

Mark Toulouse

The *One Order of Ministry* proposal starts in the right place with the theological recognition that “the whole people of God” share in the ministry of Christ to the world. This is an assumption associated with “ministry” throughout the history of the Church (capital “C” stands for ecumenical Church). Within the history of Christianity, Christians, by virtue of their baptism, become ministers for God in the world, “a priesthood of all believers.” Further, The United Church of Canada is right to emphasize “ordination” and the “One Order of Ministry” as important components of the ministry of the Church, and to emphasize the diversity of expressions contained within both. Historically, we, when reflecting as Church, have attempted to recognize that ministry ultimately rests in God, not in ourselves. Ministry also serves the whole Church, not just The United Church of Canada. This is why we must work on our understanding of ministry through theological conversations with the entire Church, and in dialogue with the whole history of the Church’s understanding of ministry, and not just by ourselves.

I have two basic concerns. The first is that this proposal, except through brief nods to other documents more theologically inclined, does not attempt to define the “Order of Ministry” in a theological manner. And it does not consider historical or ecumenical contexts much at all. The document is driven mostly by pragmatic concerns. Of course, this is a typical progressive Protestant way of viewing the world. We like to identify problems and solve them pragmatically. We rarely, especially today, hold ourselves accountable to thinking theologically, historically, or ecumenically about problems. The proposal accepts as a given “the difficulty in articulating a difference between designated lay ministry and ordained ministry” (and likewise, “commissioning” and “ordaining”) without any attempt to theologize or think historically about it. Instead of defining ordination theologically, the proposal seems to emphasize the economics of ministry – if one is “paid” for ministry, then that ministry should reside in the one order of ministry, either as “ordained candidate” or as “ordained.” Admittedly, the proposal implies this fact more than it states it, but it does come close when it says, “This report deals with the third category of Paid Accountable Ministry.” I’d much rather see the report provide a clear theological understanding of the meaning of ordination than assume that all those who are in “paid accountable” ministries should be ordained (or receive a “grandparent” admission into the “One Order of Ministry”).

The Church, especially the Protestant branches of it, but also true in many Catholic forms as well, has also historically recognized the role played by lay ministers who have served local congregations or itinerant ministries in official ways without ordination. Many, but not all, lay ministries have been bi-vocational in nature, serving ministry needs where fulltime leadership seemed inaccessible or impractical. Most lay ministers serving in pastoral roles have been vocationally committed to them, serving with a sense of “call to ministry” as strong as any among those who serve as full time ordained ministers. In The United Church of Canada, in the last fifteen years or so, Designated Lay Ministers have served this function. Accepting this proposal would do away with these distinctions of lay ministry and ordained ministry when it comes to serving in any paid accountable ministry. What are the criteria (theological, historical, and ecumenical), beyond a pragmatic response to a perceived problem, that would determine whether this should be the case or not? When considered theologically, historically, and

ecumenically, is lay ministry, as the document states, “indistinguishable from ordained ministry?”

My second concern has to do with the proposal’s treatment of educational preparation. On the one hand, I am pleased that *One Order* envisions there should be “a basic equivalency in educational preparation for ministry leadership.” One of the hallmarks of ordained ministry in the United Church has been the importance placed upon an educated ministry. Yet, the proposal contains very little specificity concerning how to determine equivalency, except to recommend a specific number of years (perhaps a four to five year model).

I am uncertain how equivalencies can be judged without attention to matters of content and the quality, expectations, and levels of comprehension generally associated with instruction as equally, if not more, important than questions related to duration. Given the basic academic requirements defined by this proposal, I think it likely that the historically important emphasis placed on academic work for ministerial preparation will be dramatically reduced. The proposal recommends a new “Diploma in Theology and Pastoral Ministry” for candidates so long as they meet the prerequisite of one year of undergraduate education (equivalent of 10 courses). For a Diploma, candidates for ordination might spend up to five years in learning circles or intensive cohort conversations (generally for about five weeks out of fifty-two each year), and in supervised ministry in one’s home context. As part of their five years, candidates would be required to take *an additional eight academic courses in a theological school setting*. Thus, academic requirements for candidates for ministry could amount to just 18 academic courses (10 undergraduate as prerequisite, and 8 in theological studies). That compares with current academic expectations for ordination: an undergraduate Bachelor of Arts (four years or 40 courses) and a Master of Divinity (three years and 30 more courses). What professional vocation (doctors, lawyers, dentists, social workers?) requires this kind of minimal academic preparation? Likely, there is room to reduce the current 70 courses to something like 40-50 courses (where at least half of the courses would be in theological studies), but is an expectation of 18 academic courses (less than two academic years of preparation) after high school truly viable? I know it sounds defensive coming from one associated with a theological school that emphasizes intellectual and personal transformation, community worship, and spiritual formation in the context of critical and academic theological education, but this new “lowest common denominator approach” to academic requirements for ministry could create serious deficiencies in the future quality of our church’s ministry.

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