Ministry is a very special word in the Church. It comes from the Greek word *diakonos*, meaning ‘one who serves’ and it applies to all Christians, not just to the ordained clergy.

The ministry of the Church is exercised by everyone who bears the mark of baptism. It is the service we carry out in the name of Christ; any act of service performed in his name. It is not something we do on our own. It is something Christ does through us.

Laity is also a special word. It comes from the Greek *laos*, meaning ‘the people of God’, and it refers to the whole Church, clergy and lay people alike.

Saint Paul says Christ is like a single body with many limbs and organs which, as many as they are, together make up one body (see 1 Corinthians 12). And he emphasises that it is the body which is given gifts for ministry, not just selected parts of the body.

The Church has not always been faithful to this New Testament understanding of ministry. All too often we have been prepared to leave ministry to the ordained professionals. But the Bishops of the Anglican Church meeting at the 1968 Lambeth Conference were emphatic that the ministry of laypersons is ‘an integral part of the whole ministry of the Church to the world’ because ‘it is here that the greatest spiritual and human resources of the ministry of the whole Church reside’.

That makes good sense. If Christ’s ministry is to the world, and if laymen and laywomen are daily involved in the world, then it is they who are obviously best placed to exercise that ministry.

The ordained ministry

The function of the ordained ministry is to equip lay people for their ministry (see Ephesians 4:12).

The ordained ministry is built on the ministry of the Apostles. Jesus called the Apostles and trained them for leadership and authority. He gave them special teaching and he specifically charged them to care for the Church.

After Pentecost the Apostles became the focus of the Church’s unity. They were the source of the Church’s teaching. The early Christians had no need of further organisation. If they wanted to know the Church’s teaching, they asked an Apostle.

However, once the Church started to grow, the picture started to change. The Apostles could no longer cover the ground and it became necessary to appoint others, representatives of the Apostles, to equip and teach the local Churches. They were elected by the Church at large but they were always ordained by the Apostles, or by those sent by the Apostles with authority to ordain.

The New Testament picture of the ordained ministry is often confusing but one thing is clear: all authority for ministry was derived from the Apostles and all ministry was exercised under their supervision.

We don’t know the exact process by which the three-fold ordained ministry - the ministry of Bishop, Priest and Deacon - evolved in the Church. We do know that by the time of writers like Irenaeus and Tertullian (180 CE), Bishops had succeeded the long dead Apostles, Priests were exercising the Apostolic ministry in local Churches and Deacons were caring for the sick and needy. What is more, those writers seemed to have no recollection of a time when this three-fold ordained ministry did not exist.
Bishops
The Order of Bishops still exercises the ministry of oversight. The Bishop oversees the work of the Diocese. The Bishop’s ministry therefore involves a hefty portion of administration. There are those who are quick to belittle this aspect of the Bishop's office. They say, ‘Bishops spend far too much time on administration’. But administration is an essential and integral part of a Bishop’s ministry and to neglect it would be a failure of trust.
At the same time, a Bishop’s badge of office is a shepherd’s crook, symbolising the Bishop’s role as the shepherd of the flock of Christ. This pastoral role is directed, in particular, towards the clergy of the diocese. They derive their authority from the Bishop who must ensure that they are equipped for their equipping ministry in the local Church.

Priests
Most Anglican clergy belong to the Order of Priests. The Priest is appointed by the Bishop to preside over a local Church. But the Priest is not just a ‘branch manager’. Fifty years ago, when I was ordained Priest, the job description was quite specific. It was the Apostles’ job description: ‘Receive the Holy Spirit for the office and work of a Priest in the Church of God, now committed to you by the laying on of our hands. Whose sins you forgive, they are forgiven; whose sins you retain, they are retained; and be a faithful dispenser of the Word of God and of his Holy Sacraments; in the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, Amen.’
Priests are sacramental people, signs of the presence of the Apostolic ministry in the local Church. Their mandate is the same as that given to the Apostles. They are to preside at the Eucharist, to Baptise, to preach the Good News, to teach and to discipline. And all to one end: ‘...for the equipment of the saints, for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ.’. Ephesians 4:12

Deacons
Nowadays the Order of Deacons is seen by many to be little more than an apprenticeship for Priesthood. This is probably due to the fact that most Priests are ordained Deacon before being ordained Priest. Historically, however, the Order of Deacons was far more important than that.
In the early Church the Deacons were entrusted with the finance and administration of the Church and with the care of the sick and the poor. They also had an essential part to play in the public worship of the Church. It seems the Eucharist could not be properly celebrated unless a Deacon was present. This remains the case in the Eastern Orthodox Church but in the West the Order of Deacons has lost much of its early significance.
The fact that Priests must first become Deacons continues to remind us of the essential quality of ordination. Priests are ordained to serve.

The ministry of the Church
Now we are back where we started with the ministry of the whole Church; the ministry of the baptised.
We have already noted that every Christian has at least one gift for service and ministry. We have noted that those gifts are many and varied and that the Holy Spirit works through our gifts to bring about God’s rule in our place and time. But the gifts the Spirit has given us nearly always need to be discovered. Then they need to be polished, trained and disciplined. The Orders of Bishop, Priest and Deacon exist to facilitate this process, to equip the saints for the work of ministry.
All over God’s world the so-called 'ordinary people of the Church' are beginning to discover their gifts, to develop them, and to use them in God’s service. Their gifts are many and varied. They include teaching and healing and parenting and listening and cooking and entertaining and managing and building and fishing and farming and policing and soldiering and writing; anything which is done well in Christ's name and in the service of others.