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**Priest of the Church or Priest of a Church? The Ecclesiology of Ordained Local Ministry
NOEL COX**

**Lexington Books/Fortress Academic, Lanham MD, USA, 2021, xv + 155 pp (hardback £73)
ISBN: 978-1-9787-1185-3**

The number of Ordained Local Ministers (OLMs) in the Church of England may have passed its peak, with 300 OLMs serving today compared to 500 a decade ago. Yet there are other parts of the Anglican Communion where Ordained Local Ministry has only very recently been introduced: in Ireland, for example, the first OLMs were ordained in 2019. Noel Cox's study of the ecclesiology of Ordained Local Ministry is therefore very timely. Previous book length treatments of OLMs (e.g. Heskins and Torry *Ordained Local Ministry* 2006, Bowden and Francis *Ordained Local Ministry in the Church of England* 2012) focused on case studies, history, theological reflection, and analysis of OLMs' effects in the parish. Cox takes a different and ambitious approach. He places his examination of OLMs within a wider conspectus of Anglican ministry, in particular its history, theology, and ecumenical significance.

Ordained Local Ministers are clergy who have been called from a local congregation, and return to serve that congregation after training and ordination. For Cox, what may be a pragmatic solution to providing clergy on the ground raises profound theological questions. Is an OLM, he asks, ordained as a priest of *the* Church, or as a priest only of a particular church? If the latter, is that a defect of intention sufficient to raise doubts as to whether their ordination is valid? From the start, Cox explains he will focus his discussion of OLMs on the experience of the Church of England— but there are also some references to the Anglican Church in Aotearoa, New Zealand and Polynesia, where Cox himself currently ministers as a priest.

In chapter 1, there is an historical overview of ordained ministry in the church. This succinctly covers catholic and Anglican theologies of holy order, including the papal bull *Apostolicae Curae* (1896) which declared Anglican orders null and void. Chapter 2 develops the theme of authority as it has developed in the decentralized Anglican Communion, while chapter 3 discusses some different forms of ordained ministry, including non-stipendiary ministry and the permanent diaconate. The context thus set, OLMs are introduced in chapter 4. Here, there is little about the fifty-year history of OLMs in the Church of England to place them within the detailed historical context of the previous chapters. Instead we are taken directly to the principal questions which the book raises: Do OLMs necessarily entail a blurring of the distinction between ordained and lay? Do they constitute a step towards congregationalism? Is it right that a category of clergy should have distinct processes for selection and training? Chapter 5 goes on to underline the uncertainty and inconsistency

which Cox sees in the status of OLM, arising from a tension between the universality of priesthood and the local nature of Ordained Local Ministry. Chapters 6 and 7 then return to more general ecclesiological questions, principally regarding the ordination of women and ecumenical relations. In chapter 8, Cox teases out the implications of these several threads, although his suggestion that the tensions in the ministry of OLMs are potentially 'even more problematic than the difficulties raised for the Anglican communion by divisions over the ordination of women or practising homosexuals' has not been the experience of the Church of England.

Ecclesiastical lawyers will want to test the assertions in this book by examining relevant legal texts. Much significance is attached to Cox's argument that, while the rite of ordination is the same for OLMs as for other clergy, their licences are to a different form of ministry. In the Church of England, however, OLMs' licences are usually worded identically to other NSMs. Nor does any canon treat an OLM differently from other non-stipendiary clergy. Furthermore, some of Cox's questions about OLMs are raised because 'it remains unclear what would happen were an OLM to move outside their home parish, benefice, or deanery...' (p 58). That may be so in provinces which have only adopted OLM ministry in the past year or two. In the Church of England's decades of experience with this form of ministry, however, this bridge has been crossed many times. As an inspection of Crockford reveals, scores of OLMs have become NSMs, stipendiary curates, and even incumbents—a process governed either by diocesan quasi-legislation or episcopal decision. I also query how novel are the ecclesiological questions raised by Ordained Local Ministry. For example, there is a long history of Benedictine monks ordained to serve in the community to which they have taken a lifelong vow of stability; or, in former centuries, Anglican college fellows or schoolmasters ordained to serve in their college or school chapel. These seem, ecclesologically, very like OLMs, and have been generally and uncontroversially accepted in the church. All of this evidence could be used to add further support to Cox's happy conclusion at the end of the book, namely that OLMs *are* 'fully priests and deacons of the universal church' (p 117).

As OLMs are called and serve locally, it might have seemed most obvious to study them close-up—the practicality of Ordained Local Ministry, its effectiveness in the parish, and so on. Cox's more imaginative approach in this book is rather to step back, and look at OLMs through a wide-angle lens, asking the difficult questions arising from apostolic tradition, ecumenical reception, and authority in Anglicanism. Just as Cox insists that an OLM's priesthood must be universal, his own work is not narrowly restricted to the particular situation of the OLM. It gives a generous grounding in universal questions of ecclesiology, with OLMs presented as a case study within that wider discussion. The result is a book which provides plenty of context even for those who are not familiar with Anglicanism: such a reader would be introduced not only to the questions Cox asks about Ordained Local Ministry, but also many of the principal issues for Anglican ecclesiology today.