

## David Kim-Cragg

The biblical basis for different “streams” of ministry in the Book of Acts reveals the intercultural context of the decision to create a separate category of ministry. It also raises questions about whether the action taken was effective. In the United Church of Canada context we are seeking to identify different gifts without suggesting hierarchy. This writer agrees we should seek the simplest, most transparent and easily understandable order of paid accountable ministry that recognizes equivalency of training. But perhaps even more than this, the church needs leaders of Spirit and wisdom who can guide us on our path into intercultural church.

It is in the Book of Acts that we find the historic situation that became the source of separate streams of ministry within the church: “the Hellenists complained against the Hebrews” (Acts 6:1b). To help the different cultures within the church to get along seven men are appointed. These later became known as “diaconal” ministers because the apostles who came up with the idea understood the job of these seven to be about serving. The basic idea was a group of ministers who would “serve” the practical needs of others, which is the root meaning of the Greek word “diakonia.” This new stream of ministry was to help alleviate the injustice felt by the “Hellenists.”

There are three interesting things about this story. The first is that the response of the church does not directly address the issue of intercultural tension that is the heart of the problem. Why did the problem develop in the first place? And how to deal with the deficit of trust between the two cultural groups? Perhaps what the church was really looking for was a ministry “full of Spirit and of wisdom” (Acts 6:3) capable of navigating the cultural differences between Greeks and Israelites.

The second thing is the biased attitude of the apostles. “It is not right,” said the apostles, “that we should neglect the word of God in order to wait at tables” (Acts 6:2). The language suggests an attitude that is condescending and gives the impression that one form of ministry is beneath another, i.e. the apostles do the important work of preaching and teaching while the diaconal ministers do the menial work of waiters or servants. To some extent the perception of a hierarchy of ministry persists today in the United Church of Canada among the three streams.

The third thing about the division of ministry between “word” and “waiting” is how quickly the distinction is transgressed. As the story unfolds, Stephen, one of the seven diaconal ministers, immediately proves himself a mighty powerful preacher and teacher of the scriptures in addition to his gifts as a servant. The distinction then between the two forms of ministry is blurred as soon as it is made. This makes me wonder about the wisdom of the distinction from the beginning.

The United Church of Canada has a strong ethos of equality. Our Jesus is more often the Lukan Jesus of the Plain than the Matthean Jesus on the Mount. We are puzzled by how to clarify the difference between three forms of ministry, ordained, diaconal, and designated, while maintaining their equality. Issues of pay equity and recognition of educational qualifications are as connected to the perception of equality or inequality as the status or authority conferred by the church.

Despite what seems from my reading of Acts as a problematic beginning, ordained and diaconal streams of ministry have a long history and are respected and recognized ecumenically. The training that each stream receives in the United Church is different but is judged to be “approximately equivalent” by the Joint Ministry Working Group (Thinking p.5). As for designated lay ministers, the value of their ministry within the UCC is unquestionable and their training could easily come up to the equivalent of ordained and diaconal (Thinking, p.6). The distinctions, therefore, are legitimate and equivalency in training is essential for maintaining the equality of each. This is key to “a simpler, more transparent and understandable order of paid accountable ministry [that] will best serve the future of the church” (Thinking, p.2).

As a final thought, the report “Thinking about One Order of Ministry” closely associates ordered ministry to levels of preparation/education and to whether or not one is paid for the work one does. These are institutionally significant factors but not necessarily spiritually significant. I do not think we have wrestled deeply enough with what the spiritual implications are of associating education levels and whether or not one is paid with whether the Spirit is acting and moving through a member of Christ’s body. What’s more, institutionalizing gifts according to dominant cultural norms of training risks disenfranchising people, and gets us into the kinds of cultural conflicts that give rise to the division of ministry in the first place.

At present, the Holy Spirit seems to be leading the UCC into an intercultural reality. Many different cultures recognize and lift up spiritual gifts for the church differently. Caution needs to be taken to recognize the equivalent gifts and training of Christians in other cultures and other denominations. The Sandy Saulteaux Centre is a positive example. Recognizing the ministry qualifications of friends in the United Church of Christ in the USA and the Philippines and the Presbyterian Church in the Republic of Korea is another good thing. What we need now more than ever is leaders like those of Sandy Saulteaux Centre and our partners who can help us to discern across cultures the true gifts of the Spirit.

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