermeneutic perspective' (Kögler, 1999:175). Kögler challenges Foucault's theory of discourse as being insufficiently 'immanent' and not admitting of the 'projection of meaning and being' which is 'inherent in every discourse' (1999:97-8).

Discourse theory has to be a hybrid: it is productive only if it gets at the tension between the immanent understanding of self and being, and actual social power relations' (ibid.).

By this argument, discourse theory, in its Foucauldian conception, would appear to invalidate the aim of biographical research, which is to 'explore, through the analysis of individual lives, the relationship between social forces and personal character' (Erben, 1996:159); each is *immanent* in the other, and the study of their relationship is literally 'meaning-ful'.

Notwithstanding these criticisms of Foucault's approach, an appreciation of the *effects* of discourse in social interactions remains essential to a rounded understanding of biographical experience. However, a hermeneutical understanding of the identity-forming role of tradition and culture is equally necessary. How then are the two approaches to be fruitfully synthesised, when, as is 'commonly assumed...hermeneutics and discourse analysis are irreconcilably opposed' (Kögler, 1999:195)? Each has limitations in relation to biographical study: discourse analysis tends to neglect the impact of individual subjectivity and autonomy on social relationships and their analysis, while hermeneutics over-emphasises the role of inter-subjectivity in generating mutual understanding of social phenomena, while underplaying the effects of personal bias. Both Gadamer and Foucault tend towards a 'tragic conception' (Kögler, 1999:13) of social reality, the former in his view of the shaping force of

tradition, and the latter in his understanding of the determining power of discourse. In any form of biographical enquiry which examines the interaction between individuals and social processes an approach which knowingly and appropriately synthesises the best insights of both hermeneutics and discourse theories will facilitate a more integrated representation of human experience.

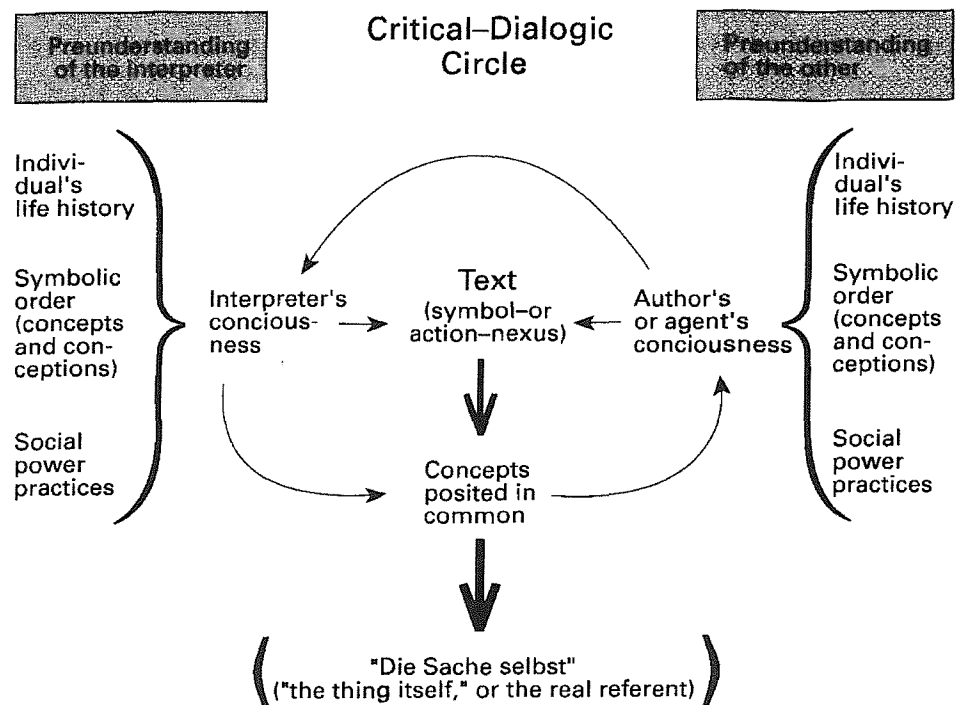
Kögler and The Power of Dialogue

The problem, as Kögler defines it, is to steer a pathway between, on the one hand, ‘the liberating, problematizing, innovative, and unpredictable potential of conversation, which is capable of leading us to new insights and critical self-reflection through experiencing the other’, and, on the other hand, the effects of power in an interaction, which tend to constrain open discussion, effectively ‘undermining the critical dimension of dialogue’ (Kögler, 1999:1). This latter problem, which tends to be ignored in Gadamer’s hermeneutical approach, has the potential to compromise biographical research in general, and most certainly pertains in the hierarchical processes of discernment of vocation. The solution Kögler proposes is a ‘methodological mediation’ which he calls *critical dialogue*. This is:

an attempt to fuse conceptually the analytical tools offered by discourse analysis...with the insights that hermeneutics has gleaned with respect to the nature of pre-understanding and the dialogic character of interpretation. (Kögler, 1999:2)

His thesis brings an interpretive element to discourse which Foucault would have rejected, but Kogler believes ‘discourse analysis can be defended and made strong only by first clarifying how such analysis is linked to our preunderstanding’ (Kögler, 1999:196). His conceptualisation of *preunderstanding* is much broader than Gadamer’s, since he incorporates not only the ‘individual’s life history’ and linguistic modes of expression, but also the ‘social power practices’ in which personal experience is embedded. He represents the ‘reciprocal interplay’ (1999:83) between the full gamut of the interpretive premises of both parties in the dialogue as a cyclical movement which he terms the ‘Critical-Dialogic (or Critical-Hermeneutic) Circle’ (1999: 171), depicted in Figure 1, over-leaf.

Figure 1: Kögler's Critical-Dialogic Circle
 (by permission of Hans Herbert Kögler and MIT Press)



Although Kögler's proposition incorporates some linguistic aspects of discourse analysis which are not utilised in this study, his integration of life history and symbolic conceptions with social power practices is highly pertinent. If the concept of *vocation*, which is central to this thesis, is taken as a working example, the manner in which an individual conceptualises *vocation* is shaped by personal, social and cultural history, which in turn influences the way 'calling' is experienced and expressed (as part of the person's 'symbolic order'). These aspects of individual consciousness concerning vocation and calling are further defined (or confined) by 'social power practices', for example, in respect of gender, class or ethnicity. Kögler proposes that the full range of *preunderstandings* which constitute the world-views of both the 'interpreter' and the 'other' be brought to awareness - *foregrounded* - so that the ideas and conceptualisations held by each (concerning vocation, leadership, or spirituality, for example) may be mutually posited. This provides a 'bridgehead' (or 'nexus'), enabling the interpreter 'to gain access to other conceptions and to new concepts linked to these conceptions' (Kögler, 1999:172), thus engendering fresh understandings of 'the thing itself' (the experience of calling to ordained ministry, perhaps). Kögler suggests that in

crossing this bridgehead into the world-view of the other, the possibility exists for us, as interpreters, to 'gain distance from our own customary assumptions' and perceive our own perspectives in a fresh light.

Critical hermeneutics enables the biographer to enter into an interpretive dialogue with another's meaning in a manner which is at once more inclusive and more equal than is possible with Gadamer's hermeneutic model. No 'fusion of horizons' (Gadamer, 1960) is sought between our own and the other's world-view, but rather, our bilateral 'otherness' ('alterity') is utilised to generate both '*a different experience of ourselves*', and an apprehension of the other's world as if standing in their shoes, but without 'recasting [their] experience in our own terms – as though it were in need of being overcome' (Kögler, 1999:212, original italics). Kögler argues for a 'process of radical self-distanciation' (ibid:169), whereby the interpreter's otherness is foregrounded (as far as possible) in such a way as to crystallise it for inspection and critique, while according *equal* status to the other person's world-view, thus allowing new horizons of understanding to emerge, which maintain the 'alterity' and integrity of each.

To be truly effective the process of uncovering and evaluating pre-understandings needs to be reciprocal, if it is to undermine the potentially prejudicial power relations in situations of biographical enquiry.

Indeed, the logic of critical dialogue consists in a *reciprocal* process of clarifying and making conscious implicit historical-cultural assumptions – a process that can lead to self-distanciation, power critiques, and the formation of new, reflectively aware concepts.

(Kögler, 1999:172)

Kögler's concept of 'Critical Dialogue' facilitates this reciprocity, enabling the other (be this research participant or ordination candidate) to apprehend the meanings which the interpreter (researcher or selector) is gleaning from the interchange, giving opportunity through dialogue to correct misconceptions, explain, amplify or clarify understandings. Without this, the implicit (or, in the case of selection personnel, explicit) authority of the interpreter stands to privilege his or her judgements in a unilateral and dominant manner.

Kögler's approach is not without difficulties, however, as the clarity of his theories appear less certain in practice. He argues lucidly against the colonising potential of the interpreter's preunderstanding, which is inherent in Gadamer's hermeneutics, but is unclear how his aim of 'los[ing] ourselves in the other's context' (Kögler, 1999:172) maintains the 'alterity' of the interpreter. Taken to its logical conclusion, 'losing ourselves in the other's context' could result in a kind of 'introjection' (Clarkson, 1989), whereby 'the other's' viewpoint is absorbed wholesale by the interpreter. This would be highly problematic in any biographical study, but Kögler aims to mitigate the risk of any form of introjection or projection, first by acknowledging the danger, and secondly by consciously attributing equal status to the world-view of 'the other'. Although this proposition may be theoretically admirable, in practice it fails to address the reality of the power imbalance which always tends to favour the interpreter's viewpoint.

Like Fraser (1981), Kögler criticises the extreme phenomenology of Foucault's discourse theory, because it proposes 'normative neutrality' in the observer. However, Kögler's concept of 'radical self-distanciation' sounds little different, as he fails to define how the effects of power vested in one's own belief system may be exposed, since, as he admits, they 'operate behind the back of *one's own* preunderstanding' (Kögler, 1999:229). The extent to which Kögler's *Critical Hermeneutics* enables the researcher to 'gain distance from [his or her] customary assumptions', critique potential power relations, and form 'new, reflectively aware concepts' (Kögler, 1999:172) is therefore questionable. Foucault (1976) would have greeted the notion of 'critical dialogue' with scepticism, since he regarded dialogue (however critical) as an evasion of the truth about the real effects of power. As he comments,

"Dialectic" is a way of evading the always open and hazardous reality of conflict...and avoiding its violent, bloody, and lethal character by reducing it to the calm Platonic form of language and dialogue.
(Foucault, 1976:116)

This danger undoubtedly exists in the 'calm Platonic' language of academic writing, such as Kögler's, or indeed, this thesis. As Foucault states, this can be an evasion of the harsh realities of conflict, and is a mechanism often visible in

the formal language of assessment and evaluation, of which Selectors' reports on ordination candidates are an example.

In spite of the inherent flaws in Kögler's proposition, application of the underpinning principles and intentions of *Critical Hermeneutics* could enrich any biographical research in fields where power structures come into play. First and foremost, Kögler's approach provides a means of critically synthesising the two important but divergent theories of hermeneutics and discourse analysis, to generate a more integrated apprehension of both *meaning* and the influences of *power* in individual experience. In this respect, *Critical Hermeneutics* counterbalances the current tendency in biographical research to focus on hermeneutics rather than discourse theory, redressing the balance by taking account of the shaping forces of both *history* and *social power practices*.

Kögler's approach is intrinsically democratic in its endeavour to mitigate the power imbalances characteristic of all interpretive situations. In particular, *Critical Hermeneutics* has, I believe, value for any biographical enquiry with an evaluative element (such discernment of vocation to ministry) because it promotes and legitimises open self-reflection on the part of the enquirer (researcher, or discernor of vocations). This helps to expose unconscious attitudes which might otherwise be imposed on 'the other' (data or person).

Fontana and Frey (1998:47) note the difficulty of conveying adequately another person's experience, because language 'has always a residue of ambiguity, no matter how carefully we word the questions and report or code the answers'. Much of the problem lies in the knotty entanglement of the Self of the researcher, and the Other of the participant, which Fine (1998:135) identifies as 'the hyphen' where the essence of the interpretive relationship lies.

Qualitative researchers are always implicated at the hyphen. When we opt, as has been the tradition, simply to write *about* those who have been Othered, we deny the hyphen. Slipping into a contradictory discourse of individualism, personalogic theorizing, and decontextualization, we inscribe the Other, strain to white out self, and refuse to engage the contradictions that litter our texts.

Kögler's *Critical-Dialogic Circle* does not 'strain to white out self', but 'works the hyphen' to help the biographical researcher 'engage the contradictions' (ibid.) of human experience (a point which Kögler may have tacitly acknowledged in choosing Paul Klee's painting, entitled 'Dispute', for the cover of his book).

The above theorisation has highlighted a number of concerns relating to the social processes in focus. These can be summarised as the effects of *pre-understandings* in biographical enquiries, the operation of *discourse*, particularly the implications of competing discourses, and the effects of *power-relations* in the discernment system. The participants' narratives, which are presented in Chapter 5, reveal the ways in which these issues, together with those raised by the previous review of the field, related to their actual experiences of discernment of vocation to priesthood. However, before presenting these narratives, the next chapter considers the methodology and methods employed to generate data in this research.

Chapter 4 Full Circle: methodology and methods in biographical research

*What we call the beginning is often the end
And to make an end is to make a beginning.
The end is where we start from...*

With the drawing of this Love and the voice of this Calling

*We shall not cease from exploration
And the end of all our exploring
Will be to arrive back where we started
And know the place for the first time*

T.S. Eliot, 'Little Gidding', from 'Four Quartets' ¹

Biographical study is frequently initiated by an ending of some kind; events are, necessarily, reviewed retrospectively. This study began with the ending of my friend's candidature for ordination training.

The famous section of Eliot's poem, quoted above, holds a peculiar resonance with the topic of this study, but beyond this, his astute observation effectively captures the hermeneutical circularity of biographical study in general, where 'hermeneutics' is concerned with 'letting that which is far and alienated speak again not only in a new voice but in a clearer voice' (Rissler, 1992:398). Experience which may seem to the observer 'far and alienated' (ibid.) is, in reality, lived as part of a 'cultural network' (Erben, 1998:4), and therefore information gained from studying that experience can contribute to the 'understanding of the wider society' (ibid.). The candidates' stories shed new light on the system for discerning vocations to priestly ministry, and in the telling, the tales enable both the narrators and those involved in designing and operating the system to, as it were, 'know the place for the first time'.

In social research, generally, there has been a noteworthy 'turn to biographical methods', which amounts to 'a paradigm change' in which it is now recognised that the traditional positivist approaches of social science have 'become

¹ T.S. Eliot, 1963, *Collected Poems 1909-1962*, London, Faber & Faber Ltd.

detached from lived realities' (Chamberlayne *et al*, 2001:1). Josselson (1995:28) notes the hermeneutic under-girding of this 'return to the study of experience... making the other present in their wholeness'. The personal and social meanings which constitute that 'wholeness', which motivate individuals and determine their actions and interactions, are examined in biographical research through 'the studied use and collection of life documents, or *documents of life*' (Plummer, 1983:13), which describe turning-point, revelatory moments, *epiphanies*, in individuals' lives (Denzin, 1989a). The form of these documents and the time-span covered varies according to the purpose of the biography: in this study transcripts of audio-taped research interviews were analysed to elucidate biographical experiences of a particular social system, namely, the system for discerning vocations to ordained ministry in the Church of England.

Kögler (1999:4) asserts that full understanding of social interactions requires an understanding of their meaning from an 'agent's' perspective. The 'agents' in this case were ordination candidates who attended national Selection Conferences in the year 2000. However, since the Selection Conference is the culmination of a prior (often extended) period of personal reflection, and of exploration of religious calling within the local Church community, it was necessary to set these agents' experiences of the discernment process within a wider biographical context of personal history and spiritual development. This requirement is not peculiar to this study; as discussed in previous chapters, the fullest understanding of human experience in a biographical enquiry necessitates situating that experience within the traditional, cultural and discursive formations which influence individual actions and outlooks.

The following sections in this chapter consider the appropriateness of a biographical approach for the study of this particular topic, and discuss the various methods employed to generate data. The values and limitations of each are addressed in the light of theory and experience. The first section considers the methodological assumptions which underpin the research design, and their relationship to the researcher's personal standpoint. Section two discusses issues of authenticity in biographical research, while section three examines the research design. Section four reflects on the use of fieldwork to provide the

contextual setting against which to foreground the experiences in focus; section five discusses issues of research sampling, outlines the rationale for the choices made, and briefly introduces the participants. Section six considers theoretical and practical aspects of biographical interviewing, and the final section addresses issues relating to data analysis. Specific ethical issues are considered as they arise in relation to each aspect of the research design, although 'ethics' is a pervasive theme throughout this study. Indeed, 'ethics' resides at the very heart of the 'critical hermeneutical' (Kögler, 1999) understanding required for both the processes of auto/biographical research itself, and of the particular social process under consideration. As Lincoln and Guba (2000:169) assert:

We would make values, or more correctly, axiology (the branch of philosophy dealing with ethics, aesthetics and religion) a part of the basic foundational philosophical dimensions of paradigm proposal. Doing so would, in our opinion, begin to help us see the embeddedness of ethics within, not external to, paradigms, and would contribute to the consideration of and dialogue about the role of spirituality in human inquiry.

The Researcher's Standpoint

Understanding realizes its full potential only when the fore-meanings that it begins with are not arbitrary. Thus it is quite right for the interpreter not to approach the text directly, relying solely on the fore-meaning already available to him, but rather to explicitly examine the legitimacy – i.e. the origin and validity – of the fore-meanings dwelling within him. (Gadamer, 1999:267)

In qualitative research such as this, which not only traverses boundaries between academic disciplines, but incorporates a religious dimension into a secular study, it is imperative that the researcher examines and elucidates her own world-view. Mason (1996:11) aptly states the requisite hermeneutical approach:

It is only once it is recognized that alternative ontological perspectives might tell different stories that a researcher can begin to see their own ontological view of the social world as a position which should be established and understood, rather than an obvious and universal truth which can be taken for granted.

Taken for granted 'truths' underpin the discourses which contribute to the shaping of biographical experience, and the perpetuation of social power relations. If biographical research is to avoid colluding with existing power

structures the researcher needs to consider her preconceptions before a research plan is formulated, and the way these might influence the research decisions at every stage of the process, from the selection of appropriate documents to review, to the choice of fieldwork sites and events, to the selection of research participants, and to the analysis and interpretation of the data (Lincoln and Guba, 2000).

Examination of my own outlook and clarification of my research decisions reveals the multi-layered and sometimes contradictory nature of my attitudes, particularly in the dual perspectives which I bring to the study, a difficulty which, it appears, is shared by other guidance and counselling colleagues (see Thorne, 1998; Savickas, 1997). My vocational guidance perspective combines with a religious outlook to embody certain ontological and epistemological 'preunderstandings', a pre-existent, inter-related value and belief system which can be conflicting. If these pre-assumptions are ignored, or dismissed as being 'normal', the consequent limitations on the data generated, and the subsequent bias in its interpretation, could compromise the integrity of the conclusions drawn.

The difficulty for the auto/biographical researcher enquiring into a culturally familiar field is discernment of the meta-narratives in which both she and her study are embedded, because the associated language, its symbols and connotations, are held in common by both researcher and participants in forms which seem 'natural' to them (Kögler, 1999:253). This commonality can, as both Kögler (1999) and Hutch (1997) suggest, provide an empathic 'bridgehead' between the researcher and the participants, which facilitates the development of deeper understanding in an atmosphere of mutual trust. In this particular study, access to data sources may have been more difficult had I not been a member of the Anglican Church, and the mutuality of our faith seemed to encourage an open and communicative attitude in all the informants and research participants. However, in such mutuality it is easy to overlook the 'normative' aspects of shared assumptions. Biographical researchers must therefore pay attention to 'the normative facet of their own cultural position'

(Erben, 1996:160), so that subtle and illuminating differences in understanding and world-view may not pass unnoticed.

A major area in this study, where normative assumptions are especially pertinent, concerns understandings of the nature and purpose of priesthood, because these assumptions serve to categorise people's spirituality, for example, as 'up or down the candle' (ABM, 2001:71). My own, somewhat Reformed, 'down the candle' view places priestly ministry on an equal footing with other (lay) ministries, within a 'priesthood of all believers'. If left unexamined, the subconsciously normative aspect of this viewpoint could (and in fact did, initially) interfere with the dialogical interactions at the various levels of the research. Denzin's (1989b:31), assertion that the researcher 'is always part of what is being studied', always 'located within the hermeneutic circle', is nowhere more pertinent than in the realm of *religious* biographical experience.

The personal value system which dictates a qualitative, interpretive approach to any research I undertake, accords with my outlook as a careers adviser, which is rooted in the person-centred approach, largely associated with Carl Rogers. This approach assumes that human beings possess a reasonable degree of autonomy, and are capable, with appropriate help, of overcoming barriers to achieve 'self-actualisation'; an ideology which is in direct conflict with a world-view which believes personal life-course to be legitimately governed and directed by an outside agency (for example, God), or a given society (such as the Church). It is important, therefore, that my own professional discourses are examined and their pre-assumptions 'distanced' (Kögler, 1999), so as to mitigate (as far as possible) the effects of my particular professional bias and prejudices. Normative, *secular* assumptions regarding the 'right' way to conduct vocational guidance may not provide a justifiable perspective from which to judge the way vocational discernment is conducted in a *religious* setting. It should not escape attention, however, that even this understanding reveals a discourse which assumes a clear-cut differentiation between secular and spiritual, which is questionable (cf. Savickas, 1997; Hutch, 1997).

Establishing Authenticity in Biographical Research

The whole experience of exposing one's inner intuition of God's calling to the assessment of religious authorities is deeply challenging, an interactional experience which Denzin (1989a) would certainly term 'epiphanal'.

Epiphanies are interactional moments and experiences which leave their marks on people's lives. In them personal character is manifested. They are often moments of crisis. They alter the fundamental meaning structures in a person's life.

(Denzin, 1989a:70)

Whatever the final outcome of the processes and procedures of discernment of vocation, they impact radically on 'the meanings and structures in a person's life', leading to a redefinition of one's perception of self and role (Butler, 1994:9). An essential element in this redefinition - this meaning-making process - is the interpretive 'emplotment' of events in a coherent and communicable manner. Once a person's actions, experiences, thoughts and feelings are narrated to another, orally or in writing, they constitute a rich resource from which interpretations can be made and conclusions drawn, not only for and about the narrator, but about the society they inhabit (Erben, 1998).

Narrative data is often considered suspect for the purposes of research on grounds of its 'subjectivity', a notion which hinges on a traditional, narrow conceptualisation of the term *validity* - that is, that the method *measures* what it purports to measure. This presents a difficulty for biographical study, in that experiential narrative is not readily quantifiable. The notion of attempting to measure the sense of divine calling, for example, seems ridiculous. Mason's (1996:89) wider definition of *validity* helps in this respect;

A judgement about whether data analysis is valid is a judgement about whether it measures, explicates or illuminates whatever it claims to measure, explicate or illuminate.

Thus, although it must be acknowledged that the *experiential* impact of a social system on the individuals involved is not susceptible to numerical measurement, interpretive investigation of the cultural, emotional, intellectual and spiritual

consequences of individual interactions with the system in question has the capacity to 'explicate or illuminate' its operational *effects*.

Validity can be more clearly conceptualised, for the purposes of biographical research, as 'internal' or 'external consistency' (Atkinson, 1998:60). *Internal consistency* demands that 'the narrative must make sense on its own, as a text that stands alone, to both its readers and creators' (ibid.). This requires skilled interviewing, with the use of 'quality checks' (ibid.) to clarify and confirm understandings between interviewer and participant throughout the interview. *External consistency* is gained when an individual's story is corroborated by other people's experiences, and these are interpreted in the light of wider, contextual analysis (documentary study and fieldwork observation, for example). In this study, thirteen biographical interviews were conducted in total; two pilot interviews, plus eleven with candidates from two of the three selection conferences observed. This data was compared with that arising from the literature review and interviews with a variety of contextual informants.

The use of multiple data-generating methods constitutes a form of *triangulation* whereby data from different sources can be compared to establish a reasonable degree of agreement, or *reliability*. In other words, the same methods used by another researcher would generate the same findings. The problem with biographical method is that the findings are not concrete, but are indicative, illuminatory, and the conclusions drawn are interpretive, rather than definitive. The same story told to a different interviewer will, almost certainly, be narrated with different emphases, and be understood from the perspective of a different listener, who may justifiably draw different conclusions. Thus, to aim for reliability, in the technical sense of exact *replicability*, would be inappropriate (Rubin & Rubin, 1985). Inconsistencies (internal or external) can, themselves, be of vital importance in biographical research, indicating 'tension or change' (Roberts, 2002:40) in the understandings of either participant or interpreter. Triangulation, through the use of 'multiple methodological practices', is therefore 'best understood as a strategy that adds

rigor, breadth, complexity richness, and depth to any inquiry' (Denzin, 2000:5).

It is arguable that questions of *validity* and *reliability* are effectively invalid in relation to biographical study, or at least misconceived (see Denzin, 1989a, Lincoln & Guba, 1986). Indeed, Atkinson claims that biography should be interpreted as an *art form*, which, like a work of art, has its own standards of judgement (Atkinson, 1996:21) – and, as has been shown, Gadamer (1960) asserts the impossibility of fully comprehending an art-work. Erben (1998:4) believes preoccupation with methodological issues in biographical study can 'dull the understanding', and detract from the purpose of the study. It is a matter of 'exercising good faith' in aiming for '*authenticity*' in representing lives, through 'internal analytical coherence, referential adequacy and instrumental pertinence' (ibid., 1998:8 italics added).

Biographical data is concerned with meaning, and has the potential to lead us 'beyond meaning in the story itself to possibly a greater meaning for some or all stories' (Atkinson, 1996:73). However, the inherently subjective nature of the central data in biographical study, and its very limited size, might suggest that *generalizations* from the particular to the wider society could be unwise, if not irrelevant. The credibility of a biographical study is not dependent on the size or statistical representativeness of the research samples, but on the rationality and plausibility of the arguments derived from data arising from a variety of appropriately related sources, the transparency of the research design, its coherence, and, above all, on the sense of *authenticity* conveyed in the interpretation of the narratives (Rubin & Rubin, 1985).

Research Design

The research design serves as a 'route-map' through the study, providing a strategic framework with essential boundaries which take account of restrictions of time, resources, access to data sources and so forth. However, while the imposition of such limits is clearly necessary, it must also be acknowledged that this does a degree of violence to the phenomenon and experiences under

scrutiny by arbitrarily curtailing them, which ‘raises questions of power’ (Usher, 1996:29) in relation to the determining position of the researcher. While this problem cannot be solved, it can at least be mitigated by the transparency of the research design.

The design of any research is shaped by the questions it seeks to answer, but in a qualitative study, ‘where theory is generated from empirical data, and data generation and sampling decisions are made in the light of evolving theoretical analysis’ (Mason, 1996:33), the design needs to have in-built flexibility. It must allow for evolutions in thinking, which might dictate a change of direction, requiring exploration of unplanned data sources. The initial research plan for this study, for example, did not anticipate the opportunity for fieldwork, as observation of Selection Conferences is not normally open to outsiders, so when the opportunity arose to attend a Selection Conference the plan had to be adjusted accordingly.

The study began with the issues raised by my friend’s experience of the discernment process, which directed the primary research in church policy documents and literature. This research corroborated some early pre-suppositions, and raised new issues, as well as providing general insight into the historical and cultural setting in which the system for discerning priestly vocations is embedded. Discussions with key personnel involved in the process both supported some of the emerging ideas and challenged my thinking in other areas, prompting new questions. The first pilot interview (with the friend whose experience initiated this research) was unstructured, the themes and issues which emerged providing a loose framework for the second pilot interview. These interviews were interleaved with the first two Selection Conferences, from which the sample cohort of ordination candidates was drawn. At the third conference, the work of the Conference Secretary and the Selectors was observed. The eleven participant interviews (a twelfth participant withdrew) were structured around the stages of the discernment process, using the information gathered thus far to frame very open questions. The following sections discuss the conduct of each of these methods in greater detail.

Fieldwork Observation and Contextual Conversations

In order to gain an understanding of the issues and debates in the field of selection for ordination training from the perspectives of those involved in the system, discussions were initiated with various key personnel. Roberts (2002:155) suggests a range of attributes which mark the 'ideal informant':

Willingness to participate, relevant knowledge of the culture, a particular social position are recommended. Good communication skills and someone not prone to academic theorising are other characteristics.

The 'particular social position' was especially important, as the selection system involves a wide variety of personnel exercising specific functions. The group of informants therefore encompassed all the main roles, and included some ordinands and newly ordained clergy. This enabled me to gauge the range of opinions concerning the mechanisms for discerning priestly vocations, and the variety of approaches employed in different dioceses. The information supplied served as comparison with data arising from study of church policy documents, and broader literature. My own pre-understandings were frequently disrupted, with my informants raising issues and sharing perspectives which had not hitherto occurred to me. Conversely, my own ideas engendered fresh insight for my informants, one result being the invitation to observe a national Selection Conference.

The first Selection Conference observed operated under a new, experimental design (since adopted as the norm), so a second Conference running on the existing model was also observed. At both the first and second Conferences, observations were focused on the candidates and the procedures they underwent. For both practical and ethical reasons (discussed later in this chapter), my interactions with selection personnel were minimal. At this point it became clear that in order to fully apprehend the system in question, observation of the work of the Selectors and their decision-making processes was required, so a third Selection Conference was observed. On this occasion my interaction with candidates was minimal.

Fieldwork observation such as this ‘sets the scene’ for the biographical experiences in focus, although the term *fieldwork* is slightly misleading as it has connotations of ethnographic study, which are not truly applicable in this case. Rather than the ethnographic principle of ‘coming alongside’ (Hammersley & Atkinson, 1989: 2) others over an extended period, the three separate observations each lasted for only three days. Nevertheless, observations in the natural loci of the activities in question has a number of advantages in biographical research, even where it is of limited duration. It allows the researcher ‘to capture the phenomenon in and on its own terms, and to grasp the culture in its own natural, ongoing environment’ (Angrosino & Mays de Perez, 2000), enhancing the researcher’s understanding of beliefs and customs, and highlighting concerns and interests (Guba and Lincoln, 1981). It provides a basis for cross-checking the data arising from the documentary study and the later participant interviews, enhancing the ‘trustworthiness’ of the conclusions reached (Atkinson, 1998: 60).

However, Guba and Lincoln (1981:193) sound a note of caution: because the method ‘leans heavily on personal interpretation’, there is danger that, by building on ‘tacit knowledge, both [the researcher’s] own and that of the members of the group’, an unconscious bias may arise from meanings and understandings which all parties ‘take for granted’. As Gadamer (1960:266-267) asserts, ‘All correct interpretation must be on guard against arbitrary fancies and limitations imposed by imperceptible habits of thought’, a tendency which can be mitigated by the cultivation of the self-reflective stance essential to a ‘critical hermeneutic’ approach (Kögler, 1999).

A further caution must also be noted in relation to fieldwork observation, concerning the potentially disruptive effect of the observer’s presence, especially in sensitive situations such as pertained in this study, where the activities under scrutiny occurred in the stressful environment of personal assessment. It was imperative, therefore, to ensure that the purposes of the research were clear to all involved, and that the researcher had no part in the assessment. As Robson (1993:196) points out, there are ‘obvious and strong ethical objections’ to entering a research field with any intention to deceive,

either about the identity of the researcher or the purpose of the observation. Agreement for initial access to the 'site', and for subsequent observations within it, are gained by negotiation, which requires skill in clarifying objectives and discerning conflicting interests.

As de Laine (2000:120) states, 'Staging and performing fieldwork rests on a foundation of negotiations with various parties, each with their own interests and expectations (sponsors and funders, gatekeepers, colleagues and subjects), which may or may not clash and could give rise to conflict'. Funding was not an issue in this research, as my stay at the Selection Conference venues was self-financed, but access to the Conference had to be negotiated with the 'gatekeepers', the Ministry Division of the Church of England. Robson (1993:295) notes the difficulty which 'looser, more emergent' research designs (such as that for this study) present for 'gatekeepers', in that the researcher is requesting a virtual 'blank cheque', which requires great trust on the part of the 'gatekeepers'. In the event, this presented no difficulty; rather, the opposite problem ensued whereby the very openness and eagerness to help, on the part of both gatekeepers and the potential participants, devolved responsibility for setting ethical boundaries onto me, as researcher. For example, the conference organiser sent me the information pack and joining instructions intended for the Selectors, which included the candidates' application forms and personal references. Since, at that point candidates had not agreed to participate in the research, and certainly had not consented to an unknown researcher having sight of their confidential statements and references, these were returned to the Ministry Division unread.

This raised the matter of 'informed consent', and relationships of power in the research process. As de Laine (2000:122) states, 'negotiation within a research process is about relationships between parties with vested interests and unequal power'. In agreeing to my attendance at the Selection Conferences the Church authorities (through the Ministry Division) were effectively speaking on behalf of the Selectors and the candidates, which presented the danger of my presence being construed as in some way allied to institutional authority structures. To mitigate the potentially coercive effect of this perception, I wrote a letter to the

candidates, to accompany the joining instructions for each Conference, introducing myself and the purpose and nature of my research. At the Conference opening sessions I was given further opportunity to elaborate, and to emphasise that any candidate or Selector was at liberty, at any point, to request that their activities were not observed.

Robson (2002) suggests that a formal, written agreement should be drawn up and signed by each participant, although as Angrosino and de Perez (2000:691) point out 'it is difficult to prepare an informed consent form when one cannot anticipate the possibilities that might flow from personal interactions'. Further, although written consent might be the ideal, gaining it could be cumbersome and intrusive in the context of the activities under observation, and such formality could act as a constraining influence on later interactions. Individually signed consent was therefore not sought from the attendees at the Selection Conferences. Nevertheless, even without such written agreements, the principle of on-going consent should apply, especially in qualitative research whose direction and design might alter in the process. This principle, which is embedded in the ethical code governing my professional activities (see Sanders & Liptrot, 1993), helps to ensure respect for individual autonomy, that 'no harm' is done to research participants, and that research is conducted 'fairly' (Mulvey, 2002:82). Before each new activity during the Conferences I therefore ascertained that a clearly informed consent to my observation still pertained.

Lincoln and Guba (2000) draw attention to the ethical dimension of the power the researcher exercises in selecting appropriate research material. The choice of fieldwork sites and events to observe is one aspect of 'sampling' which they identify as being open to the bias of researcher preconceptions, where arbitrary decisions may be made as to what would provide the richest data. In this study, however, the choice of 'sites' was suggested by the administrator at Ministry Division, which effectively mitigated any researcher bias. In the event, the Conferences were well chosen, reflecting the full range of options currently available, as the first Conference ran to a new design, while the second ran

available, as the first Conference ran to a new design, while the second ran according to the established pattern; the first and third Conferences were for both male and female candidates, but the second was for male candidates only.

Defining the Research Sample

In all research, choices have to be made regarding what to examine, how many, where, over what time period, and so forth, since the entire spectrum of a phenomenon cannot realistically be covered. Smaller samples are therefore required for study, but for auto/biographical method, the very term *sampling* presents issues. Referring to a group of people willing to tell their stories for research purposes as a *sample* has scientific connotations of objectifying them as ‘units’, ‘subjects’, or even ‘specimens’, for observation and analysis. The inference is that the researcher is able to stand outside the research in some way, which is an inherently powerful position, producing *subjects* through scientific discourses derived from the will to truth/knowledge (Foucault, 1976).

Scientific terminology, such as *sampling* and *subject*, sits uncomfortably in auto/biographical research texts, and should therefore be used with caution, in the full understanding of their discordant connotations. In this study, individuals sharing their experiences of discernment of vocation are referred to as *participants*, which accords them the autonomy and respect which is their due. Use of the term *sampling* is unavoidable at times, and denotes the setting of appropriate boundaries to the research and/or defining of appropriate groups and operational sites. The group that is thus defined is referred to as the ‘research group’.

A crucial boundary to be set in biographical research is the number of participants to be interviewed. Practicality dictates that this cannot be large, but size of the group is less at issue where depth and ‘richness’ of data are the aim (Erben, 1996). However, Mason (1996:83) refutes any notion that ‘systematic sampling strategies are not really important in qualitative research simply because it is often small scale or not amenable to the logic of mathematical probability’. To attain credibility, the sampling strategy should aim to produce a group of research participants who are broadly typical of the general population from which they are drawn, at least in a ‘common sense’ way (Mason,

1996:86). In this case, the characteristics of the research group encompassed gender, age, ethnicity, social and educational backgrounds, marital status, health and outcome of the Selection Conference. A geographical spread was also desirable, since different dioceses employ different models of vocational discernment prior to sending candidates to a national Selection Conference.

As the Selection Conferences which were allocated for my observation did, in fact, provide candidates from an array of dioceses across England and Wales, plus some from overseas, it seemed reasonable to gather the research group from these events. This strategy had several advantages: the experiences related in the subsequent research interviews were recent; my shared experience of the Selection Conferences helped to create the necessary ‘empathic bridgehead’ (Kögler, 1999) with the participants; and last, but certainly not least, possible problems in finding and accessing research participants were alleviated. Since more candidates than could be accommodated in a project of this size volunteered from the first two Selection Conferences, it was necessary to devise criteria to define a manageable group, which would meet the primary aim of the study, to ‘provide a close-up, detailed or *meticulous view*’ of specific individuals ‘relevant to or appear[ing] within the wider universe’ (Mason, 1996:92, original italics).

The research group ultimately selected could be said to ‘encapsulate a *relevant range*’ (ibid.) of Selection Conference candidates, though it is not claimed that they are statistically representative of all ordination candidates. The Church of England annual statistics on candidates attending national Selection Conferences analyses by gender, age and sponsoring diocese, so it was only possible to gauge the representativeness of the candidates in this study in relation to these criteria. In terms of *age*, the cohort of volunteers reflected the national picture for that year (see Statistics of Licensed Ministers, 2000), with ages ranging from 28 years to 56 years. In terms of *gender*, the group was unrepresentative of the national profile of candidates because the second Conference was all male, which unavoidably skewed the balance of the research group, rendering it eighty per cent male, as opposed to a national average at Selection Conferences of fifty-seven per cent male.

Details of educational qualifications, marital status, health and ethnic group were available from conference documentation and by observation, so research group representativeness in respect of these attributes could only be judged in relation to the population of candidates attending the two Selection Conferences observed. Telephone conversations with volunteers two weeks after the Conferences provided data on who was Recommended for theological training or Not Recommended, which added another sampling criterion. In this, the cohort of volunteers was again unrepresentative, in that sixty per cent were recommended for training, against a national figure for year 2000 of seventy-four per cent.

In order to present a 'relevant range' (Mason, 1996:92) of ordination candidates for this study, a research group was identified as displayed in Table 1, below. Appendix 2 provides more detailed pen-portraits of the individual candidates.

Table 1 Characteristics of Research Group

Pseudo-nym			Ethnic Gp	M.Status	Education	Health	Result
Anneke	F	28	White-European	S	Grad	Good	R
Carolyn	F	29	White-British	M	Undergrad	Issues	NR
Tanya	F	31	White-British	S	PhD	Good	R
James	M	55	White-British	M	Grad Level	Good	NR
Adrian	M	35	White-British	D/reM	Grad level	Good	NR
Paul	M	35	White-British	M	Grad	Good	R
Mark	M	41	White-British	M	Non-grad	Issues	NR
David	M	39	White-Irish	M	Grad level	Good	NR
Warren	M	37	White-British	M	Grad	Good	R
Patrick	M	29	White-British	M	Grad	Good	R
Andrew	M	56	Afro-Caribbean	M	Non-grad	Good	NR

D/reM = Divorced and remarried

R or NR = Recommended or Non Recommended

Conducting Biographical Interviews

The purpose of qualitative interviews is to provide dialogical space within a bounded but facilitative framework, which encourages research participants to reflect in detail on their lives, or on particular events. Depth interviews, as Wragg (1994:273) asserts 'require considerable skill', which goes beyond that needed for ordinary conversation, because qualitative interviews differ in a number of ways (Rubin and Rubin, 1995); they are what Burgess (1984:102) calls 'conversations with a purpose'. Firstly, the balance of control (and therefore power) lies with the interviewer, who decides the focus of the dialogue, and controls its direction (however loosely); secondly, the information gained is formally recorded in some way, dissected and analysed for research purposes; thirdly, depth interviewing contains an ethical dimension not necessarily pertaining in casual conversation.

Oakley (1981:38) condemns the 'paradigmatic representation' of the 'proper interview' as presented in methodology textbooks as a 'masculine paradigm'. She is describing an aggressive, interrogatory style of interviewing, which raises issues of power and authority on the one side, and of interviewee passivity on the other. The latter did not appear to be a problem in my interviews, and neither did I encounter any feeling that I was perceived as being in an authority position. Possibly it was in the nature of these particular participants to be proactive (after all, leadership is a necessary quality for priesthood), or perhaps, my being female was perceived as being less threatening. On a more conscious level, I believe it was the Person-centred approach of my professional background which was more pertinent than any gendered paradigm, although this background, as discussed earlier, presents its own power issues. Whatever the dynamic, in any biographical interview the relationship between interviewer and interviewee is constantly changing, so that the balance of power commensurately shifts between the different selves presented during this relationship (Collins, 1998). In other words, both parties project different identities at various stages of the interaction. For example, I may start as the efficient professional, but become the empathic listener, and change back again to bring the interview to a close. The interviewee may begin as a passive helper,

wanting to help with my research, but become the proactive author and narrator of the story. As each self appears, the balance of power alters accordingly.

The dialogical nature of depth interviewing demands a relationship of trust, 'which imposes obligations on both sides' (Burgess, 1984:102). The interviewer is responsible for ensuring that the interviewee fully understands the nature and purpose of the research, and that he or she is free to retract anything said, or withdraw from the study at any time. The researcher is responsible for safe-guarding anonymity if this is required, and for having a general regard for the well-being of the interviewees, that no harm is done to them, either during the interview or in the subsequent use of the information divulged (Diener and Crandall, 1978). As Wengraf (2001:4) states, 'the research interview is not designed to 'help' or 'empower', or 'change' the informant at all.

On the other hand, where interviewees are consenting, autonomous adults, they are responsible for what they choose to reveal, and the way they express it, for being honest, and for stating if they wish to terminate the interview. As mentioned earlier, one participant withdrew from the study because it was impossible to guarantee anonymity, due to unique circumstances which could not be disguised. The personal implications of participating in the research were therefore unpredictable, and potentially detrimental.

The inherent power imbalances in all interviews can lead the unwary interviewer into bias, where the way the questions are framed, or the inflection with which they are asked, can lead the respondent in a 'consciously or unconsciously desired direction' (Wragg, 1994:267). It might be argued that this is less likely to occur in depth interviews because their dialogical nature allows the interviewee to correct misunderstandings and clarify points of view. However, conduct of such interviews requires special skills and understanding, without which the interviewer's world-view may still predominate. As has already been suggested (see Chapter 3), an understanding of the principles of both hermeneutics and discourse is necessary, but 'considerable skill' in non-directive listening techniques is also required (Wragg, 1994:273).

The same skills which are employed in the sphere of career guidance can be utilised in the biographical interview, to both capture the immediacy of the story and check the accuracy of the interviewer's understanding. In this study, my professional skills in depth interviewing proved an invaluable asset, alleviating some of the anxiety commonly experienced by novice interviewers (see, for example, Collins, 1998). The meaning of experience for a client or research participant is ascertained, in the course of the interview, through a layering process of reflective listening. This requires careful phrasing of questions, such that they encourage the respondent to be forthcoming; highly attentive listening for nuances and implications which might present fruitful avenues of exploration; astute observation of non-verbal cues, which might emphasize the spoken words, or contradict them. Reflective listening involves periodic recapitulation of what the interviewee says, inviting clarification of facts or meanings, probing ambiguities and challenging inconsistencies, and summarising responses to provide opportunity for the interviewee to correct misunderstandings. These clarifying and cross-checking techniques serve to enhance the internal validity (consistency) of the interview. Kögler's model of the 'Critical-Dialogic Circle' (see Figure 1, Chapter 3) is helpful here, allowing for the mutual exploration of ideas which brings the interview to a place of negotiated common understanding.

Ideally, it would be useful to return to the first interviews after the series has finished to explore points missed earlier, but this is rarely feasible. Participants may also be asked to verify the accuracy of the accounts of their experiences, once they are written up, but this was not possible in this study, as many of the participants had moved on to theological college. However, while these methods may appear to provide excellent means of checking accuracy, they are dependent on the erroneous assumption that a revised narrative will be more accurate than the first. This may be so for factual details, but any perceptual changes may be the result of time-lapse and reflection, and might thereby compromise the immediacy of the earlier narrative. In other words, both accounts will be 'true' in their own way, but neither can be counted more 'valid' than the other. Ultimately, depth interviewing, as Wengraf (2001) states, is

about gaining an understanding of the limitations of one's knowledge, and the provisional nature of one's notions of 'truth'.

Depth interviews conducted in series become more accurately probing as the interviewer gains a feeling for the issues that are emerging. In this sense, the whole series of interviews becomes incorporated in the one hermeneutic circle (Gadamer, 1960). For example, by the fourth interview in the series of eleven I had become aware that certain administrative issues were problematic for some candidates, only because previous candidates had mentioned it. As data gathering methods often run concurrently, the accumulating information from other sources serves to fine-tune the interview questions; in the earlier stages of the research design data analysis and data collection are therefore interwoven (Miles and Huberman, 1984). Each research activity impinges on the others, metaphorically pitching data into a virtual soup cauldron from which thoughts, ideas, theories and themes bubble to the surface. Thus, although the essential interview design in this study remained the same, as the interviews progressed the questions became more searching as I became more informed.

The two pilot interviews played a vital role in providing pointers to the issues and themes which might be worthy of investigation; they provided indicators of what to observe at the Selection Conferences. Beyond this, they were also key to the design of the later participant interviews. The fact that both candidates reported a difficult experience of the selection process could have negatively biased my expectations for the subsequent study. However, the time-lapse between their selection experiences and our discussions allowed a certain 'distanciation' (Kögler, 1999) to occur for the interviewees, which facilitated a clearer evaluation of the whole discernment system, the positive aspects as well as the negative. This was especially true of my first pilot interviewee, herself an experienced careers adviser, and social process evaluator. The pilot interviews served to highlight issues which might not have arisen, or might have gone unnoticed, with interviewees for whom the selection system had been a more positive experience. Nevertheless, it must be acknowledged that there are problems in using friends or associates in a research project: both parties in the interview have a vested interest in the post-interview consequences 'of having

asked for and having given (or not given) “revelations”; the interviewer is ‘tempted to avoid asking “dangerous-to-the-later-relationship” questions’ and the interviewee may avoid giving “dangerous-to-the-later-relationship” answers’ (Wengraf, 2001:106). I do not believe the latter case was an issue in my pilot interviews, but this may be because I avoided being ‘dangerously’ challenging. It was undoubtedly advantageous that my eventual research participants were previously unknown to me.

Technically speaking, the pilot interviews were ‘unstructured’, open discussions in which I simply asked the respondents to tell me their stories. However, as Mason (1996) and Collins (1998) note, the notion of the totally ‘unstructured’ interview is, in practice, a fantasy; so-called ‘unstructured’ interviews require much planning. The information gained from the pilot interviews and other data sources provided a skeletal structure for the eleven participant interviews, which was ‘fleshed out’ by the open style of questioning. Although the interviews were effectively semi-structured, the open and exploratory style of questioning provided an in-built flexibility, while the outline schedule (see Appendix 3) enabled me to keep the interview ‘on track’, without being unnecessarily constricting.

The interviews were tape-recorded, with the interviewees’ permission, so as to avoid the distraction of note-taking. When interviews are recorded in this way, decisions must be made regarding handling the data; whether the audio-tapes should be literally transcribed, or simply replayed (possibly several times), the researcher noting only the most salient points, or some variation between these two extremes. The former end of the spectrum is commonly used in counselling or linguistic research, where exact mode of expression is important, but the latter end lacks the illustrative detail which can so enrich biographical data. A mid-line was therefore chosen, transcribing the bulk of the interviews, while omitting obvious irrelevancies, and including expression where it amplified or emphasised the text. Since it is impossible to assess exactly what *is* irrelevant until all the data has been collected and analysis begins, the transcriptions tended to be more detailed than was probably necessary. Trends and themes

were sought, rather than close analysis of every phrase and nuance of expression.

Another aspect of the data recording decision is how much correction the researcher should make to linguistic or grammatical errors. Two participants spoke English as a second language, which necessitated some interpretive corrections in the transcriptions. Where ambiguity was not clarified during the interview, it must be acknowledged that later correction involves a certain level of subjectivity and arbitrary judgement. Ideally this can be mitigated by checking back with the interviewee as to their meaning, but since this was not possible such judgements had to be made. The overarching concern in biographical study is that the personal stories with which the researcher has been entrusted are conveyed with the utmost integrity, holding as paramount the well-being of the narrators. As Atkinson (1998:62) says,

It should be understood that the person whose life-story is being told is of primary concern and not the story that is being recorded for research purposes. It is important not to let interpretive issues take precedence over ethical issues.

Approach to Data Analysis

As Coffey and Atkinson (1996:108) state, qualitative data analysis requires that researchers construct versions of social reality from their interactions with participants, a reality which is necessarily open to alternative interpretations: as they say, 'It is inescapable that analysis implies representation'. Richardson (2000:923) draws attention to the erroneous assumption that representing lived experience is a straight-forward activity, the written production of a 'transparent' account of the social reality studied. 'In reality' qualitative research reports are linguistic reconstructions of the social world; 'worded worlds', which 'never accurately, precisely, completely capture the studied world, yet we persist in trying' (ibid.). This might suggest that representations of lived experience are of limited value for academic research purposes, a premise based on scientific concepts of validity, reliability and generalisability which, as discussed earlier, are suspect in relation to auto/biographical studies. In aiming to elucidate universals, 'objective' analysis risks effacing 'the

intending individual..., describing human beings as though they are molecules' (Josselson, 1995:29).

The analysis and interpretation of biographical data aims for a holistic sense of 'authenticity' (Erben, 1998:4) in the portrayal of lived experience, providing 'thick description' as the basis for 'thick interpretation' (Denzin, 1989b:83):

A thick description...goes beyond mere fact and surface appearances. It presents detail, context, emotion, and the webs of social relationships that join persons to one another. Thick description evokes emotionality and self-feelings. It inserts history into experience. It establishes the significance of an experience, or the sequence of events, for the person or persons in question.

In other words, achieving 'thick interpretation' is a hermeneutical process, in which narratives of lived experience are 'read' as texts, with the primary analytical categories generated by the contextual/theoretical research functioning like chapter-headings in a book, to 'signpost the reader' around the story (Mason, 1996:111). Arguably, the imposition of such headings risks curtailing experiential narratives by choosing certain avenues to explore and closing down others (Mason, 1996; Scott and Usher, 1996), a situation which is unavoidable given that all researchers approach their data with a set of presuppositions (Miles and Huberman, 1984). However, as Gadamer (1960) has argued, these 'pre-understandings' can provide a valuable interpretive framework, the underlying sketch which supports the ultimate 'portrait'. The necessity, in research terms, is to be aware of, as far as possible, and to indicate those avenues which might merit further exploration, and to acknowledge explanations which may be incomplete or open to alternative interpretations.

Miles and Huberman (1984:23) demonstrate the iterative nature of qualitative data analysis, in their 'Interactive Model', which displays a fluidity of movement between collection, reduction and display of data, and conclusion-drawing/verifying. They conceptualise the process of 'reduction and display' as one of sorting and categorising data into 'bins'. Contextual study and theorising produces provisional analytical categories (bins), which are confirmed or contradicted by fieldwork observation (where applicable) and pilot interviews, generating an analytical framework for the main body of the

research, the participant interviews. Each interview narrative opens up further areas for exploration, and more finely tuned analytical categories emerge from the subsequent transcripts. Further sifting of data in each 'bin' helps to prioritise issues according to the weight given them by the participants, enabling their priorities and experiences to be checked against former suppositions and theoretical analysis, so as to draw conclusions in which theory is evaluated against actual experience, and experience is illuminated by the application of theory.

The participant interviews in this study each produced between one and a half hours and two hours of tape-recorded narrative, which fell naturally into two main sections. The first related to the personal experience of 'calling', and the second to candidates' experiences of the institutional processes for evaluating that 'call'. The latter section, again, fell naturally into three chronological sub-sections: the diocesan processes of vocational discernment, the national Selection Conference, and receiving of feedback on the Selectors' reports. The broad analytical categories, which the early research had generated, provided the framework for the subsequent more detailed analysis and interpretation.

The primary analytical categories applied to data in this study were 1) *sequential*, following the four main sections of the transcripts which reflected the chronological order of the interviews, and 2) *thematic*, according to the main issues which emerged from the contextual research (see Mason, 1996). Each of the chronological sections was examined in the light of the main themes arising from the review of the field and the theorising, and as the analysis progressed, the participants' perspectives on the issues generated increasingly refined categories. The analysis and interpretation became an iterative process in which, as new or alternative explanations emerged, each narrative was revisited to confirm previous interpretations and/or highlight contradictions or discrepancies. In this way, rather than inappropriately circumscribing the data, the initial, tentative application of the primary categories served to 'open up' the analysis and interpretation, to 'make them

more precise, replace empirically feeble bins with more meaningful ones, reconstrue relationships' (Miles and Huberman, 1984:33).

The following chapter presents the participants stories in relation to the contextual data generated by the methods described above.

Chapter 5

An Uncertain Space: Narratives of Vocational Discernment

*You can see how much it has taken,
how hard it is merely for them to be there,
confused by their passions, not knowing
how to use the cutlery or what to wear
or about tomorrow or whether to send,
postmarked from the country of Perhaps,
the letter that means less than they intend.*

Chris McCully, *The Country of Perhaps*, 2002 ¹

The transitional status of contemporary Christian priesthood makes its exact nature difficult to define, and therefore communication of the experience of being called to such a role is problematic, especially since such calling operates within its own integrity and follows its own logic: all attempts to portray the experience must inevitably be deficient in some respect (Holloway, 1997). The task of discerning the authenticity of a call to priesthood, and selecting suitable people to become priests, is thus extremely difficult. The same could be said of the task of accurately portraying the biographical experiences of candidates submitting their sense of calling to the discernment of others; the narratives themselves and their ultimate interpretations inevitably ‘say less than they intend’ (McCully, 2002). Nevertheless, despite this limitation, the stories told in this chapter help to elucidate the interface between the personal and the institutional, between the Church’s system for discerning vocations to ordained ministry and the candidates, an relationship which has hitherto been largely unexplored.

The participants’ stories in this study demonstrate the insecurity associated with the whole process of vocational discernment, the inevitable concerns with appearances (‘how to use the cutlery or what to wear’), and the underlying anxieties about the outcome and its ramifications. They display a ‘consciousness’ which is ‘simultaneously directed to an inner world of thought and experience and an outer world of events and experience’ (Denzin,

¹McCully, C., 2002, *The Country of Perhaps*, Manchester, Carcanet

1989a:28). In this chapter, a continuous movement between the two is traced, beginning with the inner experience of 'calling', and linking this to the external influences which shaped the internalised concepts of priesthood, and helped frame the sense of vocation. The ways in which participants' calling was tested by external events and other people, prior to submitting it to the scrutiny of the Church, is examined. The study then moves on to consider the participants' experiences of the institutional processes for discerning vocations to ordained ministry, falling naturally into three parts reflecting the stages of the discernment process. Firstly, experiences of the diocesan procedures prior to national Selection Conference are examined, then experiences of the Conference itself. In returning to the dioceses, where participants receive feedback on the Selectors' reports, the focus is redirected to the inner world of thought and feeling.

The narratives are presented in the chronological order in which the experiences occurred, so as to convey their complexity in a logical and comprehensible manner, considering the particularities of the events described in relation to the literature review in Chapter 2. The interpretation of broader issues raised by the participants' stories follows in Chapter 6, with reference to the theorising presented in Chapter 3. In both chapters, when the comments or observations refer to all attendees at a Selection Conference, the generic term 'candidates' is used, whereas the particular candidates who participated in this study are designated 'participants'. Where participants are quoted verbatim, words or phrases which they especially emphasised are underlined, and my own words, as interviewer, are printed in italics.

The Sense of Calling

As the review showed, there are few auto/biographical records of the experience of calling to priesthood with which to compare the participants' stories. However, it is generally assumed that this calling is experiential (see ACCM, 1989), and candidates are expected to 'be able to speak of their sense of vocation to ministry and mission, referring both to their own conviction and to the extent to which others have confirmed it' (ABM, 1993:82, *italics added*). Thus, candidates who have recently undergone the selection process are

probably the best prepared to articulate their sense of calling, even if they do so in a hesitant and fragmented manner. For example, when Mark, was asked to describe how he experienced his calling, he replied,

Whoof! That's very difficult. I feel as if there's a whole piece of me not being used... There's a kind of burning in me - almost as if my heart's on fire screaming out, "Please let me be the minister for these people who need me". I know that sounds big-headed, and it's not meant to be, but the fire's there.

Others talked of a 'tightening of stomach muscles', 'you just feel full up', 'excitement in the pit of the stomach', alternating with 'flutterings of fear', but the feelings were mostly of a more elusive nature, as Adrian said, 'like trying to define the feeling of awe'. The sense of calling was just that, a *sense*, a kind of knowing, a 'feeling of rightness', 'a homecoming' with an imperative quality, which equates with Palmer's (2000:24) description of the vocational impulse as 'something I can't not do'. As Warren put it,

It grew from an idea to a desire, and became a growing desire, and one that almost had a physical sensation to it. If you have something you're looking forward to or you want... there's almost a kind of physical knotting of the stomach, or butterflies in the stomach, a kind of yearning for something. It was a bit like that... So I thought, I need to test this, so I resolved to disregard it and to renew my energies in my work... but the more effort I made to do that, the stronger I felt this desire. And actually it was as if the desire was fighting back and saying, No, I'm not going to be extinguished, I'm not going to be sidelined, I'm actually, you know, the stronger of the two - it was a real tussle - I'm the stronger one here and I'm gonna prevail... Eventually it got to a stage where the desire was so strong and tangible, and the dread and doom about my work was so strong and tangible that I had to address it, I just had to address it.

Even where participants portray their sense of calling in more intellectual terms, such as university lecturer, Tanya, the emphatic tone and body language betray an underlying passion. She feels she has always had 'an extremely strong sense of vocation, in the abstract', that -

Life is for doing something particular with, a sense that there is a calling and there is something that you ought to be doing... one way in which to frame a kind of instinct, a kind of, you know, simply a strong, inarticulable sense of something that is.

While all participants could discern childhood influences (some positive, some negative) in the formation of their calling, three could identify specific moments in their youth when they experienced some kind of direct calling to ordained ministry, epiphanal moments 'which leave marks on people's lives... alter[ing] the fundamental meaning structures of a person's life' (Denzin, 1989a:70). As an eight year old, Carolyn dreamed of being a priest, despite there being no female role-models at that time, and at age ten, when attending the ordination of a cousin, she remembers feeling that she was also meant to do that; 'It's so hard to explain, it's just this kind of sense that that's what I should be doing'. Patrick was baptised at a Non-Conformist church when he was twelve, and someone prophesied over him that he would become a preacher. He commented,

It's interesting, that that was the first thing in my mind, actually, now I think about it. Perhaps I grew up thinking, Well, I don't know whether this will come true or not.

Adrian talked to his vicar about priesthood when he was fourteen, and was sent on a Youth Vocations Weekend. He remembers voicing concern to a group leader that he 'just didn't fit the mould', and the leader replied, 'Well, of all the people here I think you're the one who is going to be a priest'. As Adrian said,

Of course, I never forgot that. It was probably the moment when I thought, Someone's recognising something here...when someone who doesn't know you, has only just met you, says, "I sense something in you which is greater than you, bigger than you"... that's incredibly moving, so I just gradually began to look at it.

Adrian, like many of the participants, began exercising his sense of vocation in a secular capacity: Warren was a lawyer, Paul a nurse, Tanya, Patrick and Adrian were teachers, and all conceived these as spiritual 'callings' as well as secular, yet they nevertheless felt unfulfilled. Patrick expressed the defining difference between ordained ministry and other types of vocation, as 'the weight of consequence' -

In ministry you're preparing people for eternity. That's the big difference. Your dealing with real crunch things of what life is all about.

Adrian described being a priest as 'an ontological thing', echoing the recurring theme of a number of writers (see Melinsky, 1992, Greenwood, 1994, Redfern,

1999); or, as the Bishop of Dorking put it in a preliminary research discussion, 'A priest is what you are, not just what you do'. The same idea was expressed by other participants, who felt the need to make a formally recognised, whole-life commitment. As Warren said:

I very much felt that I needed, wanted, desired, was being called to give every aspect of my life to God, the whole of my life... So I very much felt I wanted my work to be - my work to be ministry. That actually being an ordained person is not only being set apart to do a certain kind of Christian work, it's actually a whole changing of self.

Or, in Tanya's words:

I was looking for something that was total – in a sense I think I wanted to be dedicated, and I wanted to be visibly dedicated, actually... In a way, I felt very strongly, actually, that I already was what I felt, a priest. What I hoped a priest might be and what I hoped a priestly life might mean, was in a sense, what I was already trying to do. And part of it certainly was that I wanted to be formally labelled; very much a kind of coming out.

For candidates who, like Tanya, feel that they *are* already 'priests' (in a 'lay' manner), ordination serves as a public ratification by the community of the Church of an individual's specific calling within the universal calling to Christian priesthood, with a commensurate public commitment to fulfil the requirements of that calling. For some this simply represents a practical necessity, under a discourse of 'professionalism' which debars the non-professional. David echoed the concerns expressed by a number of authors (cf. Eaton, 1999, or ABM, 2000) about 'creeping professionalism' when he said,

We live in a 'professional' society - it's infiltrated our society that you must be a professional person. So there's a tension in me which says, 'professional priesthood?' We should all be missionaries, we should all be preaching, all be evangelical and pastoral, but also part of me says I want to do this, and the best way to do this is to be ordained.

James expressed his views more bluntly about the exclusionary nature of ordination discourses, saying,

I always feel I can only go so far [as a Reader] and that's it, and Readers unfortunately in the Church of England are, as somebody said "You're not in the club", basically you're on the second tier, if you like.

Whatever their current perceptions of vocation and ordained ministry, all the participants could identify a variety of influences which helped to shape their understandings, based in personal biography and family history, their wider social and educational environments and their ecclesiological heritage.

Influences on Vocational Development

Exploring the influences which shape the sense of vocation to ordained ministry, Towler and Coxon (1979), found that the most important were *clergy* whom ordinands had personally known, *mother*, then *friends* and *father*, followed by *books*, *teachers*, *spouse* and other *relatives*. The research group in this study identified similar influences, but in a different order of priority, possibly because the development of vocation was universally perceived as a 'journey' (cf. Jamieson, 1997) which began with the awakening of personal faith. Anneke traces the beginnings of her faith, and her abiding interest in theology to the influence of her Religious Education teacher at secondary school; Warren also identified particular teachers. James cites a church youth club as important, and David a particular Evangelical curate, through whom he came to personal faith as an adolescent, while Mark 'came to faith' through the example of his boxing coach. Family and up-bringing in a church environment were significant in the development of faith for Carolyn, Tanya, Paul, David, Patrick and Andrew, while the pervading influence of a Christian schooling was counted seminal for Warren.

Clergy role-models were highly influential in the development of vocation for six participants. Carolyn and Adrian were greatly influenced as children by particular priests, the former by a cousin who was ordained, and the latter by a curate in his parish church. For the majority of participants, however, clerical influences appeared later in life. For Anneke this was the Senior Chaplain at the mission where she worked; for James, the influence in his early twenties was his parish priest, while for David, at the same age, the example of clergy in an Anglican community was significant. Clergy parents were formative influences for both Tanya and Paul, although the influence was not entirely positive for the latter.

Formal theological education, of various types, was important for most of the participants. Anneke studied theology at university, and later in training for ordination in another denomination, as had David. James trained as a Lay Reader and Spiritual Director, Mark as a Church Army Evangelist, and Patrick as a Youth Evangelist. Carolyn was studying part-time for a degree in theology at the time of her Selection Conference, and Andrew had undertaken a certificate in theology by distance learning. Theological education had enabled these candidates to 'practise' different aspects of priestly ministry, such as mission work, youth work, pastoral work, and preaching.

Other influences mentioned by participants, were church music (Adrian), a diocesan youth vocations weekend (also Adrian), and spouses. Paul particularly identifies his wife as an agent in his faith journey, but all the participants noted the support of partners as vital in the pursuit of their calling. Some formative influences were less definable, such as 'the mystery of it all...and the richness of the liturgy', which affected Adrian, or a 'whole range of different religious experiences [being] just absolutely interwoven into life', which Tanya gained from parents who taught comparative religion.

Because the influences which participants identified formed a matrix rather than a neatly staged progression, they were not asked to give a personal weighting to each influence, but from the frequency with which each was mentioned an order of priority emerged which differs slightly from Towler's and Coxon's (1979) findings. *Clergy role-models, theological education* and the opportunity to *practise* some aspect of priestly ministry were the most formative influences.

Concepts of priesthood

Savickas (1997) notes the link between role-models or influential people (real or fictional) and vocational interests, elucidation of the former helping to uncover the motivational needs and values which direct the latter. Accordingly, participants in this study were asked to define their ideal priest, based on the formative influences just described.

The qualities which participants identified as defining their 'ideal priest' fell into three main categories. The most-mentioned qualities were *pastoral*; caring, empathic, prayerful, humble, self-sacrificing, a good listener, non-judgemental, encouraging, able to 'get on with people of all ages and backgrounds'. The second largest group of qualities related to *teaching* ability; enthusiasm for the gospel and Bible teaching, being a good communicator and a facilitator of other people's development, intelligent and enquiring. The least mentioned group pertained to *leadership*, which was only emphasised by James, himself a business manager, who cited organisational ability, being a good strategic planner and general manager. In their lack of emphasis on leadership qualities, the participants, as a group, were at variance with the Criteria for Selection for Ordained Ministry (ABM, 1993). It is noteworthy that in defining their concept of the 'ideal priest', none of the participants referred to the Church's Criteria for Selection.

Asked to assess themselves against their own criteria, all the participants voiced self-doubt, perceiving their ideals as aspirational rather than already attained. As Paul said, 'I would like to fit them, and my aim is to fit them. It is something that in many ways you cannot start to do until you are ordained'. While all participants experienced uncertainties at some stage of their vocational journey, it is clear that some were initially inhibited by the notion of a priestly 'mould' which they must necessarily fit. For Adrian, one aspect of this 'mould' was his feeling that 'absolute certainty' about God's calling is a pre-requisite, whereas his sense of vocation is more tentative. He did not, therefore, explore his vocation until mid-life. Mark also delayed investigating his calling until middle-age because of class-based preconceptions of priesthood. He remarked,

At that time I thought priests were middle class academics...white, male, who could mix in the highest circles...whereas I was from a working class background with very little academic qualifications, very, very little, well no management experience...That's why I think there was this real sense of, I can't do this, it's not me, I don't come from there...I didn't know any working class priests at all.

Mark's sense of social inferiority in relation to priestly models is not without foundation (cf. Dewar, 2000, Hodge and Mantle, 2001), and his perception of a

male hegemony in the priesthood was factually correct prior to November 1993. Until that date, the masculine paradigm necessarily constrained concepts of ordained ministry; Carolyn, for example, recalls her childhood prayer, 'Dear God, please let me be a man, so I can be a vicar'. Male discourses of priesthood still pertain in some quarters (see Furlong, 1998, Dewar, 2000, Rees, 2002), although only one participant in this study, Andrew, subscribed to the view that women should not be ordained.

Andrew's understanding of priesthood was very much shaped by his interpretations of submission and authority within the Church, and a feeling that one should wait for one's vocation to be recognised by those in authority, then act in obedience to their call. He is not alone in this understanding (see Archbishops' Council, 1985), although in his case, his personal reticence may be linked to his cultural heritage as an Afro-Caribbean who came to England in the 1950s. This may have influenced his perceptions of leadership in the Church (cf. ABM, 1993:95), whose meta-narrative of authority and submission can, as Percy (1996) asserts, reify power relations, and thereby effectively perpetuate the white, middle-class hegemony. That this prohibited Andrew's exploration of vocation until his fifties can only be supposition, however, since he could not be drawn to discuss the matter.

Even where local church leaders identify a potential vocation in a church member, the Church nowadays expects all *external confirmation* to be balanced by a strong *inner sense* of calling to ministry (ABM, 1993). Conversely, the Church requires that candidates are not only able to articulate their personal sense of vocation, but to describe how 'others have confirmed it' (ABM, 1993:82), and an obvious way to do this is to canvass the views of others whose opinion one respects.

Personal Testing of the Sense of Calling

All the participants in this study began by sharing their feelings with immediate family. Only Anneke experienced opposition at this stage, as her parents were offended by her leaving the family's Reformed denomination. For a while this caused a major family rift. Describing the scenario, she said -

I'm a nothing and so on, and if I wouldn't do my curacy in the [other] Church it wouldn't be worth living for them any more...My Mum was in tears and my father was – ooph! It was terrible, really, really terrible.

Anneke's story of perseverance illustrates the tenacity with which this sense of God's calling grips a person. Both Carolyn and Mark had to overcome major health obstacles to candidature for ordination training, and Adrian had to undergo the intrusive and challenging process of gaining a Faculty from the Archbishops (see note in Chapter 2), because he had been divorced and re-married. Paul had lived abroad since childhood, so to meet residential qualifications he took the risk of moving to England to begin theological training, at his own expense, before applying for ordination. His story demonstrates the intense involvement of immediate family in a candidate's vocation (see ABM, 1997b), since he is married with small children, and his wife worked to support him during his training - as do many other spouses.

Overcoming barriers may be viewed by both candidates and selectors as confirmation of vocation, but, undue tenacity might be indicative of underlying pathology (Melinsky, 1992), so opinions of third parties are sought. Since the various functions performed by the participants in their local church communities afforded them opportunity to 'practise' aspects of priestly ministry against which others could evaluate their calling, the affirmation of colleagues and other church members is of paramount importance. In particular, the affirmation of the person's parish priest is a pre-requisite for a potential candidate to begin the diocesan discernment process, and ultimately, the national selection process requires three lengthy personal references in addition to the candidate's diocesan sponsoring papers.

Experiences of the Diocesan Processes for Discerning Vocations

One of the first concerns voiced by candidates at the Selection Conferences I observed related to the differences in diocesan pre-Selection Conference procedures. Candidates felt that preparation for Selection Conference was 'not a level playing field', a concern also raised in the 1995 Review of Selection Procedures (ABM). The experiences of participants in this study confirm

Kuhrt's (2001) finding that little has improved in this regard during the intervening period.

Diocesan discernment processes for participants in this study varied in length between six months and two years. Carolyn had the shortest preparation, and though it was 'incredibly affirming', she felt she had been 'pushed through' because the DDO 'said he wanted it done before the next training budget' - despite the ABM (1995:16) policy statement that procedures 'must not be finance led'. She 'felt cheated' when she discovered that other candidates 'took two or three years to get through the system', which had taken her less than six months.

There were also significant procedural variations. The number of interviews which the participants underwent in their dioceses before attending a national Selection Conference varied from two to more than thirteen, and there were also variations in the amount and content of reading required; only Paul was asked to write essays. Anneke, Mark and David underwent some form of 'mock' selection conference, but the remaining participants had no such practice.

Less than half the research group – Tanya, James, Adrian, Paul and Warren - reported meetings with a Diocesan Vocations Adviser (VA), whose function they perceived as being essentially a primary discernment 'filter'. The VA was understood as part of the diocesan discernment team, reporting to the Diocesan Director of Ordinands (DDO). James's DDO, for example, had selected the VA he required him to see, from several in the diocese whose job it is to give advice and guidance about broader issues of vocation, but, James says, 'the DDO selects the one you go to see'. Background research revealed that some dioceses do not have a Vocations Adviser, and that some Director of Ordinands posts subsume the vocations advisory function. Many of the participants seemed uncertain whether they had seen a VA or not, as the function of different diocesan discernment personnel was often not clarified. Paul, for example, did not know that his DDO was also the diocesan Vocations Adviser, and Carolyn thought she might have seen the VA, but 'he never outlined his role clearly'. Whether or not the participants in this research had seen their

Diocesan Vocations Adviser, none felt that they had been encouraged to consider broader aspects of vocation. Although for most this was not an issue at the time, Carolyn felt, in retrospect, that she would have benefited from discussing the various options.

The extent to which individual interviewers challenged and probed candidates' vocational motivations varied greatly. Paul, Adrian, Warren and David felt that the diocesan process was very thorough and challenging. Paul rated his DDO as 'very good, in many ways more thorough than the Conference...I really can't speak highly enough of him'. Anneke, James and Mark found the interviews challenging in parts, while Carolyn, Tanya, Andrew and Patrick felt their diocesan discernment experiences had been undemanding. Patrick 'didn't find it helpful at all'; he had expected the DDO to be 'a bit more confrontational'. Tanya felt that although the personnel she saw made a 'perfectly sincere effort to see whether [she] was a reasonable kind of person', the enquiry was not very deep: 'I just don't think anything very profound was going on here'.

The listening skills of some interviewers in the diocesan discernment process were held in question by several participants, who felt that some interviewers were more keen to talk than listen; as Tanya said, 'A lot of people did a lot of talking to me last year'. Some candidates require particularly skilled, astute questioning and listening to illuminate their attributes to the full. David, for example, finds self-promotion difficult, and he omitted to reveal some valuable prior experiences:

We overlooked [my parish work] big-time. I didn't talk about – I don't – some people are very brash...pushing forward your strengths. I don't push forward my strengths.

Andrew, too, was extremely self-effacing and softly-spoken. He was reluctant to assert himself when his DDO failed to make contact for two years after his first interview; 'I had an interview with the DDO then that's all I heard of it,' he said. The DDO eventually contacted him to ask if he was still interested in ordination, and it seems that the process then moved quickly, and 'in a matter of weeks', he was booked at a Selection Conference. Failure to elicit pertinent information from these candidates may have disadvantaged them in some

measure in the selection process, as neither candidate was ultimately recommended for ordination training.

All participants were required to see at least two Examining Chaplains, who may be given specific topics to examine to supplement the DDO's investigations. These chaplains are chosen by the DDO, and are usually other diocesan clergy, although lay people may also be used. Not all are equally well qualified for the role, as Carolyn found. She said that one Examining Chaplain 'spent about two and a half hours just pouring his heart out to me about his wife who had died, and so the roles were suddenly changed'. She offered her own interpretation of this behaviour:

He didn't ask me anything particularly searching, but I suppose I'd demonstrated the sort of person I was because I'd coped well with what he was saying, and I wonder if that wasn't a ploy – was he genuinely upset or was he testing me?

Whatever the reasons for this apparently unconventional behaviour, it would not normally be regarded as appropriate, ethical practice in a vocational discernment interview.

Understanding of the principals of ethical practice is an aspect of competence in depth interviewing which Carolyn's experience suggests is sometimes lacking, a supposition supported by other participants' stories, especially in relation to bias. The clergy gate-keeper through whom Anneke needed to approach her DDO allowed his cultural prejudices to interfere with his judgement of her vocation:

He couldn't really stand [people from my country], so there was a level which made support and even conversations very awkward, or impossible even...I now know he even made some not so nice remarks about me to the DDO.

In addition, as she later discovered, her DDO contravened a confidentiality agreement by discussing with the aforementioned cleric 'things [she] had specifically asked [him] to treat in confidence'. Consequently, she withdrew her application, and reapplied in a new diocese when she transferred jobs.

Tanya had a very different experience of the operation of pre-judgements, where she felt the diocesan personnel she met were intimidated by a university lecturer. The DDO 'was extremely jumpy', she said –

He just said, sort of, "How do you think you can relate to normal people?"...He had this outrageous idea of what I would be ... You know, how can this young intellectual woman possibly relate? I mean, there he was sitting there failing spectacularly to relate to me, asking me how I could possibly be a clergy woman.

He asked you that directly?

Oh yes, astonishing! Really bizarre.

A reverse set of pre-assumptions obtained when Tanya went to see the Bishop, who knew her father. She felt that this predisposed the Bishop in her favour, as he 'is pro-academics, and pro-clergy families, so unlike other people in the diocese he had no problem with my being a don'. This might be viewed as a healthy counterbalance to the negative assumptions of the DDO, or alternatively, as indication that traditional notions of qualifications for priesthood persist (cf. Dewar, 2000, Hodge and Mantle, 2001). Clearly, the impartiality of assessments of vocational potential may be prejudiced when they are 'oriented by the concerns and vantage point' (Warnke, 1987:73) of the assessor.

Prejudice, however, need not necessarily present as bias, a Gadamerian (1960) assertion confirmed by Anneke's experience in her second diocese, where the sponsoring Chaplain allowed her 'text [to] present itself in all its otherness and thus assert its own truth' (Gadamer, 1999:269). Despite his personal opposition to the ordination of women, the Chaplain supported Anneke's application enthusiastically. Similarly, though Carolyn experienced difficulty with one Examining Chaplain, whom she found 'very strange' (she felt he was uncomfortable with women), after relating her experience of the interview to her DDO, he chose to lay aside this particular clerical assessment in favour of the 'truth' of her own narrative.

Regardless of their criticisms of various aspects of the diocesan procedures, the majority of the participants found the process as a whole affirming. They generally rated their self-confidence as moderate to high by the time they reached the national Selection Conference. Only Tanya felt that her confidence was self-generated, rising above a somewhat negative diocesan discernment experience. Of the six participants who were not ultimately recommended for training by the national selectors, Carolyn and James had felt extremely confident at the end of their diocesan discernment processes, while Adrian, Mark, David and Andrew felt fairly confident of success. In each case, they felt justified in their optimism by their DDOs or sponsoring Bishops. Carolyn's DDO, for example, as she was leaving her first interview with him, squeezed her shoulder and said, 'You're going to sail through this'. While accepting that DDOs will normally aim to boost the self-confidence of their candidates before a Selection Conference, it must be acknowledged that raising expectations unrealistically carries its own negative potential. If a candidate, like Carolyn, subsequently fails to be recommended for training, the reversal is all the more traumatic (Butler, 1994, ABM, 1997b).

Experiences of National Selection Conference

Prior self-confidence does not necessarily assuage pre-Conference anxiety, as the experience of my research group indicates. Tanya, for example, was 'very worried' despite her innate self-confidence 'because [she] had heard such anecdotal horror stories', and Anneke was anxious about communicating under stress in her second language. As she said, 'There was an awful lot at stake for all of us [and] some reactions were clearly stress reactions'. She noticed candidates 'testing each other out to gauge acceptance levels', although, in common with all the participants, she appreciated the mutual support and fellowship which quickly overcame any sense of threat. This was universally considered the most noteworthy aspect of the Conferences.

Understandably, 'impression management' was a general concern for most candidates. Tanya, for example, was afraid of appearing too forceful for a priestly role, a fear exacerbated by the prior attitude of her DDO. Anneke was concerned about appropriate behaviour at the opening worship session. She

remembers seeing other people (Selectors and candidates) ‘walking in [to Chapel] not even acknowledging the altar, and thinking, if I genuflect now are they going to brand me as one of those bloody Catholics?’ David and James recalled uncertainties about appropriate mode of dress, and all participants mentioned feeling self-conscious at the first meal-time.

Although candidates were informed at the start of the Conferences that they were not under observation during worship and social periods, this engendered universal scepticism. As Adrian said,

They were listening to what you were saying. They’re not watching, they’re listening. So that if you said over lunch, I really don’t believe that Jesus is the Son of God, they’re not gonna let that go by are they? So that’s nonsense. It’s just pretending to do something that they can’t actually do.

Warren, a lawyer, likened the problem to a courtroom setting where the Judge instructs the jury to disregard certain statements, which cannot, in reality, be erased from their minds; likewise, candidates’ social behaviour cannot be discounted.

Many participants felt that Selectors should be observing the way candidates interact in every situation, in order to gain a well-rounded perspective. Patrick maintained that observation was necessary to assess the consistency of candidates’ behaviour, saying.

You can say all the right things in an interview but if your life is not matching up to what you’re professing, then there’s gotta be some problem. If I went down the pub, for example, and got off my face, if that didn’t affect it I’d be shocked. What I understood by that [not being observed] is that they just wanted us to be ourselves.

Nevertheless, the sense of being watched inevitably created a feeling of ‘wanting to give what was required’. James felt that ‘at meal-times you had to be on your best behaviour and do your bit’, although he ‘wasn’t sure what image they were looking for’. Carolyn felt, in hindsight, that she ‘should have put on more of a front’, because she knew ‘from speaking to other people they felt very uncomfortable at meal-times and things’, whereas she had been very relaxed.

Anxiety was exacerbated for some candidates by the practical arrangements at the Conferences. For example, David and Adrian remarked on the somewhat daunting arrangement of the meeting lounge, with candidates sitting in high-backed chairs set around the perimeter, 'like an old people's home'. Sounds from antiquated plumbing, or through thin partition walls between bedrooms, disturbed the sleep of many candidates, especially at the second Conference where the venue was noted for undue noise. Warren and Mark particularly remarked on the stress caused by the consequent tiredness. This was especially problematic for Mark, who was recovering from an illness which meant that he tires easily, and his anxiety was increased by discovering, on the first evening, that his interviews had been scheduled for the afternoon period, when his energy level is low. His DDO had informed the Conference Secretary of this, and he had medical clearance from the Ministry Division doctor, but he 'didn't want to say anything in case they thought, this man can't manage'. He was uncertain whether this was a deliberate test of his stamina, or a genuine failure in communication.

Two more general communication failures occurred at the second Selection Conference. One concerned the fact that it was open to male candidates only, which caused some degree of anxiety for Warren, Mark, David and Adrian. They were afraid they had accidentally been registered as opposing women's ordination, until they discovered the strategic reasons for the arrangement. The second communication failure concerned the organisation of the first evening meal, which followed the pattern in use until 2001, whereby the candidates do not meet the Selectors until after dinner.¹ This 'old' model seemed to exacerbate the initial stress for some candidates, because it confounded the expectations raised by the pre-Conference literature that the discernment process was a mutual exploration (ABM, 1995) between candidates and Selectors. As Adrian put it:

¹Under the new model, used at the first Conference, the Selectors join candidates for the evening meal.

I was bemused that the Selectors weren't at dinner, and we weren't told why they weren't, so it was a bit like secret police almost – you wonder what on earth is going on, and why the hell had no-one bothered to tell us that that's the procedure.

Under the 'old' model of Selection Conferences, no exercises or tests were conducted during the first evening, leaving candidates free to socialise. Candidates reported that this increased the tension by delaying the anticipated assessments, so under the new (now current) design, the Personal Inventory Questionnaire is completed after the first evening meal.

The Personal Inventory is a questionnaire consisting of sixteen open questions grouped around the themes addressed by the three selection interviewers, the Senior Selector, the Pastoral Selector and the Educational Selector. The aim is to 'offer stimuli and opening prompts to candidates' (ABM, 1996b:48) to help them articulate their sense of calling, and to provide a framework for the subsequent selection interviews. Candidates are instructed to write their answers as they occur to them, rather than deliberating at length; the maximum time allowed for each question is thirteen minutes. With exploratory questions such as, 'How has your call to ordination changed you?', or 'Outline the occasion when your faith was most challenged. How have you resolved this?' (ABM, 1996b:113-115), a majority of the participants (eight) found this time-scale too demanding. Although they agreed that the timing prevented 'waffle', they also felt that it generated spurious or shallow 'knee-jerk' answers. Carolyn, for example, in response to a question about anger, says she 'put down really silly things...that were really petty in comparison with the things that make me feel angry'. Anneke found the time pressure on the Personal Inventory 'quite appalling'. She said,

I mean, they're very personal questions. You may have prepared for ages beforehand, but you do know what's at stake. You sit there and you start shaking, you might have a new idea or insight and didn't have enough time to pursue it in thirteen minutes.

Tanya made the point that the timing might present difficulties for 'someone with less experience of writing', and Paul was concerned that, at speed, his writing becomes illegible. David has a form of dyslexia, which necessitates him writing at a slow, deliberate pace, so he found all the written exercises

‘traumatic’, as did Andrew, whose Caribbean schooling had emphasised ‘correctness over speed’.

Of the three types of written task, the cognitive tests created the most anxiety. This may be partly due to lack of clarity regarding the mechanics and purpose of the tests; none of the participants in this study fully understood why they were used. Although the tests did not unduly disturb Warren, he said,

I can’t actually see necessarily how doing those tests helps the Selectors assess your ability to undertake a course in theology.

David, Carolyn, Tanya and James were unsure of the weighting of the tests, in the decision making process. David said,

They said it doesn’t count for anything, but I’m not sure whether it does or it doesn’t...I think they were more heavily weighted than they let on.

Although Adrian felt the contrary, that the cognitive tests were ‘built up, actually, to be more than they were’, this ‘build up’ itself generated anxiety which he felt outweighed the potential value of the tests. Tanya felt that the claim, stated by the Conference Secretary, that there is ‘no Pass or Fail’ in psychometric tests, was ‘disingenuous’: ‘of course there’s a point below which you fail, or why use them?’ she said.

As with all psychometric assessments, which are administered to a prescribed script and are very precisely timed, speed was again an issue for most candidates, especially those with language difficulties. David was so stressed by the necessity to work fast that he felt he would have been unable to cope with an interview straight afterwards, while Andrew needed help from the Conference Secretary to understand the questions, as he was unused to the demands of this type of assessment. He said,

I’m not accustomed to time limits. I left school years and years ago an’ my schoolin’ emphasised correctness not speed...They should make room for people like me who are not everyday into those quick tests, quick writin’ an’ that.

Both David and Andrew scored ‘below average’ in the cognitive tests, although their scores should have been interpreted in the light of their particular problems. Tanya felt that the tests ‘were pitched too high for the variety of

people there'. 'Sentence arranging was quite subtle, and you would have to be quite experienced to get it', she said. She also judged the subject matter to be potentially discriminatory, 'daunting in a way which was not relevant to the test', which underscores concerns regarding the normalising power of prescriptive models of assessment (see, for example, ABM, 2000).

The written exercise, which was different for each Conference attended by the participants in this study, presented fewer problems than the exercises described above. The first group was asked to write a three-minute radio talk for 'Thought for the Day', and the second to design a programme for a parish church centenary celebration, in two hundred and fifty words. Since there is no time limit, candidates can work at their own pace, which also mitigates language difficulties. The main issue was one of unfamiliarity with the underpinning concepts and lack of sympathy with the aims of the task. Carolyn, for example, felt there was an erroneous assumption that all candidates had heard 'Thought for the Day' and would understand what was required, and Patrick, from his standpoint as an Evangelical, was out of sympathy with the idea of giving a radio talk which precluded gospel preaching. The centenary celebrations presented no such issues.

The remaining exercise was conducted in two groups, running concurrently. Each group is asked to form a committee, with each member taking turns as the Chairperson. The three Selectors for each group observe the interactions from strategic points around the room, and 'the candidates are instructed to conduct themselves as if the Selectors were not there' (ABM, 1996b:44). For Carolyn, Tanya, Adrian, Paul, James and Mark the group exercise presented no problems; they approached it with equanimity based on their real-life committee experiences. For the remaining participants the exercise was a source of concern. Anneke 'was petrified of it' because she was afraid that she would present herself ineffectively in a foreign language. Patrick, one of the youngest candidates, found the exercise difficult due to lack of life experience. He had never encountered the issues covered, and there wasn't enough time to 'get [his] head around them'. He felt they were essentially social issues and 'sensed [he] wouldn't know what to do about it', which left him feeling

‘largely ignorant and unable to offer any intelligent comments’. For Andrew, lack of experience as a committee Chairman was the problem, and he ‘fell short’ because he was unsure of the expectations of the role.

Warren ‘dreaded’ the group exercise, ‘the whole business about not knowing what it’s going to be, and how it works and the rest of it’, although it was not as bad as he had expected. Unlike David, he found that his group participated and debated well, whereas David declared his group exercise ‘a disaster’ because ‘the group wasn’t warmed up to the idea... The overall effect for me was like pulling teeth’. Clearly, the ease of leadership is affected by where one is placed in the order of rotation, since David was first to chair his group. In addition, being first meant that he had to assimilate the written text of the role-play scenario quickly, which caused particular difficulties with his dyslexia. However, as Warren pointed out, leading towards the end of the exercise can also be problematic because ‘the points that were supposed to be probed [by later group leaders] have already been covered’.

The various exercises undertaken by the candidates are interleaved with their individual selection interviews, the Personal Inventory providing a basis for the dialogue (as outlined in Chapter 2). The stated aim of the interviews is ‘to get the best out of each candidate’ by adopting ‘a supportive and encouraging manner’ (ABM, 1996b:55), and this was fulfilled in the experience of many of the participants in this study, in part if not totally. Tanya, for instance, went to her Selection Conference ‘with terrifying expectations of rampant prejudice’, but found only acceptance and encouragement. Her main criticism was that the interviews lacked depth. Andrew also felt accepted, despite having expressed his opposition to women’s ordination in a manner which could have caused offence (he had said he would not accept the Eucharist from a female priest because he believes that ‘nothing unclean should go in the Holy of Holies’); he said his Selectors ‘made him feel comfortable’. Paul also found his interviews more relaxed than comparable secular experiences. He felt that, by the end of the Conference, the Selectors knew him well enough to make a valid assessment of his calling, a point with which Warren disagreed. Although he also found his Selectors affirming, he believes it impossible to ‘know a person

in three short interviews', and that even with collateral evidence 'what they're seeing is a picture of the person, rather than the person'. James, whose experience was rather less positive, agreed with Warren, feeling that Selectors should 'take more notice of the parish you're coming from where people have known you a long time'. This raises concerns regarding the use of written references, which participants universally felt were under-utilised, if not totally ignored, a point which caused them some embarrassment because the references are demanding and time-consuming for their referees.

Regardless of their evaluations of the selection process, none of the participants questioned the sincerity of the Selectors. Paul felt that –

The way all the interviewers and the secretary presented as being serious in what they were doing both in the interviews and in the worship...helped assure me that whatever happened I wasn't being treated lightly or flippantly.

Patrick sensed the Selectors 'felt the weight of responsibility on them' and were genuinely concerned to find 'what's right for [him]'; he found the interviews more searching than those in his diocese. Warren also remarked on the penetrating nature of some of his interviews; the Senior Selector was 'very probing, very tenacious' in encouraging him to articulate his sense of calling, which he found difficult to express. He recalls that he had a 'heavy feeling that [he] just hadn't connected', but as he was leaving the interview he spontaneously said,

Look, there is actually nothing else that sets me on fire. Just that sentence. And his eyes lit up, that's all I can say, there was nothing wildly expressive, but just, there was a glint, and I thought, I'm glad I said that, I think it's said something about me to him that he understands.

Warren's experience of sudden empathy concurs with Holloway's (1997:16) assertion that, when discussing spiritual experience, mutual understanding is only truly possible between people 'who have also encountered these mysteries'.

Such mutual empathy can have its pitfalls, however, as illustrated by Carolyn's experience with her Educational interviewer, a 'fellow smoker' with whom she had 'built up a nice relationship over the few days':

You know, we smoked together and we laughed together, a real jokey friendship. We had great fun.

Contrary to the guidelines (ABM, 1996b:60), which instruct Selectors not to 'stray into other Selector's areas', this Selector's questioning had focussed on the Pastoral issue of an illness (from which Carolyn was now recovering), rather than the designated educational issues. The Selector appears to have fallen into a trap identified in the Selector Handbook (1996b:51, 60), which says,

Selection interviews are not the same as...counselling interviews... Senior Selectors and Educational Selectors need to beware of the tendency to become Pastoral Selectors!

The Selector then exacerbated this contravention by asking;

Is there anything from the other interviews that you would like to discuss; anything that when we are round the table [*in deliberations*] I can put your point of view across.

Carolyn, by her own admission a trusting and friendly person, interpreted this as indicating a genuine friendship, and replied that there were 'a couple of things', to which the Selector responded, 'Tell you what, let's go outside and have a cigarette and discuss those' [*mimicking her conspiratorial tone*].

Carolyn described what happened next:

So off we went and had a fag and discussed those [things], but it didn't feel right because we weren't meant to be doing that –

You felt like naughty school girls?

Exactly, so we were doing that sort of hiding round the back of the building...

How much longer were you with her chatting outside?

Oh, for some time, we went beyond the interview time, in a sense, but we were chatting about general things.

As the Selector Handbook (ABM, 1996b:57) warns, if a Selector is overly encouraging, candidates may gain the wrong impression, and 'they could get a

shock if they find they do not get recommended after all', which was precisely Carolyn's experience. She felt that her honesty had rebounded:

I was so honest with her, but I think I should have just left it...
At the end [of the Conference], I said goodbye to all the Selectors, but she was the only one who sort of came forward and gave me a hug, I mean a real proper big squeeze, and said, "I hope it all goes well". And we went out for a last fag before we left...Her report was the worst, and I was really shocked.

Carolyn's Pastoral interview, however, illustrates an alternative outcome of the hermeneutic dynamic operating in all interview situations, where each party, overtly or covertly, interprets the other's words and behaviour. This Selector adopted a friendly, but 'distanciated' stance, though Carolyn perceived this as insecurity founded on personality mismatch -

because I was bright and bubbly and confident, and she didn't strike me as - she was certainly confident, but it was a very cool sort of confidence that she, um showed, so I think we are very different people and she felt uncomfortable with me...I did feel that she felt insecure, and (*slight pause*) I felt like I was in control of the interview.

The sense of mismatch may have been correct, in light of the deep seriousness with which the Selectors approached their part in the discernment process, compared with Carolyn's projected light-heartedness. Her interpretation of the situation, however, seems to have been incorrect. She expected a negative report from this interview, but it was 'the most glowing report out of the lot', so Carolyn feels, in retrospect, that she 'may have got [the Selector] a bit wrong perhaps'.

This reciprocal pre-judgement begins even before the Selection Conference starts, when all parties receive their relevant conference papers. The Selectors inevitably gain impressions of the candidates they are to interview from their documentation, and the candidates form an image of each Selector from the profiles supplied with the joining instructions. These preconceptions can generate misinterpretations unless they are brought to consciousness and set aside, as several participants found. James's interview with the Educational Selector was a case in point. Both interviewer and interviewee clearly approached the interview with preconceptions of the other; both are licensed

Lay Readers, which James thought ‘might be a stumbling block’. Betraying his own hierarchical pre-understandings of priesthood James said,

He kept on about why didn’t I want to continue to be a Reader. He majored on that. I wasn’t going to convince him that I had a calling to go beyond that – because I wasn’t sure whether he’d been through the same process [*ie. selection for ordination training, James’s implication being that this Selector may have been unsuccessful*].

Carolyn’s interview with her Senior Selector also suffered from bilateral preconceptions. This Selector, like the Educational Selector, concentrated on Carolyn’s illness, and she said.

He looked at me as if I was ill, not a person with a disability. The interesting thing I actually thought was in my favour - which I actually don’t think it was now ...when we had this introductory thing in the evening, and I knew then that he was going to be one of my Selectors, he said his daughter had MS, and I thought, Oh that’s going to be to my advantage because there won’t be any discrimination. Then afterwards, I wondered if his daughter’s really ill or something, and I wondered if it had clouded what he was saying...I was very honest about things, and I wonder if perhaps I shouldn’t have been.

The issue of pre-assumptions, for Adrian, centred on style of churchmanship and the fact that he is divorced and remarried, regarding which a Faculty had been granted by the Archbishops (see House of Bishops, 2000), enabling him to attend the Conference. Adrian describes himself as ‘liberal Catholic’, but his Senior Selector was an Evangelical, and Adrian gained the impression that, on the basis of his registration documents, the Selector had ‘made up his mind before [he] walked in the door’. Adrian’s description of the interview is quoted at length as it illustrates very clearly the potentially destructive impact of pre-assumptions in interview situations:

Well, [the Selector] being an Evangelical - which somebody on the conference had warned me about, so I was a bit unnerved about that anyway...When I came out I thought it had gone quite well, considering that I was alert to his churchmanship and so on – not that I was going to be very guarded, but just that I was very conscious of it.

Are you saying that, knowing he was an Evangelical you assumed that he was not going to be pro divorced priests, and you felt that this showed?

Yes, and I can prove it to you, twice – one was, in the Inventory there was a question about experience of other church traditions not familiar to you...I wrote about one of these parishes I've encountered in his area. I just said the worship is really poor, and so on...then underneath I said, 'I've also experienced a very positive form of churchmanship different from my own, which was a Baptist church...and it was wonderful'. All he asked me about was the first. He was not interested in the Baptist one at all. He was interested in the fact that it was a low Anglican Church I was negative about.

But he didn't make direct reference to your divorce?

Yes he did – my DDO said "It will not be mentioned. They will know, but it's been done. Their 'boss' has dealt with it."

To clarify – was the DDO's attitude that it actually shouldn't be mentioned, because having been dealt with, it's not pertinent?

Yes, exactly. They're testing my vocation; they're not looking at my previous marriage, otherwise what's the point of the Faculty? And he trod, therefore, on ground which I think is unethical, because he said to me – on two fronts really – he made comment of it, so that he let me know that he knew. He made one reference where he said that "you obviously had an affair", which I thought was a bit unacceptable.

Are you now saying that you felt the use of that word 'affair' contained value judgements?

Absolutely – there's lots of ways to say it... So I said yes, but I felt, you can't judge me on that because it's already been dealt with...He was making decisions about me – I was walking into a trap and there was literally nothing I could do about it. So, one was the 'affair'. The other was that he really challenged me about living in sin. He basically said to me "The Church's teaching is clear on co-habitation, and you lived with [your wife], and how can you marry the two together?" And I think by now I was quite warm, I was beginning to feel quite irritated by it...It was such a cutting question.

You said 'cutting'. Did you find this aggressive?

Yes. He certainly wasn't neutral. There was nothing neutral about the interview, to be honest...The final element of this conversation – it was all quite devastating really – he suggested...that I would almost be schizophrenic, in that I would accept the Church's authority, being within the Anglican tradition, and the teaching of the Church, and that I would teach privately something different to my congregation. He more or less told me that. And I said 'No, I wouldn't do that'... And I said that just as I wouldn't do that within an educational context, I wouldn't do it in the Church.

He 'more or less' told you?

No, he was explicit. He challenged me – which again I think is quite censorious and quite shocking, really - in his report...he said (the phrase I'll remember to my dying day) that he thought I "would not uphold the consensus fidei".

As both Carolyn's and Adrian's narratives demonstrate, knowing facts about one's assessors prior to the interviews can set up certain expectations. If these are negative, an unnecessarily adversarial atmosphere may be generated. Arguably, it is the interviewer's task to mitigate any such climate, and a competent and aware interviewer will do so, as David experienced. Like Adrian, he also approached one of his interviews with negative preconceptions, framed by the Pastoral Selector's biographical profile, which stated that she is a Social Worker. He found this image 'threatening', and thought, 'P.C. or what! I'm gonna have to be very careful what I say'. However, she quickly put him at ease, and he described her as 'the most professional' of all his Selectors, 'which was reflected in her report'.

The issue of interviewer competence was raised by several participants, echoing concerns expressed five years previously in the 'Review of Selection Procedures' (ABM, 1995). Anneke, for example, felt that her interviewers were not skilled in eliciting information from her, that she 'was pushing a bit to get the information across'. Tanya questioned the challenging/probing skills of the interviewers; for her the Conference 'was an absolute damp squib. [She] just didn't feel tested'. James was irritated by one Selector's vagueness and inability to clarify, remarking, 'I had to clarify on more than one occasion with that particular interviewer'. David also commented on one Selector's vagueness, who made 'tenuous links' in his interpretations, and whose body-language 'was uncomfortable...he giggled, and that made me uncomfortable'. Adrian, who is trained in listening skills, rated the skills of his interviewers as 'not very good'. Mark, also trained in interview skills, felt that he would have been critical of the Selectors' interview skills even if he had been recommended. His Senior Selector opened the door to him, then went and sat down with his back to him and started making notes, leaving Mark sitting waiting to be addressed. He said the behaviour felt 'head-masterish', and when

the interview commenced the Selector asked 'closed and aggressive questions, and disclosed his own opinion'; he lacked ability to 'draw out the best response from candidates'.

Despite the difficult experiences of some participants, most left their Selection Conference with their level of self-confidence intact. Even Adrian reported that he 'came out feeling quite good'. Andrew's confidence was slightly diminished, largely because of the tests and exercises, and only Warren felt that his prior confidence had been severely dented, leaving him feeling 'immensely gloomy and despondent'. He describes his return home:

And my wife caught [my mood] when I got home as well, and we just went through some days of really deep anguish...having been through this life event...probably one of, if not the most important event of my life, that Selection Conference...Actually the Selection Conference is pivotal in terms of one's life...I felt completely physically, emotionally, spiritually washed out at the end of it.

Nearly all the participants remarked on this post-Conference exhaustion, and many found the waiting period between leaving the Selection Conference and receiving the Selectors' reports very tense, with emotions swinging between optimism and despondency. As Warren's experience illustrates, this also affects candidates' immediate families, and their local church supporters, particularly their parish priest, may be similarly 'on edge', since the verdict is often felt to reflect on them personally (ABM, 1997a and b).

Back in the Diocese: Receiving the Conference Report

The Selectors recommended Anneke, Tanya, Paul, Patrick and Warren for ordination training. In the excitement and relief of hearing the positive result, they remember little of the contents of Selectors' reports, as passed on by their DDOs or Bishops. No comments were recalled as causing particular surprise or alarm. In fact, Warren never received any verbal feedback beyond the verdict. Carolyn, James, Adrian, Mark, David and Andrew were not recommended for training, and they recall vividly receiving feedback on the Selectors' reports.

Carolyn's shock at not being recommended was greatly exacerbated by some administrative mismanagement in which her Conference report was sent to the

wrong address. Having heard nothing three days after the due date for receiving the Conference report she contacted her DDO, who had not received it. So she then telephoned the Bishop, who she felt was 'very abrupt' with her, saying, 'I haven't received your report yet. I don't know what's going on. I'll let you know'. She said,

That was the whole, sort of, thing, we'll let you know, you don't have to chase. So I felt awful... So then the DDO phoned me, and he said, "Oh... my dear, I'm so sorry. The report had been sent to the new Bishop at his old address. They've just faxed us a copy from Church House," he said, "I'm afraid you haven't got through".

The participants in this study were not allowed to see their Conference reports, as their Selection Conferences predated the implementation of the Data Protection Act in 2001. Some DDOs read the report verbatim to candidates, but others paraphrased what they regarded as the salient points. Many of the participants, like David, took careful notes to remind themselves of the content of the reports, although it should be noted that by the time this content was reiterated in the research interviews the words had been filtered at least twice, and therefore distortions are possible. However, the issue here is not the exact accuracy of the participants' recollections, but the tenor of the reports *as they heard them*, the feelings that were generated, and how these were handled by diocesan personnel. As 'The Care of Candidates' (ABM, 1997b) notes,

The manner in which the bishop's decision is communicated should be considered carefully... the candidate, especially if not recommended, will find it difficult to absorb detailed information at this initial stage.

When participants had left their Selection Conference 'feeling good', negative reports came as a great shock. The issue was highlighted by David's experience with his Senior Selector, whose interviewing skills he had judged 'very professional'. He had been challenging, but David said he 'was comfortable with it'. He felt their disagreement over their respective concepts of the Church had been minor, and did not feel unduly criticised, so the pejorative tone of this Selector's report was a shock. David's DDO read it to him, and he wrote it down verbatim. His notes of the report said:

“David has a romantic appreciation of the convert...and that is set in the context of coming from a bog-standard Irish Catholic background.”

He actually used that phrase?

His very words...He [the Selector] is Irish, he's from Cork. I don't disagree with what it means, that I'm from a Catholic family that comes from Ireland, but there are prejudicial - there's prejudice in that statement.

David's narrative is slightly confused at this point, concerning whether the Senior Selector, himself, described David's background as 'bog-standard Irish Catholic', or whether he wrote that the *candidate* so described himself. In either case, such terminology would usually be considered inappropriate for a formal report. Even if the phrase was the candidate's self-description, it might be expected that the interviewer would challenge this during the interview, and subsequently re-phrase it in the 'calm, Platonic' style (Foucault, 1976:116) of report writing, or justify the use of otherwise pejorative language. David denies using the phrase because it is neither his personal style of expression, nor does it accurately describe his upbringing, and feels deeply aggrieved by what he perceives as the Selector's evident personal prejudices.

David had a further shock from his Educational Selector's report, which referred to an aspect of the interview dialogue which, in David's recall, never occurred. He said,

He included in his report about how I dealt with...concepts in the prophet Amos, which I was unaware of.

So was he criticising you for not being aware of these arguments?

Yes, and the DDO asked me, “Did you say this?” And I said, No, I don't even understand it.

But did he actually come back to you on this during the interview?

No. His observation came back in the report, it was not discussed in the interview.

David's DDO lodged a formal complaint with the Ministry Division regarding use of the phrase 'bog-standard Irish Catholic', and also the reference made to

an apparently fictitious point of debate. The official response, passed on to David, was that since the matter concerned 'the candidate's word against the Selector's word', it was not possible to address it further. David feels that (contrary to the assertions of ABM, 1995) 'the process is not open and honest', and his experience substantiates Jamieson's (1997:34) criticism that decision 'ought to be open to greater scrutiny'.

The report from Adrian's Senior Selector is another example which appears to undermine earlier research findings indicating no churchmanship bias in Selectors' decisions (ABM, 1995). Once again, the report focussed on negative aspects of the interview dialogue, which appeared to confirm the Selector's own presuppositions, while ignoring evidence to the contrary. Adrian's vicar 'was furious', but Adrian himself 'was just punch-drunk'; he 'felt this great sense of injustice', hearing 'such half-truths' about himself. Terminology was, once again, an issue, the Bishop expressing concern at the Senior Selector's accusatory use of the term 'affair' in relation to Adrian's divorce, a matter outside the jurisdiction of a Selection Conference. The DDO was disturbed by the 'large mismatch' between Adrian's story of his Conference experiences and the Selectors' report.

Mark also experienced a discrepancy between his recollection of the selection interviews and the Selectors' written representations. Like Carolyn, he was recovering from illness, and had the necessary medical clearance to attend a Selection Conference, but unlike Carolyn, none of his Selectors addressed the issue directly. It is possible that they may have been unaware of the health issues, since they do not see the medical reports. The Conference Secretary is responsible for informing them of any matters he or she deems apposite, and in Mark's case the Secretary may have decided that having attained medical clearance, it was unnecessary to raise the matter. Nevertheless, a perception of poor health, and that he appeared unduly fatigued, were given as principal reasons for not recommending him for training. He felt he had been unfairly treated as his DDO's formal request that interviews be scheduled in the mornings, and his affirmative medical reports, appear to have gone unheeded. He did not recognise the Selectors' representation of himself (cf. Butler, 1994).

‘What they picked up on isn’t me’ he said, and his Bishop said he found the Selectors’ report ‘internally contradictory’. Both Mark and Carolyn felt particularly hurt that Selectors’ discernment of their potential appeared to have been circumscribed by overriding preconceptions of ‘disability’.

Mark’s and Carolyn’s DDOs both felt that the decisions were essentially financial in respect of their medical histories, despite assertions that financial considerations should not impinge on the discernment process (see ABM, 1995). It is noteworthy that of the six non-recommended participants four represented poor financial risks, in pension terms: two had health issues and two were over fifty years old.

With Andrew the issue of ‘unfairness’ lay not in the Conference report, but in his actual sponsorship to the Selection Conference. He had great difficulty with all the tests and exercises, from standpoints of language, education and occupational or church experience. He reported that the Selectors ‘said I was no use on the committee at all – I didn’t contribute nothin’ to the group exercise’. When questioned more closely, the report had actually stated that he ‘contributed little’ to the exercise, but the hyperbole is indicative of his sense of abject failure. As Thorp (1995) says in her paper *Journeying into the Landscape of Non Recommendation*, the sense of rejection may obliterate positive elements in the report. Butler (1994) perceives the experience of non-recommendation as a crisis in self-image, and Andrew’s self-image was certainly diminished; he felt he ‘had let everyone down, let the Vicar down, let the Bishop down’.

The ‘complex emotional reactions’ (ABM, 1997a:169) experienced by all candidates, particularly those who are not recommended for training, encompass all who have hitherto supported the candidate. When the person whose vocation they have so actively affirmed is rejected (for that is the way non-recommendation is usually perceived: see ABM, 1997b), supporters often experience this as a reflection on their own judgement. Relatives jump to the defence of the candidate, sharing (and sometimes exacerbating) their outrage, and ‘those with pastoral care tend to collude in this’ (Thorp, 2001:120). The

way Warren's wife shared his 'anguish' while awaiting the verdict has already been noted; David's wife 'burst into tears' and his 'Mother-in-law threw a wobbler' on hearing the negative result; James said his wife was 'more upset about it' than he was; Adrian's wife 'got very distressed, and his DDO 'had tears in his eyes'; Mark's wife shared his sense of outrage, as did his teenage children. James summed up the reaction of supporters in the local church community:

Your own parish priest says they've got it wrong because he's known you a bit longer. Certainly the people who have written your references, who have known you for 20 years, are thinking "what is the Church of England playing at?" I think that's what a lot of people felt on my behalf: people who've known you for a long time, who feel that you are right and suddenly somebody's discerned that you're not going to get into the club, and they think what a waste of time, and my parish priest says, "What is the point of me writing recommendations if nobody is going to take any notice of it?" That's all he can say. But, you just have to pick yourself up by the bootlaces and get on with it.

Adrian found his DDO extremely supportive, but experiences of the other participants who were not recommended were less affirming. Carolyn said, 'The follow-up has been appalling'. Though her Vicar was most supportive, she had 'no contact at all' with her previously encouraging DDO. James, similarly, had 'no word from his DDO'. He says,

You feel that the Church ought to be doing something for candidates who have not made it, to actually help them get through the process. You're put through a lot over several months, and there's lots of hurdles to clear, you've been tested and tested, by lots of people.

James felt that the diocesan process leading up to the Selection Conference built up expectations and confidence incrementally, which confirms Butler's (1994:4) assertion that 'each stage is likely to feel like encouragement to continue'. As he says,

Each hurdle you get over, you think gosh, we're getting near to this now...If they didn't think you had some sort of calling, why did they put you through all this? I know they say it's for other people to discern it, but you feel that once you're not there, give it two weeks and forget it. There's not been any contact by my parish clergy.

Like James, Mark found that support soon dwindled, and that he was left to 'get on with the job'. Bereavement is an apt analogy (see Butler, 1994, Thorp, 2001) as non-recommendation appears to generate the same sort of embarrassed avoidance of the sufferer. David described the changed attitude of his DDO:

His gentle openness he had before and supportiveness became guarded and closed and protective... He walked past me in the corridor, complete blank, he stonewalled me.

Andrew made no comment about the measure of support received, believing that the failure was all his. However, he knew that his Bishop was 'unhappy' with the advice from the Selectors, and said he was considering sending Andrew to 'a ministry college in London' (possibly meaning pre-theological training).

Adrian's Bishop chose to exercise his prerogative to set aside the Selectors' advice, and sponsor him for ordination training regardless, but the more usual response when a Bishop does not agree with the decision is to re-submit the candidate for selection at a later date, usually after a period of two years. James said he will be too old to re-apply in two years time, so as his Bishop chose not to over-rule the Selectors, 'that was [his] one shot at it'. Andrew will also be too old, unless his Bishop sponsors him directly to college. Mark and David have the option of re-applying in two years, but Carolyn's DDO 'felt that a mistake had been made', and encouraged her to reapply immediately, although she requested six months to think this through.

The experience of non-recommendation begs an obvious question concerning the effect this has on a candidate's sense of calling to ordained ministry, whether it evaporates or is readily redirected towards alternative expressions of vocation. All the participants in this study who were not recommended for ordination training said that they still felt called to priesthood. Andrew, who takes a very submissive attitude to Church authorities, says he will accept whatever decision is made. James has no option but to accept, but feels, like Butler (1994), that the Church is disregarding valuable assets. He says,

I still feel a need to be used. But I'm not going to become a priest at the present time. You just get forgotten – rather than saying OK, you haven't made it through that, but where can we use your time and talents? The VA is supposed to assist you in the process but nobody's made any contact whatsoever... But I wonder what they do with candidates who offer themselves to the church, and haven't got through the system – what are they doing with them? Are they looking at the forms and saying "this guy's got management skills, this one's got personnel skills, where can we use this talent which is being offered free of charge?" And they're not, and I think that's where the church goes totally wrong, the Church of England can't see the wood for the trees.

Nothing in the discernment process convinced David that his sense of calling was invalid, and he is likely to re-apply in due course. He feels that the pain of the rejection is exacerbated by the one-sidedness of the system, and that if it were more 'open and honest', the candidate 'would probably agree with the decision'. Mark's sense of calling to priesthood is as strong as ever, but for the time being he must continue with his current, more specific, vocation as an Evangelist. Carolyn still feels called to ordained ministry, and despite the shock of the Conference report, she feels that the process, overall, was positive, and that she will re-apply. She says the next time she will be 'less open and more assertive', and will want to spend more time in preparation. Adrian is exempt from repeating the selection process as he is now at theological college undergoing ordination training.

It is recommended (ABM, 1997b:22) that meetings are held with candidates at three and six months after non-recommendation to discuss how they 'are coping with the decision...and what the process will be from now on'. The involvement of Vocations Advisers, Counsellors and Spiritual Directors is suggested to supplement the support of the DDO. At the time of the research interviews, which occurred between three and five months after the Selection Conferences, none of the 'non-recommended' participants had been offered such support. This leaves them feeling deeply aggrieved and in a vocational limbo, feelings shared by their families and friends.

At the end of the research interviews, the participants were asked to give a general evaluation of their discernment experiences, although the limitations of

such evaluations is recognised, in that they are given from the standpoint of having received the Selectors' reports. Experiences of interactions with discernment personnel, which seemed positive at the time, may seem less so in the light of negative criticism, and vice versa. As might be expected, the non-recommended candidates were more critical of the selection process which had 'rejected' them (Thorp, 2001), but this was not universally true across the discernment system as a whole. Carolyn, for example, regarded the overall experience as positive, despite non-recommendation, whereas Tanya, though recommended, was acerbic in her critique. She said, 'the whole process of selection seems to me a complete cabaret, really - at best, deeply comic, and at worst, just dreadful'. Warren's summation of the discernment system is more tolerant, identifying the developmental aspects of the experience:

It's easy to paint the whole picture of the selection process in a negative light, and I don't think I want to do that at all. I mean there are many aspects of it that are very positive, and there are many aspects that are probably the best that can be done...I feel I've learned a lot about myself and about God in the last eighteen months. I've come out of it further along the road than I was, without doubt.

It is unlikely that any institutional process as complex as discernment of vocation to ordained ministry could simultaneously satisfy the requirements of all those involved, as the mixed verdicts of the participants in this study demonstrate. Collectively, their experiences suggests that the process of submitting one's sense of calling to the assessment of the designated authorities is, like the proverbial 'curate's egg', good in parts. The sincerity and seriousness of the personnel involved was never held in question, and all participants agreed with Warren's assertion that much of this complex and emotive process is 'probably the best that can be done'. However, the narratives have highlighted a number of important theoretical and ethical matters regarding the 'less good parts', which suggest that many of the concerns expressed in ABM reports between 1995 and 1997 still pertain. These are discussed in the next chapter.

*This is a difficult land. Here things miscarry
Whether we care, or do not care enough...
We are a people; race and speech support us,
Ancestral rites and custom, roof and tree,
Our songs that tell of triumphs and disasters,
Fleeting alike, continuance of fold and hearth,
Our names and callings, work and rest and sleep,
And something that, defeated, still endures...
This is a difficult country and our home.*

Edwin Muir, 'The Difficult Land'¹

Discernment of vocation to ordained ministry represents a juncture between personal and corporate, individual and institutional, in a 'difficult country' where things are prone to 'miscarry', despite the best intentions. Whatever their many differences, all those involved in the discernment process are bound by ties of 'rite and custom', whose enduring influence pervades every interaction.

As a biographical enterprise designed to elicit 'soul-truth' (Palmer, 2000:7), discernment of vocation is inherently hermeneutical, since it involves interpretation of narrative, and understanding of deeply personal experiences and beliefs, which are firmly embedded in tradition. To some degree, these beliefs are held in common by all parties in the process, but this can generate complications. As Gadamer (1960) has shown, genuine mutual understanding may be compromised if filtered through a glaze of unexamined pre-conceptions, shaped by individual biography and cultural heritage. While such pre-conceptions, often expressed through group-specific symbols and metaphors, can serve as useful heuristics between like-minded people, they can also present delimiting horizons to awareness and appreciation of difference.

One reason for this, is that symbolic language is underpinned by ideological assumptions, encapsulated in 'truth statements' which act in exclusionary ways that are intrinsically powerful (Foucault, 1969, 1976). Discernment of vocation

¹ Butter, P, (ed.), 1991, *The Complete Poems of Edwin Muir*, Aberdeen, Scotland, The Association of Scottish Literary Studies

to ordained ministry is set in a network of complex power-relations dependent upon certain concepts of truth, and promulgating a variety of pre-assumptions, whose operational effects impact significantly on the experiences of ordination candidates. To fully apprehend this experience it is therefore necessary to explore the nature of the pre-understandings which are brought to bear on the discernment process, including their associated power relationships.

The two-fold research question underpinning this study enquires into the biographical experience of God's calling to ordained ministry, and 'the relationship between this feeling and the Church's role of recognition, nurture and ratification' (ACCM, 1989:73). The data analysis, which was interwoven with the participant's stories in the previous chapter, sought to illuminate the *experiential* elements of this question, attempting to describe the feeling of being called, and explaining *what* actually happens in the discernment process. The wider theoretical interpretation of the narratives, presented in this chapter, seeks to enrich the foregoing description by elucidating the *relational* aspects of the research question, investigating the *how* and *why* elements of the transactions between individuals and institution in the discernment system.

The operation of *pre-understandings*, in the manner of Kögler's (1999) encompassing definition, is a dominant theme threading throughout the narratives presented in this study. The first section of this chapter examines the role of pre-understandings in the conceptualisation of vocation. The second section considers the impact of pre-understandings on the participants' experiences of submitting their vocation to the discernment of others, firstly in the diocese, and then at the national Selection Conference. The third section addresses the experiences of candidates not recommended for ordination training, a situation pertaining to half the participants in this study, whose stories demonstrate with particular clarity the effect of unexamined pre-understandings on evaluations of human experience. It is recognised that these sections somewhat arbitrarily dissect an otherwise integrated experience, and that the issues emerging from the narratives form an intricate web across the entire experience of discernment of vocation. The final section, therefore, takes a more holistic view, considering the potential role of 'critical dialogue'



(Kögler, 1999) in elucidating the meaning of vocation and its discernment for ordination candidates.

Although the primary aim of this study is to illuminate the experience of ordination candidates, it is inevitable that in so doing the discernment system itself is subject to critique. However, in highlighting issues emerging from the participants' stories, this study neither implies that discernment personnel in the Church of England are intentionally culpable, nor does it question Selectors' decisions concerning individual candidates. Further, it is acknowledged that the interpretations offered, though based in the research, are unavoidably influenced by my own biographical pre-understandings (outlined in Chapter 4). Nevertheless, it is hoped that these interpretations may supply fresh perspectives, with potential to usefully inform future decision-making, revealing areas worthy of further study.

The Role of Pre-understandings in the Conceptualisation of Vocation

Since candidates are required to articulate their sense of calling to ordained ministry (ABM, 1993:82), and others are required to assess the validity of that calling, it is reasonable to ask how all those involved understand this phenomenon, because prior understandings shape expectations and stand to affect judgements, if not brought to conscious awareness. This study has shown that *calling* and *vocation* are effectively inseparable, which is understandable in the light of prevalent conceptualisations of vocation as a 'journey' (Jamieson, 1997), as 'the process of implementing the self-concept' (Super, 1963:3), or as 'a call to personhood' (Clark, 1996:71). Personal identity, it seems, is intimately involved in the experience of 'calling' and its vocational expression, which both explains and underpins the statement that vocation to priesthood is 'an ontological thing' (Adrian). In other words, vocation is about personal *values*, and as Foucault (1980) shows, personal values are closely allied to concepts of 'truth'. Any intuition of calling, therefore, is likely to be interpreted and assessed in the context of those values, and their underpinning 'truth statements'. Sinton (1993) has shown the normalising, and thereby exclusionary, power of statements in relation to religious vocation, a principle

which Mark and Carolyn both illustrate, in that their notions of priesthood were initially circumscribed by ‘statements’ about class and gender.

The report, *A Call to Order* (1989), from which the research question is drawn, provides an example of a more nebulous, but nonetheless ‘normalising’ assumption that God’s calling is a *felt* experience, a ‘symbolic order’ (Kögler, 1999) conceptualising vocation to priesthood in essentially romantic terms. This can act to exclude those whose calling is more intellectually based, generating a ‘romanticism versus reality’ (Oliver, 2001:17) opposition, which may be symptomatic of underlying changes in the field of knowledge relating to concepts of vocation. The destructive potential of the resultant conflict of truth statements is revealed in the experiences of Adrian and David. For Adrian, his lack of felt conviction of calling delayed his testing of vocation for many years, while David fell foul of a Selector who dismissed his passionate conviction as ‘the romantic appreciation of the convert’. It may be that David’s Selector was forcefully expressing an innate suspicion of the emotional aspects of calling, reflective of his own life-history framed by an earlier discourse presupposing vocation to be primarily a rational, intellectual matter. His dismissive phraseology may, however, indicate an underlying concern that contemporary understandings of vocation have become unduly esoteric (cf. Clark, 1996), and in so doing, increasingly romanticised. The authors of *A Climate of Encouragement* (ABM, 2000:47-8), share the concern, feeling that ideas of ‘vocation’ are now little more than ‘an echo’ evoking ‘wistful memories’, while Adair (2000:vii) says, as ‘the concept of vocation...recedes into the constellation of organized religion’ it seems ‘to move ever further from real life’.

Vocational concepts and the apprehension of God’s calling would appear from the literature to be highly influenced by the style of ‘organized religion’, or churchmanship traditions shaping a person’s spiritual development. Towler and Coxon (1979:59) found that ordinands identifying themselves as Evangelicals generally conceptualised their calling in very personal, individualistic terms, as ‘inner conviction’, while those self-identified as Catholic placed greater, or at least equal, emphasis on the external, corporate aspects of calling (cf.

Archbishops' Council, 1985:5). However, the participants in this study tend to contradict this finding, since the majority gave priority to personal intuition, regardless of their ecclesiological standpoint.

This may be reflective of the growing predominance of Western cultural discourses emphasising individual autonomy, a proposition possibly supported by Andrew's narrative. As the single non-white candidate in the sample group, he was the only participant to emphasise the corporate nature of calling to ordination. Nevertheless, as Sinton (1993:150) states, nowadays 'most Anglicans expect a candidate first to "have a vocation", then to "test a vocation", which assumes the initiatives come first from the candidate, and the role of others is passive and critical'. *A Climate of Encouragement* (ABM, 2000:11-12) confirms this, describing vocation as 'a unique awareness of God having intruded personally into our life', which tends to reinforce pre-assumptions that deep personal conviction is a *pre-requisite* for ordained ministry. A 'truth statement' to this effect initially inhibited Adrian, and could have engendered negative evaluations of Andrew's vocation, as he presented his calling in very passive terms.

The apprehension of 'calling' as being specifically to *ordained ministry* appears to be most strongly governed by the perceived 'fit' between individual self-concept and personal conceptualisations (cf. Adair, 2000) of priesthood, where ordained ministry is envisaged as offering greater potential for self-fulfilment than other expressions of vocation (teaching or nursing, for instance). The participants' narratives exhibit the characteristics of 'vocational people' defined by Adair (2000:20) - lack of a 'mercenary spirit', creativity, enthusiasm, humility, tenacity, a sense of service, love of the chosen 'work', reflecting a worldview which is altruistic and self-sacrificing, 'a comprehensive idea of order' (Geertz, 1973:89) which tends to be *pastoral* more than *managerial*. It is noteworthy that these qualities accord with 'vocational norms' by which the Church appears to have traditionally evaluated *women's* ministries (Walsh, 2001). The participants' self-images are mirrored in their personal conceptualisations of the priestly role, and it is also noteworthy that these are not defined by any in terms of the Church's Selection Criteria.

All the participants recognised the profound influence of their personal histories on the formation of their ideas of vocation. The influences which they recorded vary slightly in emphasis from the earlier findings of Towler and Coxon (1979), with clergy role-models, theological education and the opportunity to practise some form of ministry rating the most significant. Even where the influence of the role-model(s) was felt to be substantially negative, as in Paul's case, it was accepted that 'even rejecting it or reacting to it they remain conditioned by it' (Warnke, 1987:79). This was particularly demonstrated in the narratives of Adrian and Patrick, who experienced one type of influence not mentioned by Towler and Coxon (1979), namely 'prophetic utterance'. Whether this utterance was the product of some underlying discourse positioning them as 'priestly' people, or of divine inspiration, is beyond the remit of this study to surmise, but the subliminal effects of dogmatic predictive statements on pre-understandings of vocation is acknowledged by both candidates. The most pervasive and productive influence (in terms of priestly vocations) reported by all the participants, with varying degrees of emphasis, was theological education of some kind. This lends weight to the proposals put forward in the recent (draft) report, *Formation for ministry within a learning church* (Archbishops' Council, 2003), that wider provision of theological training for the laity has the capacity to generate vocations. However, it is clear that the report carries a pre-understanding that 'vocation' effectively means ordained ministry, perpetuating a discourse which has the capacity to shape and direct an individual's sense of calling.

The concept of 'the priesthood of all believers', to which the Church of England officially subscribes, asserts that all Christians have some manner of priestly vocation, an understanding which theoretically undermines exclusionary discourses limiting the concept to certain gifted people in certain contexts. However, the ordination barrier categorically presents such a discourse, barring lay people from the priesthood. This is emphasised by the highly visible hierarchy of the Church, which can convey the feeling that ordained ministry is the epitome of religious vocation (see James' narrative), despite statements to the contrary (for example, ABM, 1996a). None of the

participants in this study felt they had been seriously challenged to consider other expressions of vocation, gaining the impression that diocesan personnel had generally operated under the assumption that exploration of vocation in the Church was ultimately about ordination (contrary to assertions of ABM, 1997b). This implies that the defining and directive power of the ordination discourse is prevalent and pervasive.

The formative power of this discourse is highlighted by the tenacity demonstrated by some of the participants in pursuing ordination. It seems unlikely that these particular candidates could have been easily redirected towards alternatives, as those already employed in a recognised 'vocation' or ministry felt there was 'still something missing', and only ordained ministry could fulfil their vocational sense; non-recommendation did not change this. It is quite possible that some candidates' perceptions are so framed by the ordination discourse that they are able to persuade discernment personnel whose world-view is similarly informed, and that 'a naïve assimilation of the two horizons' (Gadamer, 1960:306) occurs. This may explain why the vocations of some candidates, enthusiastically endorsed by diocesan clergy, fail to be ratified by Bishops' Selectors, (cf Carolyn), and why those same clergy then appear to lose interest in the candidate when ordination is no longer an option.

A two-fold question is raised here. On the one hand, could some people who might otherwise choose lay ministries be 'channelled' into ordained ministry by DDOs subscribing to confessional discourses of priesthood which under-value non-ordained ministries, with the candidate becoming 'subject to the authority and authoritative discourse of the partner (the confessor) within the transaction' (Usher & Edwards, 1998:215)? On the other hand, might the 'inner tug' of calling be interpreted (possibly erroneously) by some recipients as a call to ordained ministry, simply because priesthood is positioned in their minds as the ultimate expression of vocation? Affirmative answers could support Foucault's (1981) 'biopower' hypothesis that discourses create 'subjects' by positioning people in certain roles, a mechanism described by

Usher and Edwards (1998: 215) in a pertinent example of the relationship between confessional discourses and pastoral power:

Pastoral power, working through confession, enables individuals to actively participate in disciplinary regimes by investing their own identity, subjectivity and desires with those ascribed to them through certain knowledgeable discourses.

However, this would deny the *spiritual* dimension of religious calling. Either the vocational ideas of the participants in this study were shaped by romanticised pre-understandings governed by 'knowledgeable discourses' of ordination, or calling to priesthood is something beyond human constructions – or both. Carolyn's early childhood intimations of calling to priesthood might indicate the latter, while David's story could suggest the former, although the truth probably lies somewhere between the two extremes. The difficulty for personnel attempting to discern the validity of a priestly vocation is in defining where on the spectrum a person's sense of calling lies, and in dissecting the calling from the discursive formations which may have generated or defined it (cf. ABM, 2000).

The Operation of Pre-understandings in Discernment of Vocation

Discernment of vocation begins with articulation of one's sense of calling, which this study shows to be an extremely difficult enterprise, since the experience of 'being called' is deeply personal and highly individual, a factor which potentially undermines the whole concept of vocational discernment. As Holloway (1997) notes, understanding another's spiritual journey requires empathy based in some commonality of experience. Although such foundations exist, in that all personnel involved in the discernment process (unlike its secular counterparts) share a common faith, it is clear that individual spiritual constructions profoundly influence interpretations of religious experience. This is both a hermeneutical problem, and, when it relates to evaluations of the experience of others, a power issue (Jamieson, 1997).

It is arguable that greater exploration of concepts and conceptualisations of ordained ministry during the early stages of the discernment process would help to expose underlying assumptions shaped by personal-contextual history,

and uncover any discrepancies between a candidate's self-perception and the Church's current understandings and requirements of priesthood. It is further arguable that this is the primary role of *vocational guidance*, whose function is 'to make open for intervention those aspects of a person [and their context] which have hitherto remained unspoken' (Usher and Edwards, 1998:214). While the *person-centred* vocational guidance function of the Vocations Adviser and the *institutionally focussed* human resource management function of the Director of Ordinands are not mutually exclusive, conflation of the associated discourses may exacerbate tendencies to concentrate on ordination to the exclusion of other possible ministries. This is especially so where the vocations advisory function is seen as an adjunct to the DDO's role, as evidenced by Carolyn's and James's stories, a situation which is becoming more prevalent as resources for vocational guidance are reduced nationally.

At the diocesan level of the discernment process, a major source of concern is the wide variations in the extent and style of candidates' preparations for the national Selection Conference: the experiences of the participants in this study confirm findings in the literature (cf. ABM, 2000, Kuhrt, 2001). The extremes of these variations have two contrary results, both potentially detrimental to candidates. The less prepared candidates may be disadvantaged by ill-formed expectations of the selection procedures; as Andrew and Carolyn found, just 'being yourself' proved inadequate. Alternatively, overly prepared candidates may, according to some Selectors, appear 'less natural', and success in prior 'mock' selection conferences can create unwarranted expectations, as David found. Kuhrt (2001) suggests that greater sharing of expertise and experience across the dioceses would be valuable, creating a more 'level playing field' for candidates attending national Selection Conferences.

However, a more cohesive diocesan system would require greater agreement regarding working practices and standards, as the narratives demonstrate that the approaches, pre-assumptions and competencies of diocesan personnel is as varied as their personal biographies. It is clear that for many of the participants the discernment process lacked depth; the interactions were insufficiently dialogical, and certainly not so in any 'critical' (Kögler, 1999) sense. As Tanya

said, 'A lot of people did a lot of talking' to her, but not much listening, and over half the research group felt that the discernment process was not very challenging.

The Operation of Pre-understandings in Selection for Ordination Training

Unlike the diocesan parts of the discernment process, the national selection system for ordination training in the Church of England has produced a relatively standardised means of 'testing vocations', although the variations in the experience and abilities of the selection personnel, coupled with the paucity of training available, still presents problems. Like Diocesan Directors of Ordinands and Vocations Advisers, many Bishops' Selectors are not trained in the necessary hermeneutical listening skills; neither are they generally equipped to apprehend the implications of the discourses which govern the system, nor the ethical problems inherent in operating across multiple discursive fields. The participants' experiences suggest that the system, as a whole, would be improved by enhancing the personnel training currently on offer. Even where an interviewer's professional background might indicate appropriate proficiency, some of the narratives show that on-going training and monitoring would be beneficial (see, for example, Carolyn's Educational Selector, whose occupational qualifications fit her admirably for the Selector function, but who failed to maintain the requisite ethical boundaries).

The Selection Conference, itself, though felt to be praiseworthy in many respects, presented multiple issues for the participants, some of which could have been mitigated by improved communications between diocesan personnel and the Ministry Division staff, between the latter and the candidates, and/or between Conference Secretaries and Selectors. Three participants had special needs, which were either given undue attention (Carolyn), or ignored (Mark and David), despite formal requests concerning their requirements being submitted to the Ministry Division. This was more than just an administrative matter, as it disempowered these candidates to a degree, actually or perceptually, which cast doubt in their minds on the reliability of the Selectors' judgements, and rendered the ultimate non-recommendations all the more unacceptable to them and their supporters.

The angst which is endemic in all selection processes tends to create somewhat cynical pre-suppositions which are difficult to allay, however skilled the selection personnel. This was evident in the way candidates tended to read more into events than was probably justifiable; for example, Adrian's feeling that the absence of Selectors at the first meal was 'like secret police', Carolyn's wondering if an Examining Chaplain's poor interview skills were actually a deliberate ploy to test her in some way, or Mark's feeling that failure to accommodate his special needs at the Conference was a covert assessment of his state of health. Assertions that candidates are not observed during social gatherings only generated further cynicism; all the participants expected to be observed at all times. The power balance in favour of the Selectors was pre-understood, and the participants expected the boundaries between themselves and the Selectors to be clearly drawn. It could be said that they needed to know the rules of this 'game of truth' (Foucault, 1984).

The selection process is promoted as a collaborative venture; the preparatory booklet, 'Going to a Selection Conference' (Archbishops' Council, 1999:2) states:

The most important point of all is that the Conference is set in the context of *worship*. Candidates and Selectors together seek God's will through corporate worship and private prayer (original italics).

However, the very mutuality of this spiritual context tends to erode the ethical boundaries which usually pertain in selection situations, and which are intended to safeguard the integrity of all parties. Efforts to mitigate the inherent power imbalance by providing personal profiles of the Selectors at the start of the Conference, and by involving them in introductory 'ice-breakers' blurred the normal (expected) demarcation between Selectors and candidates, and actually rebounded in some cases. Carolyn, James, David, Adrian and Mark all formed erroneous preconceptions of one or more of their Selectors, with unfortunate consequences. An unwitting 'fusion of horizons' (Gadamer, 1960) appears to have occurred whereby these candidates projected their own worldviews onto certain selectors, pre-supposing either mutual empathy or antagonism on the basis of their profiles and introductory remarks.

The dangers inherent in blurring of boundaries are well illustrated by the behaviour of Carolyn's Educational Selector, who took the corroborative principle to an extreme, creating an illusion of equality which drew Carolyn into inappropriately familiar dialogue, to her ultimate disadvantage. While Carolyn's interpretation of this particular Selector's behaviour might be regarded as naïve in the context of a Selection Conference, the balance of power in such a situation lies with the interviewer, who therefore holds the responsibility for setting and maintaining appropriate boundaries, so as to avoid creating unwarranted expectations. If the dialogue had been more 'critical' (in Kögler's conceptualisation), the inherent intra-subjectivity of the hermeneutical circle could have been mitigated, and a greater 'distanciation' of each worldview might have been accomplished.

In contrast, Carolyn's Pastoral Selector communicated and maintained appropriate boundaries, and though Carolyn interpreted this as comparatively 'distant', it helped her adjust her response accordingly. It is arguable that maintaining professional distance, rather than attempting to establish mutuality in the selection process, *appropriately empowers* all parties because all roles and expectations are clearly defined. When the expected 'rules of the game' are broken by either side, the essential reciprocity which Foucault (1980:163) identified in all power-relationships - that 'subtle integration' of power-response mechanisms - loses its 'efficiency'; all players may be confounded, and the intended mutuality of the selection process is effectively compromised. Since the ultimate power clearly lies in the hands of the Selectors, it is understandable that some candidates view collaborative intentions in selection as a pretence, and suspect the system of promoting cynical power-play (for example, Mark, James and David).

The various exercises incorporated into the Selection Conference compounded the sense of play-acting for some participants, and were a source of considerable anxiety for most. The timing of the Personal Inventory Questionnaire was felt to be unduly restrictive, especially for candidates with language problems. The length and repetitiveness of the Group Exercise disadvantaged candidates coming last in the role-play, because their designated

topic had already been discussed; this and the written exercise offered a single topic which was dependent on the pre-assumption that all candidates were familiar with the scenario/context given. The cognitive tests were generally perceived by the participants as unnecessary, even irrelevant, and they were sceptical of assertions that they have little significance in their own right. Many of the selection personnel expressed concern that the latter tests engender anxiety out of all proportion to their value.

The ethical rules of psychometric assessment dictate that tests should be ‘discriminating (but not discriminatory)...enabling fine judgements to be made between different people’s level of ability’ (ASE, 1994:1.1). However, the language and concepts employed in the cognitive tests used by the Church of England were demonstrably problematic for several participants. As Tanya remarked, the tests demand great subtlety of language, and ability to utilise this quickly, which is problematic for dyslexic candidates such as David, although any relevant special needs should be taken into account in the framing of test reports. Familiarity with a variety of (sometimes advanced) disciplines is also required, which may be outside the experience of non-graduate candidates, such as Andrew, although the stated purpose of the tests is to demonstrate hidden academic ability; in other words, their intention is *inclusive*, rather than exclusive. However, the potential clearly exists for candidates unfamiliar with the implicit cultural pre-understandings, or with learning difficulties, to be antagonised or confused by these tests and their performance thereby compromised. This was undoubtedly so for David and Andrew.

All tests and exercises are founded on normative assumptions (however broad or narrow these may be), which are useful when measuring performance against clearly defined requirements. The problem, in the context of discernment of vocation to priesthood, is that the Assessment Centre approach tends to militate against eccentricity, and stands to disadvantage candidates with any unusual characteristics. Ironically, the Church’s anti-discriminatory intentions are in practice undermined by the attempt to treat all candidates the same. As the experiences of participants who were not recommended for training confirm, normative measures leave little room for the appreciation or accommodation of

difference, matching attributes and personality in accordance with some imaginary blue-print (cf. ABM, 2000). In the face of increased awareness of the narrative construction of personal identity, there is a 'growing disenchantment' with psychometric testing, interest inventories and other 'matching' devices which 'are unlikely to encompass this sense of self as they are not based on dialogue and interaction' (Reid, 2002:57).

'Dialogue and interaction', however, do not necessarily mitigate the effects of normative assumptions, or overcome bias, especially where the dialogue is uncritical. As the literature review indicates, the discernment system is subject to numerous foundational 'truth statements' (Foucault, 1969), presenting multiple opportunities for pre-judices (Gadamer, 1960) to become operative, which could be counteracted if the principles of 'critical dialogue' (Kögler, 1999) were applied. Eight of the eleven participants reported bias in some part of the process. The narratives of David, Anneke, Tanya and Adrian evidence definitive prejudice in respect of *churchmanship*, *education*, *nationality* and *divorce and remarriage*. Discrimination in respect of *age* and *health*, founded on financial considerations, could be implicated in Andrew's, James's, Carolyn's and Mark's stories, which would confirm findings of the ABM (1995) Review of Selection Procedures. *Social class* appeared to present more of an issue for candidates than for selectors (cf Mark), although it may be implicit in the comments of one of David's Selectors (cf. 'bog-standard Irish Catholic').

Indirect discrimination on the basis of *ethnicity* could be inferred from Andrew's story, firstly, in the possibility of positive bias at the diocesan stage of the discernment process, which ultimately operated to his disadvantage at the selection stage, and secondly, in the tests and exercises which tend to favour candidates with advanced language skills, and understanding of the underpinning cultural assumptions. Together, these factors may substantiate Russell's (1994) concern regarding the assimilation of black candidates into white clergy norms. The danger here is that of 'tokenism' where, in the haste to address the ethnic imbalance in the clergy, black candidates receive inadequate vocational guidance and examination of their attributes before attending a

Selection Conference. While the underlying intentions of affirmative action may be laudable, the operational effect could be injurious to under-qualified or otherwise unsuitable candidates. As Andrew's story illustrates, some candidates from a non-British background (not necessarily just black candidates) may not relate to the intellectual approach which characterises British job-selection procedures (including that for ordained ministry). They may ultimately find these procedures discriminatory rather than discriminating, the underlying pre-assumptions effectively 'colonising' their world-views with those of an alien culture.

Contrary to expectations created by the literature review, discrimination in respect of *gender* did not present as a pressing issue in any of the narratives, (except briefly in Andrew's, who is opposed to the ordination of women), although Denzin's (1989b:116) assertion that 'gender filters knowledge' remains pertinent to this study. The understanding an interviewer grasps of an interviewee's meaning is unavoidably shaped by the gender of each. Difficulties this might engender can be intensified when the interview takes place within a culturally paternalistic setting (Fontana and Frey, 1998), such as the Church, where the authority-submission meta-narrative can reify power relations (Percy, 1998). However, the participants' stories indicate that the genderisation of these power-relations is a highly complex matter, presenting a 'matrix of force relations at a given time' (Dreyfus and Rabinow, 1982:186), which enmeshes all those involved in ways they do not fully understand.

All the participants in this study perceived an emphasis on *leadership* qualities in the selection process, which they tended to conceptualise in secular managerial terms, feeling that these were valued over and above pastoral qualities. This was particularly strongly felt by James, David, Mark and Andrew, and is a concern substantiated by current debates in the literature. The Church has traditionally viewed leadership as a characteristically *masculine* attribute, so a predominant leadership discourse in the discernment system could operate to the disadvantage of both male and female candidates who exhibit more strongly *pastoral* (ie. traditionally *feminine*; see Walsh, 2001) characteristics. If the participants' perceptions were justified, Walsh might be

correct in asserting that a 'gendered lexical set' persists in clerical selection, which values masculine attributes, but this would contradict the hypothesis of Francis and Robbins (1996) that a newly *feminised* clerical discourse stands to disadvantage male candidates.

Out of the six participants not recommended for training, five placed greater emphasis on *pastoral* qualities than leadership ones, and four of these are male. However, the converse does not pertain, since the stories of the five participants who were recommended (of whom two are female) also showed strong pastoral qualities as well as leadership qualities. This seems to indicate that the candidates' perception that a predominantly *managerial* discourse (ie. traditionally masculine) of leadership operates in the selection process is not demonstrable in practice. This would accord with the Selection Criteria for 'Leadership and Collaboration' (ABM, 1993:95), which notes that 'ministerial leadership...cannot be expressed merely in secular managerial terms'. As Foucault (cited in Faubion, 1994:333) notes, Christianity postulates a type of leadership not commonly sought in secular management, which he terms 'pastoral power':

Pastoral power is not merely a form of power that commands, it must also be prepared to sacrifice itself for the life and salvation of the flock.

The narratives present no clear evidence that the men and women in this study were 'evaluated according to a set of vocational norms' (Walsh, 2000:166) which are predominantly gendered, either masculine or feminine, that is, which showed bias either towards pastoral or leadership qualities. This suggests that, in this respect at least, the Selectors were trying to understand the candidates against their own particular backgrounds (see ABM, 1993).

Considering the complexities of the discernment system and the number and variety of personalities involved, with the multi-faceted potential for bias which this presents, it is perhaps surprising that any participants were able to say they experienced no prejudice in any part of the process, which was the case for Paul, Warren and Patrick. In this context, however, it is noteworthy that all three are white, male, middle-class graduates, aged between twenty-

nine and thirty-seven, who are healthy, and married once, which could imply that they presented little opportunity for prejudice since they fell within hypothetical clergy 'norms'. Certainly, many of the participants agreed with Adrian that people out of a particular 'mould' were sought for ordination, and the ultimate outcomes of their Selection Conferences may lend weight to this 'normative' hypothesis. Of the five participants who were recommended for ordination training, four fitted the above 'norms' (the fifth, Tanya, fitted except for gender). However, of the six participants who were not recommended, five possessed some 'abnormal' attribute (health issues, divorce, ethnicity, for example).

In all job selection processes it must be accepted that certain normative characteristics will be sought to suit the job specifications, but this only highlights the difficulties arising from the Church's conflation of the *discernment* and *selection* functions. While normative criteria are essential to the activities of selecting a person to fulfil a particular function, they seem less appropriate to the broader activities of discerning a religious calling. Part of the problem is the amalgamation of the *role* of priesthood and the *function* of clergy, each of which, as Russell identifies, are underpinned by different assumptions:

The term 'priest' denotes a theological status within the Church and the criteria for testing the adequacy of [related] statements are theological. However, the term 'clergyman' denotes an occupational role among the many occupational roles in society... Here the criteria for testing the adequacy of the definition are the criteria of empirical verification. The fact that the terms 'priest' and 'clergyman' afford a double definition of the religious functionary in the Church of England can create much confusion, particularly when statements based on different sets of criteria are too readily juxtaposed. (Russell, 1984:3)

When the whole process is regarded as *discernment* of priestly vocation, the work of *selecting* clergy to meet a comprehensive set of normative criteria becomes ambiguous.

The Experience of Non-recommendation

There are difficulties around the vocabulary of vocation. The process is one of discernment, but training is dependent upon a 'selection' conference – and if some are 'selected' what about those who are not? The language we use may compound the pain of rejection that candidates can feel deeply. (Thorp, 2001:117)

The experiences of the participants in this study suggest that, despite the injunctions contained in 'The Care of Candidates Before and After Selection Conferences' (ABM, 1997b), much work remains to be done in the dioceses regarding the appropriate handling of 'non-recommended' candidates. Although it is understood that the sense of rejection for ordination is generally more profound than failure in secular job selections, because priesthood is perceived in ontological terms (cf. Butler, 1994, Thorp, 1995), the corresponding support and affirmation is frequently lacking, as the narratives of the non-recommended participants in this study illustrate.

The spiritual dimension of selection for priesthood adds a particular twist for candidates who are not recommended, in that the process lacks the competitive element which characterises secular job applications. In the case of rejection for a secular job, although applicants may feel wounded, the feeling can be mitigated by the knowledge that they were beaten (possibly narrowly) by someone more suitably qualified, leaving them free to seek similar employment elsewhere. With the Church, there is no equivalent option to find another employer; 'not recommended' candidates must remain in the organisation, and work out their feelings within that context, or break a bond that runs far deeper than allegiance to a secular employer. As the six non-recommended participants attest, the sense of God's calling has an imperative quality which does not recede when not affirmed by 'discerners', leaving such candidates in a painful state of vocational limbo. The Church does little to present constructive alternatives to these candidates, which exacerbates their sense of rejection, because they feel their experience and expertise is being 'wasted' (cf. James' comments).

Non-recommendation for ordination is experienced as a rejection of the entire self (witness Andrew's sense of having 'let everyone down'); it is 'a crisis in self-image' (Butler, 1994), with profound spiritual implications. Thorp (1995: 4) found that 'not recommended' candidates deeply resent the euphemistic use of the designation, perceiving this as a denial of the realities of their 'rejection', an impression which seems justified by institutional assertions that 'anecdotal evidence in dioceses of lack of support or insensitivity' are due more to 'the nature of the feelings of disappointment surrounding this matter' than to lack of care (ABM, 2000:63). For the non-recommended participants in this study, the dismissive attitude of previously supportive diocesan clergy greatly intensified the feeling of rejection. Only Adrian found his DDO and Bishop supportive.

The emotional reactions were exacerbated for many participants by the apparent lack of cognisance taken of personal references. Prior to the Data Protection Act (1998) it was understood that the content of references was confidential to selection personnel and should not be alluded to in the candidates' interviews, but Selectors were instructed to 'make reference to appropriate referee's comments' (ABM, 1996b:100) when writing Conference reports. It seems, however, that this was not so for the participants in question¹ and they found it hard to accept portrayals of themselves which they could not recognise, and which appeared to ignore the comments of those most familiar with their work and talents. The comparative accumulation of evidence, which is essential to the hermeneutical enterprise of interpreting human experience, appears (to these candidates, at least) to have been inadequate, and if this perception has any basis in fact, it presents a moderation issue of concern to Conference Secretaries.

The participants' tales of their Conference Reports suggest that some Selectors are unaware of the boundaries and implications of their own religious and cultural identities; they appeared to lack the necessary 'historical

¹ It is possible that, since their experiences, this ambiguity has been mitigated by the implementation of the Act (2001) which decrees that all information on candidates must be open for their inspection.

consciousness', and seemed unaware 'of their own bias' (Gadamer 1960). It is clear that they were not 'dialogically open' (Kögler, 1999:27), and it seems that certain Selectors succumbed to the danger of Gadamer's 'fusion of horizons', where the other's meaning is assimilated into the interpreter's world-view, 'recasting' his or her experience in familiar terms, 'as though it were in need of being overcome' (Kögler, 1999:212). This was particularly exemplified by the experiences of David, Mark and Adrian, whose stories confirm Foucault's proposition that the power inherent in 'truth statements' - such as those defining Irish Catholicism, health and disability, or marriage and divorce - is enhanced by 'the status of those charged with saying what counts as true' (Foucault, 1976:131). These candidates would affirm Jamieson's (1997:33-34) description of the 'discernment' process, when she says:

To many, the word [discernment] appears as a kind of jargon dragged in to buttress decisions that ought to be open to greater scrutiny, and it is a rhetoric that has undoubtedly been abused by people in power.

The ultimate balance of power in any job selection inevitably lies with those with authority to select or reject, but in the specific religious context of this selection system the authority in the interaction is both factual and symbolic, because the Selectors represent the Bishops. In a hierarchical organisation, which values the ability to submit to authority (see Selection Criteria, ABM, 1993), the weight of that authority is incrementally increased with each stage of the discernment process. While this commensurately empowers candidates who are eventually recommended for ordination, it commensurately disempowers candidates not so recommended (Butler, 1994). Prior to implementation of the Data Protection Act in 2001, the prohibition on candidates viewing their Conference Reports increased this sense of disempowerment, especially when they found no redress for defamatory statements and inaccuracies. This seemed to deny the collaborative intentions of the discernment system, and felt like 'a refusal on the Church's part to own the implications of its actions' (Thorp, 1995: 4). The experiences of the non-recommended participants appear to support Foucault's (1976:117) assertion that:

So long as the posing of the question of power was kept subordinate to the economic instance and the system of interests this served, there was a tendency to regard these problems as of small importance.

The problem, which Holloway (1997:xiv) identifies, is that Christianity tends 'to load everything with theological significance', which makes reappraisal of underlying pre-understandings and power-relations extremely difficult.

The Discernment Process and the Role of Critical Dialogue

The authors of *A Climate of Encouragement* (ABM, 2000) describe the process of discerning a vocation to priesthood as 'a whole range of stirrings, questions, hopes...[a] process of separation and illumination which normally takes place both in the mind of the person being called and in those charged with the discernment of the call' (ABM, 2000:58/9). They envisage the task as one of separating out the constitutive elements of a vocation so as to 'weigh its complexity and density' (ABM, 2000:60-61). Drawing on Hardy's (1996) image of refraction, they assert that a candidate's sense of calling must pass through a 'refracting prism' to be 'refined, interpreted, re-focused and re-directed, a process which reciprocally involves everyone considering the person's vocation:

At every point in a consideration of a vocation it is vital that all those in the process pass through this... 'prism', and that each group or person sees how their own perception of truth is affected by the refractive process. Refraction is a process which divides 'strands' and then re-configures them into an image or interpretation... As refraction transforms light as it passes from one medium to another, so different images are formed and experienced, and, as it were, light itself is seen 'in a different light'.
(ABM, 2000:60-61)

Through this process, the various sources of the 'different streams of light' which converge in vocation are illuminated, leading to 'a fuller appreciation of what it means for this or that person to be called' (ibid:62).

Within this metaphoric conceptualisation, which has strongly hermeneutical overtones, there is a sense of the authors reaching towards an approach to the task of vocational discernment which might approximate to Kögler's (1999) Critical Dialogue. Certainly, they emphasise the dialogical nature of discernment, and the necessity for all parties to examine their worldviews, and

they infer the necessity of establishing a ‘nexus’ or ‘bridgehead’ (ibid.) of mutual understanding. However, they do not define the constituent elements of worldview, which impact so radically on the conceptualisation and discernment of religious vocation. As this study has shown, pre-understandings of vocation are constituted from an amalgamation of personal life-history, the symbolic-metaphoric constructs of religious background, and the social power relationships and practices which circumscribe beliefs (see Kögler’s ‘Critical-Dialogic Circle’, Figure 1, Chapter 3); all three strands coalesce in the formation of vocation, and its discernment.

The participants stories have highlighted a number of problems in the system for discerning vocations to priesthood, many of which might be mitigated by an educated and informed application of the principles of ‘critical hermeneutics’ (Kögler, 1999). Half the sample group, for example, felt that their interviews lacked depth, but if discernment personnel were trained to probe the full range of a candidate’s pre-understandings about vocation, more of their underlying motivations might be exposed for mutual consideration; ‘critical dialogue’ has the potential to be extremely challenging and deeply probing. Equally, training in the principles of Kögler’s approach would help to ‘foreground’ the pre-understandings of the interviewers, and alleviate the inherent danger of the interpreter effectively colonising, rather than elucidating, the worldview of the candidate, as seems to have occurred with several participants.

The necessity of establishing an empathic ‘bridgehead’ (Kögler, 1999) into the candidate’s world should help to generate a more ‘supportive and encouraging’ (ABM, 1996:55) interview atmosphere than some encountered. A fuller appreciation of the need for interviewers to ‘foreground’ and ‘distanciate’ their own pre-understandings, would tend to counteract the propensity for bias in the discernment system, and would clearly have benefited many participants at various stages in the process, where Selectors’ pre-judgements presented as prejudice. The emphatically dialogical nature of ‘critical hermeneutics’ might help to prevent the sort of entrapment Adrian felt he experienced in one of his Selection interviews, and generate a more ‘open and honest’ environment than some participants felt was the case.

Although it is accepted that ‘Critical hermeneutics’ cannot solve every problem associated with the discernment system - it cannot address administrative difficulties or issues pertaining to the various tests and exercises, for example – it is possible that an appreciation of Kögler’s approach to understanding human experience could raise awareness of the complexities and implications of the power relationships involved in testing vocations. ‘Critical dialogue’, by definition, would promote a more genuinely collaborative context for the discernment process. However, as has been shown, collaborative intent is problematic at the selection stage, and it has therefore been suggested that *selection* be more definitively differentiated from *discernment*, and that the vocational guidance function be enhanced to facilitate a more rigorous exploration of pre-understandings of vocation, quite separate from the selection process.

The findings from this research are summarised in the following chapter, which also reflects on the effectiveness of the methodology in elucidating the interface between the Church’s system for discerning vocations to ordained ministry and the candidates.

Chapter 7 Soul Matters: Reflections and Conclusions

In our culture, we tend to gather information in ways that do not work very well when the source is the human soul: the soul is not responsive to subpoenas or cross-examinations. At best it will stand in the dock only long enough to plead the Fifth Amendment. At worst it will jump bail and never be heard from again. The soul speaks its truth only under quiet, inviting, trustworthy conditions.

Palmer (2000:7)

The first selection process for a Church leader in the New Testament involved the prayerful drawing of lots (Acts, 1:23-26), a system which suited the relatively simple process of choosing between two appropriately qualified individuals to oversee an infant organisation. However, the complexities of the contemporary Church of England demand a commensurately complex system for discerning priestly vocations and selecting suitable candidates for training. In many ways this thesis represents a ‘counsel of perfection’ regarding that system, positing an ideal scenario of ‘inviting, trustworthy conditions’ which facilitates the speaking of ‘soul-truth’ (Palmer, 2000:7). Many of the issues raised by this study might be readily solvable in a world of limitless resources, but it must be accepted that discernment of vocation takes place in the ‘real world’ (Robson, 1993) of limitations and compromise; it may be that, as Warren said, the system is the best that it can be within current constraints. Nevertheless, this study has highlighted matters which merit serious consideration in the on-going development of the discernment system, and in the interests of improving the experience of discernment of vocation to ordained ministry for all concerned.

This concluding chapter begins by reflecting on the appropriateness of the chosen methodology as a means of examining the impact of the Church’s processes for discerning vocations on the lives of individual candidates. The interpretive approach of the study is evaluated, and the research findings are summarised. Areas meriting further study are identified, and finally, the main conclusions are explicated.

Reflections on Methodology

The guiding feature of biographical research is that it attempts to suit its method to its purpose. We say that biographical research has both *general* and *specific* purposes. The *general* purpose is to provide greater insight than hitherto into the nature and meaning of individual lives or groups of lives... The *specific* purpose of the research will be the analysis of a particular life or lives for some designated reason.

(Erben, 1998:4)

The *general* purpose of this research was to 'provide insight into the nature and meaning' of calling to ordination in the Church of England, while the *specific* purpose was to examine the experiential impact of the Church's system for discerning priestly vocations and selecting suitable candidates for training. This section assesses the extent to which a biographical approach has fulfilled these purposes. The relative merits of the particular methods employed to generate data in this study have already been discussed in Chapter 4.

Biographical study as a means of examining social processes has both advantages and limitations. One of the advantages, as identified by Breckner and Rupp (2002:293), is that individual, subjective experience is pre-eminent, unlike more traditional, positivist approaches to social studies. People are not 'defined from an external perspective... which tends either to victimise them or to de-emphasise a problem they have that outsiders consider to be less important or even trivial' (ibid.). The intended purpose (or, possibly, the unintended outcome), of biographical research is often the giving of voice, which is particularly pertinent when studying a system which is not open to challenge from those subject to it, as is the case with selection for ordination training. As Collins (1998:3.17) says,

As interviewers, we are sometimes asked to bear witness to injustice; the stories are moral tales where wrongs, although they may never be righted, are at least acknowledged by another. There is also the possibility, of course, that this particular wrong will be recorded for posterity and the wronged publicly vindicated.

While the latter outcome is unlikely in respect of any participants in this study, the research has undoubtedly given voice to people who felt their grievances were unheeded. However, this highlights a potential disadvantage of biography as a means of studying social processes: aggrieved people can use research

interviews to work out their angst, portraying their experiences in lurid detail which apports blame and ignores the positive. This danger is highlighted by Thorpe (2001) in regard to non-recommended candidates, and is a problem requiring careful management on the part of the researcher.

In this respect, my background in career guidance proved an asset, although the power issues inherent in the 'confessional' context of all types of biographical interviewing are acknowledged. The interviewer (be this guidance practitioner or researcher) 'plays an active and powerful role' (Usher and Edwards, 1998:214) in assisting the interviewee to 'discover the "truth" about [him or her]self' (ibid.), potentially directing that 'discovery' through the questions asked, the inflections of voice, or even by the use of silence. An inexperienced interviewer might mistake sympathy for empathy, and unwittingly collude with a participants' grievance in a 'naïve assimilation' (Gadamer, 1960) of his or her perspective. It is hoped that deployment of the democratic principles of 'critical dialogue' (Kögler, 1999), together with well-honed reflective listening skills (cf Wragg, 1994) helped to counteract any such tendency in this research, but ultimately there can be no absolute certainty that I, as interviewer, did not in some way shape the stories that emerged from the interviews, or collude with the injured feelings of the non-recommended participants.

In this regard, the small sample size and the lack of statistical representativeness can serve to exaggerate the findings of biographical research, and thus prove disadvantageous for the purposes of elucidating social processes. The experiences of only eleven ordination candidates, for example, of whom fifty-four per-cent were not recommended against a national average of thirty per-cent non-recommendation, may have generated an unfairly negative impression of the discernment system as a whole. For this reason multiple methods were used to gather information from a wide variety of sources, comparing each participant's story to others, and to documentary evidence and observation in the field of study. This thoroughness represents a strength of biographical study, since the narratives are firmly embedded in their social and historical contexts and corroborated by external evidence, which helps justify the subsequent interpretations.

Collins (1998:3.18) argues that the narrative reconstruction of disruptive events for the purposes of conveying the situation to an interviewer – the story-telling – gives a degree of coherence which creates ‘order out of chaos’, a proposition with which all the participants in this study agreed. Here again, an advantage of biographical research for the participants may prove an ultimate disadvantage in the elucidation of social systems, because personal stories are anchored at specific points in time and can quickly lose their efficacy in changing organisational situations (see Grant *et al*, 1998). As far as the Church is concerned this caveat is mitigated by the relative constancy of the institution over a prolonged period: change does not happen quickly in the Church of England, and therefore explication of experiences within it can be deemed applicable for some time. Nevertheless, though the timing of this study was particularly apposite (having undergone three years’ trial and development the current national selection system was ripe for study from an experiential perspective), the limited ‘shelf-life’ of biographical studies when used to shed light on social systems must be taken seriously in the long term. The Church of England, and particularly its priesthood, is facing enormous challenges, which will generate fresh stories with fresh new meanings, and the relevance of older ones will become questionable (see Grant *et al*, 1998).

The political-ethical dimension is another factor which cannot be ignored in biographical research which examines the interface between individuals and given societies, where an inevitable consequence is that those societies are subject to critique in some measure. In biographical research, the attention is focused on the individual, and all care is taken that ‘no harm’ (cf. Mulvey, 2002) is done to him or her by the research, but what of the potential harm to other parties implicated in the study? In the case in question, the discernment personnel directly involved gave verbal assent to the research, some actively participating and encouraging constructive criticism. Others were less directly involved, or only implicated through the stories of the participants, and were therefore unable to give any degree of informed consent. The purpose of this study was to be illuminative (cf. Simons, 1987) of the system for discerning vocations to ordained ministry, but inevitably the actions of the relevant personnel come under scrutiny, and some are not shown in a favourable light.

This raises issues concerning potential publication of the study, in respect of style, content and intended audience. Any discussion of the problems highlighted by the study must deal in generalities, as revelation of particularities would undermine certain personnel who could be subject to public criticism.

Erben (1998) maintains that study of individual experience can help to illuminate the wider society. However, the specifics of individual experiences in a specialised system, such as that for discerning vocations to Anglican priesthood, may appear to have little direct relevance to society at large. Even within the society of the Church, the criticism might be made that the experiences of such a relatively few ordination candidates cannot be taken as representative of the whole population of ordination candidates. This study makes no claim to generalizability, since the sample group was, statistically speaking, too small, but size or range of the study is not at issue in biographical research (cf. Erben, 1998). When dealing with characteristics of individual human experience, conclusions drawn from statistics can be, as Durkheim (1952:149) asserts 'uncertain'; statistical generalizations are frequently built on third-party suppositions *about* an experience, rather than the experience itself. Conversely, it may be argued that drawing conclusions from individual narratives can be equally suspect, especially if the experiences studied are idiosyncratic. However, Durkheim (1952) in his study of suicide, and later, Foucault (1964) in his study of insanity, have established the principle of exploring the norms governing social phenomena by examining cases which are generally considered 'abnormal'. Thus, even if some of the experiences in this study could be shown to be atypical, their very peculiarity serves to throw into sharp relief important aspects of the discernment system, which might escape attention in a larger study of 'typical' candidates.

The ultimate purpose of biographical study, according to Erben (1996) is that we should *learn* from the experience of others. Weinsheimer and Marshall (1988, xvi-xvii) describe this educative facet of hermeneutical understanding:

When we understand what someone says to us, we understand not just that person (his “psychology”, for instance), nor just his or her “view”, but we seriously consider whether that way of looking at a subject has some validity for us too.

Biographical study of the way a group of individuals copes with a defined seminal experience, can illuminate the meaning, significance and effect on individual lives of societal structures, and ‘render understandable’ (Denzin, 1989:69) problematic human experience. It can serve as an ‘eye-opener’ on social issues, highlighting matters that merit more focussed exploration, and thus provide the basis for more targeted research. Biographical method has helped to ‘render understandable’ the experiences of calling to ordained ministry, and of discernment of vocation in the Church of England. Within the limitations discussed above, the approach has afforded a perspective on the discernment system, which has foregrounded issues which could constitute the focus of more narrowly defined studies, or further research from different perspectives.

Reflections on the Interpretive Approach

Biographical study is a hermeneutical enterprise and, as Gadamer (1960) states, the knowledge derived can only ever be partial and perspectival. The same data may be viewed from several interpretive standpoints, each of which might be employed by social researchers with differing expertise, and each of which might generate different understandings.

Narrative analysis, for example, might have examined the parallel stories of relationships with family, church community, colleagues, and so forth, which are contained within the main narrative. The more the participants’ narratives are studied, the more stories can be discerned, which would throw light on the issues of vocational discernment from multiple perspectives. A *psycho-analytical* approach would have added other dimensions, excavating the motivations underlying the stories, and possibly video-recording the interviews so as to examine the nuances of expression and body language. This approach could have explored more deeply the contradictions in the texts, for example Adrian’s ready acceptance of a youth leader’s affirmation of his vocation, but

his rejection of the Selectors' negative verdict. However, since the purpose of this study was to explicate the interactions between a group of people and a social system, which had not hitherto been investigated from an experiential perspective, a more comprehensive approach than these more detailed studies was indicated.

The interpretive lens through which the stories in this study were viewed was Kögler's (1999) *critical hermeneutic* approach, which seeks to synthesise Gadamer's hermeneutics with Foucault's discourse theories. Each has limitations, as discussed in Chapter 3, but the synergy between the two, which Kögler's approach facilitates, mirrors current thinking in the relevant field of career guidance theory (cf. Reid, 2002). The proposition that this study demanded recognition of the formative roles of both tradition and discourse in human interactions was confirmed by the participants' stories. It is my belief that a 'critical hermeneutic' approach to the interpretation of the data was therefore justified, and ultimately fruitful.

Summary of Findings

This study has shown that the sense of calling to ordained ministry is highly individual and extremely difficult to communicate to others who are attempting to discern the validity of the vocation. While this appears to undermine the whole basis of the discernment enterprise, it remains necessary to fill clergy posts, which demands a coherent system for ratifying calling and selecting suitable candidates for priesthood. The review of the field revealed concerns about *disparities between dioceses* in the manner and extent of preparation given to candidates attending national Selection Conferences, concerns which were confirmed by the participants' experiences. Unease was also revealed relating to *discrepancies in the levels of interview skills and competencies* of some discernment personnel; this, too, was corroborated by the narratives.

The literature review revealed a number of issues which have a potentially formative role in the development and understanding of vocation, and have the capacity to engender bias in the discernment system. Ecclesiological tradition, or *churchmanship* was the first such issue which was shown to shape

conceptualisations of priesthood, and thereby govern the way 'calling' is perceived and experienced, both by the recipients and their assessors.

Although, the participants' stories tended to contradict this finding in respect of their own perceptions of calling, they did demonstrate that the judgement of discernment personnel can be constrained by their particular ecclesiological background. The narratives also demonstrate the formative power of ordination discourses, both on candidates own ideas of vocation, and in the early interactions with diocesan personnel. The issue of *language in relation to vocation* is shown to be important, and the need to explicate the underlying assumptions held by all parties in the discernment dialogue. This is particularly so with regard to the Selection Criteria, as misunderstandings may arise where viewpoints and assumptions are not clarified. A study of the way candidates and discernment personnel conceptualise each of the Selection Criteria could prove fruitful, possibly utilising linguistic or discourse analysis to gain a more detailed understanding.

Social class is another issue which emerged as a historically normative factor in the selection of clergy, but this appeared as more of a constraint for some of the participants than for their Selectors. *Gender* was shown to be a major issue in the literature, but this too presented few direct problems in the experiences of the participants. The inference drawn from their stories is that any gender-related normative assumptions are associated with understandings of *leadership*, and whether this is perceived in *pastoral* or *managerial* terms, the former being traditionally feminine, the latter traditionally masculine. No indications of overt gender bias were revealed by the participants' narratives, and there was no definitive evidence of Selectors evaluating candidates against clearly genderised norms. A feminist study of the discernment system might generate different findings and provide enlightening alternative perspectives.

Ethnicity is another matter of concern, in that ethnic minorities are greatly under-represented in the ordained ministry of the Church of England. In the drive to increase representation of minority groups amongst the Anglican clergy, the potential for affirmative action to engender unwitting discrimination was inferred from the experiences of the one black candidate in this study. The

various tests employed in the selection process were also shown to have unintentional discriminatory possibilities. This was especially true for candidates from non-Western cultures, and those with language or learning difficulties. It seems that further examination of the tests and their uses is needed.

Another area where discrimination could occur relates to *age* and *health*, in respect of the long-term *financial considerations* for older candidates or those with health problems. It is noted that of the six participants not recommended for ordination training, two are over fifty-five years of age, and two have had serious illnesses which were cited as factors in the decision not to recommend them for training, despite their having formal medical clearance to apply for selection. *Divorce and remarriage* also present problems for the Church, although divorced candidates who have a Faculty from the Archbishops to attend a national Selection Conference should not encounter prejudice. This was not, however, the experience of a divorced and remarried candidate in this study. The experiences of candidates who have official permissions to attend a national Selection Conference suggest that some investigation would be warranted into the attitudes of Bishop's Selectors to these particular permissions, and to the role of the Conference Secretary in ensuring that Selectors' reports are free from bias.

There were special issues associated with *non-recommendation*. All but one of the participants in this category were dismayed by the changed attitudes of previously supportive diocesan personnel, which greatly exacerbated their feelings of bereavement. This was compounded by the lack of appeal against inaccurate or offensive statements, which appeared to ignore personal references, and effectively cemented the power imbalance inherent in the selection system. The experiences of the non-recommended participants in this research, which confirm the findings of other studies (cf. Butler, 1994, Thorp), seem to contradict the collaborative intentions of the discernment process, and would certainly merit further biographical study.

The study has highlighted concerns relating to interviewer competence, in particular the need to take account of *pre-understandings*. In attempting to apprehend and portray the 'truth' of another's life experience, interpreters (be they Selectors or researchers) must cultivate awareness of their own worldviews, in all their constituent aspects - their cultural heritage and personal history, the related concepts and conceptualisations, and the ideological assumptions associated with social power practices, all of which might 'colour' the interpretation in some way. This is especially true where the interpretation involves an element of assessment, as is the case when discerning vocations to ordained ministry. Justice demands that the assessors first clarify their own pre-understandings, and apprehend their operational impact on the assessment process, and on the lives of the people they are assessing; or in Foucault's words, that they understand 'what what they do does' (Dreyfus & Rabinow, 1982:187).

Conclusions

The report *The Care of Candidates Before and After Selection Conferences* (ABM 1997b) reflects the concern of earlier papers in emphasising the importance of vocational guidance before candidates are put forward for Selection Conference, and the findings of this study support this proposal, which would have a number of benefits. A diocesan model of vocational discernment which places greater emphasis on the initial guidance function might result in fewer candidates attending national Selection Conferences, as some potential candidates discover that their true or preferred vocation lies elsewhere, but the percentage of ultimate recommendations might increase. In other words, the discernment process could be made more efficient, which has obvious economic benefits for the Church. However, from a biographical perspective, the savings in personal anguish for candidates not recommended for training is probably of greater importance, especially if a wider appreciation and up-take of lay ministries is accomplished. This could mitigate the frustration of candidates who feel that the secular expertise they have to offer is under-valued, and could help to utilise such expertise more effectively. Further study of the extent and style of vocational guidance available in the dioceses could prove illuminating, especially at a time when the Church is actively

seeking to broaden the scope and opportunities for Christian ministry, both lay and ordained (cf. Archbishops' Council, 2002).

Thorp (2001:117-118) maintains that part of the vocational guidance function should be to 'familiarize candidates with the landscape of non-recommendation' *before* the national Selection Conference. Such work may also 'provide a searching contribution to the process of vocational exploration', as it probes deeply the personal motivations and constructs which underlie the sense of vocation. In Thorp's model, diocesan Vocations Advisers continue their involvement with non-recommended candidates after the Selection Conference, supporting them and exploring alternatives, which helps ease the crisis of self-esteem by counterbalancing their sense of absolute disempowerment.

Enhancement of the vocations advisory function in the dioceses might achieve a greater separation between *person-centred* explorations of calling and *institutionally-focussed* investigations of vocation, allowing the Diocesan Directors of Ordinands and the Bishops' Selectors to exercise their *human resource* function with clarity, as *institutional* representatives. Although it must be acknowledged that this suggestion is, itself, founded on discursive assumptions that the personal and the institutional are binary opposites - which is problematic in a fundamentally communitarian organisation - this study has highlighted the practical and ethical dangers of confusing the various roles and functions performed in the discernment process. This viewpoint is supported by policy statements to the same effect; for example, *The Care of Candidates Before and After Selection Conferences* (ABM, 1997b:3) states:

The care of candidates as they go through the selection process is more effective when the different categories of relationship are recognized and not confused.

The later Report, *A Climate of Encouragement* (ABM, 2000:109) infers that this issue has not yet been addressed.

We suggest that where an individual is responsible both for encouraging candidates and for filtering them, there is a strong likelihood of confusion in the mind of some candidates.

This perception is supported by the participants' experiences, which also suggest that there is equal confusion in the minds of many discernment personnel.

Use of secular 'Assessment Centre' methods in a spiritual context is a prime illustration of conflation of potentially conflicting discourses. Here again, separation of the *discernment* and *selection* functions may prove helpful, devolving the former to guidance personnel in the dioceses, and the latter to Bishops' Selectors, and allowing the current model of the Selection Conference to operate in a (virtually) secular and clear-cut manner. In other words, the dioceses are responsible for the collaborative, spiritual venture of discerning vocations (in a broad sense), and Selectors are responsible for choosing people for the specific role of priest. This is not to suggest that the spiritual context of selection for ordination be set aside, but simply that the responsibilities of all personnel be more clearly defined. This is particularly so for the role and function of Diocesan Director of Ordinands, which tends to straddle the divide between discernment and selection.

Attention was drawn in the previous chapter to the need for enhancement of the training available to discernment personnel. It was suggested that Kögler's (1999) 'Critical Hermeneutic' approach could prove useful as a means of challenging and stimulating interviewers to examine their own pre-understandings, and appreciate the ethical dimensions of interpersonal dialogue in guidance or assessment situations. This necessity is recognised by secular career guidance theorists, amongst whom there is evidence of a renaissance of traditional concepts of vocation as being more than just a job, involving the whole of life and self (cf. Reid, 2002, Young and Collin, 1992, Cochran, 1997). Savickas (1997), for example, promotes the view that vocational exploration is an essentially spiritual exercise (in a generic, non-religious sense). It is possible, therefore, that the secular career guidance community may have something to offer the Church in the development of training for discernment personnel. It is noteworthy that in the numerous consultations which have occurred in the course of reviewing the discernment process over the last ten years, the external consultants have represented management

disciplines and organisational psychology, but no vocational guidance consultants have been included.

There is a necessary caveat to this proposal, however, which this study has revealed; there are dangers in incorporating secular management practices into the system for discerning religious vocations. The discourses governing commercial enterprises can be, as Thorne (1998:117) asserts, destructive. He describes as 'punitive' the assessment culture 'where...everyone seems to be busily engaged in evaluating someone else or avoiding the adverse judgement of their own evaluators.' This culture sits uncomfortably in a pastoral context, and unless the underlying pre-understandings of the relevant secular processes are uncovered, attempts to distil a model of best practice for the system for discerning vocations to Christian priesthood may be inadvertently compromised.

It seems appropriate that the last word in this study should go to a participant who successfully negotiated the selection process, and whose assessment is therefore not coloured by a negative result.

I think the one thing that I would always want to stress is that the practice must lead the institution. If I were running a selection system, what I would want to tell myself all the time, and to remind people around me who were working in it, is that it's the human and the Divine which matter; it's the practice of love which matters; it's the religious practice which matters; that everything you do for the institution has got to be done through that. That has to be the first and the second and the third thing you think about. And the good, or the future, or the nature of the institution is what you think about tenth. ... You have to do the best you can, facing every person that you face in the selection process with those things absolutely at the forefront of your mind.

(Tanya)

APPENDIX 1

Synopsis of the Criteria for Selection for Candidates for Ministry in the Church of England as Priests, Deacons or Accredited Lay Workers

The Criteria for Selection for Ministry in the Church of England are defined in considerable detail for the use of selection personnel. The summary below is taken from the section headings for each criterion, as listed in ABM Policy Paper No. 3A, 1993.

A. MINISTRY WITHIN THE CHURCH OF ENGLAND

Candidates should be familiar with the tradition and practice of the Church of England and be ready to work within them.

B. VOCATION

Candidates should be able to speak of their sense of vocation to ministry and mission, referring both to their own conviction and to the extent to which others have confirmed it. Their sense of vocation should be obedient, realistic and informed.

C. FAITH

Candidates should show understanding of the Christian faith and a desire to deepen their understanding. They should demonstrate personal commitment to Christ and a capacity to communicate the Gospel.

D. SPIRITUALITY

Candidates should show evidence of a commitment to a spiritual discipline, involving individual and corporate prayer and worship. Their spiritual practice should be such as to sustain and energise them in their daily lives.

E. PERSONALITY AND CHARACTER

Candidates should be sufficiently mature and stable to show that they are able to sustain the demanding role of a minister and to face change and pressure in a flexible and balanced way. They should be seen to be people of integrity.

F. RELATIONSHIPS

Candidates should demonstrate self-awareness and self-acceptance as a basis for developing open and healthy professional, personal and pastoral relationships as ministers. They should respect the will of the Church on matters of sexual morality.

G. LEADERSHIP AND COLLABORATION

Candidates should show ability to offer leadership in the Church community and to some extent the wider community. This ability includes the capacity to offer an example of faith and discipleship, to collaborate effectively with others, as well as to guide and shape the life of the Church community in its mission to the world.

H. QUALITY OF MIND

Candidates should have the necessary intellectual capacity and quality of mind to undertake satisfactorily a course of theological study and ministerial preparation and to cope with the intellectual demands of ministry.

APPENDIX 2

Profiles of research participants

Anneke is a young, single woman, of European origin, who at the time of this study was working in a mission situation in England. She graduated as a teacher, and began her ordination training in a Reformed Church in her home country, but work-experience in Britain produced a growing conviction that she should apply for ordination training in the Anglican Church. This caused major problems with her parents, but she continued with her application, and was sponsored to attend a national Selection Conference, from which she was ultimately recommended for training.

Carolyn is a young mother and a part-time under-graduate theological student. She had experienced major health problems for some years prior to the conference, but this had not prevented her carrying out extensive pastoral work in her local community. She is now largely recovered. This was her first Selection Conference and her DDO was very confident that she would succeed. She was not, however, recommended for training, but her DDO has encouraged her to re-apply within the next two years.

Tanya is in her early thirties, and single. She is the daughter of a clergyman and theologian, and is herself a university lecturer with a Classics doctorate. She has a wide education in religious studies. This was her first application for ordination training and she was recommended for training

James is company director, with professional qualifications in finance. He is in his mid-fifties, married, and is a Licensed Lay Reader in his local parish. He is also a trained spiritual director and runs retreats. This was his first Selection Conference for ordained ministry training, but selectors did not recommend him for training.

Adrian is a Religious Education teacher, in his mid-thirties, with a Masters degree and qualifications in counselling. He has had various roles in his local church, but regards his main function as intercession and informal pastoral support. He is divorced, but now remarried. This was his first candidature for ordination training, but he was not recommended by the Selectors. His Bishop has since over-ruled the decision and Adrian proceeded to theological training.

Paul is in his mid-thirties, married with a family, and is a trained nurse. His father was an Anglican priest, but the family emigrated to Australia when Paul was thirteen. Having married in Australia, and had children, he felt drawn back to England, and ordination in the Anglican Church. Since he could not apply from abroad, he registered at a theological college as a private student, with the

intention of applying once he was settled. He was sponsored to attend a Selection Conference by the diocese in which the theological college is situated, and was ultimately recommended for training.

Mark is in his forties, and defines his background as working class, having left school at age sixteen to begin an apprenticeship. He is married with a teen-age family. He has held a commission in the Church Army for many years, and despite health problems has managed to organise his work to accommodate his limitations, without any reduction in his working hours. Doctors appointed by the church assessed him as fit enough to carry out a priestly role on a full-time basis, and consequently his Bishop sponsored him to attend a Selection Conference. He was, however, not recommended for training.

David is in his late thirties and married with children. He currently manages an Anglican retreat centre, but was brought up a Roman Catholic. At age twenty-three he felt called to the priesthood, but ultimately left the seminary where he was training, feeling that his motives were questionable. After working in an ecumenical retreat house, he eventually settled in an Anglican church, from which he applied for ordination in the Church of England. In due course, he attended a Selection Conference, but was not recommended for training.

Warren is in his mid-thirties and married with a young family. He is a Law graduate, and practised as a solicitor before applying for ordination training. He became a committed Christian while at school, but lapsed while at university. After re-establishing his religious commitment, he found he became increasingly bored with legal practice and felt a strong pull towards ordained ministry. He applied for ordination training, and was subsequently recommended by the Selectors.

Patrick is married, and at twenty-nine, one of the youngest participants in the study. Having been brought up in a Brethren assembly, he later became a Pastoral Assistant in an Anglican Church, then studied a one year Bible course to become a Youth Pastor in a Baptist Church. However, he felt he belonged more in an Anglican environment so he joined a local Church of England. He qualified as a teacher, but felt called to ordination, and was ultimately sponsored to a Selection Conference, from which he was recommended for training.

Andrew is the oldest candidate in the research group, married with grown-up children. He is Afro-Caribbean with no formal educational qualifications, although has been studying theology by distance learning for some years. He has long been involved in pastoral work, and leadership of prayer and Bible-study groups in his local parish. This was his first application for ordination training, but he was not recommended by the Selectors.

APPENDIX 3

Participant Interview Schedule

The following served as a guide only, acting as an *aide memoir* to ensure that all aspects had been covered. The interviews were more fluid and dialogical than this outline might suggest.

I) CALLING

1. Describe your religious background – were you brought up in the Anglican Church?

Where would you place yourself at this point in time on a span from *low church* through to *high church*

2. a) Can you describe your ideal priest?
b) In what ways do you feel you fit this model?
3. Describe how your sense of calling to ordained ministry emerged
 - Time sequence?
 - How was it experienced? What did it feel like?
 - Did you consider any other type of ministry?
 - Why did you decide on *ordained* ministry?
 - Can you explain how your ideas/feelings about ordained ministry differ from ideas/feelings about a secular job or career choice?
 - Do you feel any particular person or event (*epiphanies*) had a special influence on the development of your sense of calling?

II) PRE-SELECTION CONFERENCE PROCESS (ie. diocesan process)

1. Take me through the procedure you experienced at diocesan level, from the time you first voiced your sense of vocation.
 - How long did the process take?
 - Did you see the Diocesan Vocations Adviser, and if so, at what point, and what was his/her role? How did he/she relate to the DDO?

- How many interviews did you have, and with whom?
 - Did you have to attend a diocesan selection panel, or any ‘practice interviews’?
 - Were you given any particular reading to do? What was it?
2. How searching did you find the diocesan interviews?
 - how did you feel after the interviews eg. confident, affirmed, undermined?
 3. Where did your greatest support come from?
 4. What, for you, was the most significant aspect of the diocesan process?
 5. On a scale of 1 – 10 (where 10 is high), how would you estimate your level of confidence by the time the conference arrived?
 - did you feel adequately prepared?

III) SELECTION CONFERENCE

1. Tell me the story of the selection conference from your point of view.
 - The welcome and introduction?
 - The general atmosphere?
 - The timetable?
 - The personal inventory?
 - The cognitive tests?
 - The written exercise?
 - The group exercise?
 - The interviews? - The arrangement of the room?
 - The use of the personal inventory?
 - Any mention of references?
 - Type of questions asked?
 - How did the interviews compare with any other job interviews you have had?
 - What sort of atmosphere did the selectors create?
 - Was this the same as in the rest of the conference?
2. What would you count as the most significant aspect of the conference, for you?

3. By the end of the conference, how well do you feel the selectors knew you?
4. Was this borne out in the Selectors' Report

IV) POST-CONFERENCE

1. What was it like waiting for the results? How confident did you feel?
2. How did you hear the results?
 - from whom?
 - what happened – the order of events, who seen?
 - What were you feelings at this time?

V) GENERAL COMMENTS

Taking the whole selection process overall

1. As a process designed to assist in 'the discernment of vocation to ministry' - where do you feel the main focus of the discernment lies - in discerning what's best for you, or what's best for the church? Or both?
2. In retrospect, would you say the selection process made you feel affirmed, strengthened, approved, enabled in testing your vocation?
3. What, if anything, would you most like to change about the system?

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