

Kate Crawford

Recently, I had the privilege of sitting at a table at the General Council offices with a group of people gathered to discuss *One Order of Ministry*, and how to frame it as a remit. It is difficult work, and the wording has to be both careful and clear so that the church can come to know its own mind through the remit process.

I felt honoured to be at that table. While I have received study documents aplenty through the years, I have never been at the front end of any. I was looking forward to the whole experience.

What a surprise, then, to discover that among the dozen or so of us who had been gathered, from across Canada, and across the categories of ministry, not only did we not see see ministry in the same way, we couldn't even see each other in an unbiased way. As we discussed ministry each from our own perspective, we began to betray deeply felt but seldom expressed biases about the superiority of our own path, qualifications, and gifts to the church: "Diaconal Ministers are closer to the people...."; "Designated Lay Ministers are more real..."; "Ordained Ministers are more educated...." We saw each other as caricatures.

It was abundantly clear to me in that moment that we do have a problem in our theology and practice of ministry. But I'm not completely convinced that the remit as it is currently being crafted (very carefully, by extremely qualified people) is the answer. Let me explain.

There was a time in our denomination when the role and function of an ordained minister, such as myself now, was very clear. Until one was ordained, rights and privileges, like administering the sacraments, were withheld. Ordination was a gateway, and training for ordination was a difficult and self-sacrificial process, which transformed as it educated. I can remember applying for a license to perform sacraments for the pastoral charge where I served in solo ministry as an intern supply, who had completed a Master of Divinity degree, and being refused by my Presbytery. I had not yet passed through the gate.

But through the years this has changed. Rights and privileges are now more and more being extended *by pastoral need* (there is no one else but me), rather than *by qualification* (I have been trained for and approved to do the work). Function has become the new qualification.

And perhaps there is nothing wrong with that. After all, the disciples didn't have to get a Master's degree and pass Conference Interviews in order to function in ministry. Vocation and giftedness are their own qualifications, as any Newfoundland outpost Lay Reader could tell you.

But ministry in the twenty-first century is not the same kettle of fish as it was in the first. It is now a profession as much as a vocation, and as such it must have coherent and consistent professional standards, discipline, compensation, and training. Alas, we do not have these. And the confusion created by this lack is being keenly felt throughout the ranks of those who serve in ministry. It can also lead to resentment, especially when changing models of ministry cease to value the education, effort, and sacrifice which were formerly required of all ministry personnel in equal measure.

The remit is an attempt to address this confusion and resentment by creating a model of ministry based on the assumption that we are all essentially the same – diaconal, ordained, university-educated or not – by virtue of *function*. This does seem to be the practice of the church at this time. If the remit passes, it will enshrine this current practice for the future.

But are we all the same? And should we be? One of the principles we have long upheld was the distinct gift and tradition of the diaconate – set apart for education, service and pastoral care. In contrast to that, the gift of the ordained was also, therefore, distinct – set apart for word, sacrament and pastoral care. And the gift of the Designated Lay Minister was distinctly local, bounded by a Presbytery.

Personally, I would prefer a strengthening of the distinctions that made us unique, rather than an erosion of them because we have not honoured them in recent years. But here I fear that I sound like an old curmudgeon, wheezily decrying that “it warn’t like that in my younger days!”

I assure you, it warn’t. As the discussions on the remit approach, I am left with many questions and few answers. In the upcoming time of structural change for our denomination, we need to be confident in the strength and wisdom of all of our leaders. Let us choose the path that leads us there.

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