

## David Hart - A Reflection on the United Church of Canada Document, "One Order of Ministry"

In the course of my long tenure of ministry at Bedford United Church, there came a day in Sunday worship when I chose to shed my traditional clerical alb and stole in favour of wearing my everyday "street" clothes. Little did I realize how this simple action would lead the congregation to a profound debate over the meaning of ministry! The document, "One Order of Ministry," presented to the 42<sup>nd</sup> General Council and now being disseminated throughout the church for conversation prior to the distribution of a remit, is achieving the same end.

I chose to shed the alb and stole as a symbolic action to emphasize that the entire community of faith is called to ministry. In worship we utilize lay presiders, scripture readers, providers of prayer, musical leaders and so on. In addition, lay people resource the administrative and ministry functions of the community. Given this reality, I suggested that no distinction should be made between myself as a person in ministry and them. Many of them had different ideas!

My congregation politely, but also sometimes passionately, told me that regardless of the "ministry of the whole people of God," I still had a special role or function amongst them, that of providing spiritual leadership. They expressed concern that the disuse of the alb and stole could lead to a diminishment of my stature amongst them and of the community's respect for me and my function. We chose to disagree for a while, and in time they came to appreciate my decision and to recognize that their worries had been unfounded.

In the years to follow, we began using as our collective affirmation in worship and on other occasions, the saying, "The Spirit in me Honours the Spirit in You", sometimes shortened to the single word *Namaste*. This phrase and saying has become deeply embedded in the hearts and psyche of the entire congregation. When we say it, we put our hands together in a position of prayer, an expression of a sacred recognition of the presence of the Spirit in one another. It embodies the recognition that regardless of function or position in the community we are all expressions of the one life of God; different in function but equal in essence.

As the United Church of Canada considers subsuming three originally distinct groups, namely designated lay ministers (DLM), diaconal ministers and ordained ministers, under the one heading of "ordination," I try to keep in mind the important distinction between function and status that has emerged in our congregation. It's a distinction the apostle Paul also highlights.

Paul states that "The body is one, even though it has many parts. It was by one Spirit that all of us, whether we are Jews or Greeks, slaves or citizens, were baptized into one body" (I Corinthians 12). Paul affirms what we too have discerned at Bedford United, that there are no distinctions separating people in terms of value or status in God's sight.

Paul does not deny that there are different functions and roles that people play. He says, "There are, indeed, many different members but one body." But the differing of function does not have any bearing on our status or inherent value as expressions of one God. In my mind, the significant issue to be resolved in the current debate regarding ministry is to clarify the distinction between status and function as it pertains to the term "ordination."

I will always remember the day of my ordination for a variety of wonderful reasons. But one of my more disturbing memories is of classmates who could not wait to don a clerical collar as a symbol of newfound status in the church. Is this what ordination is intended to represent? A newfound stature and status in the community? I think not.

The committee writing the report on ministry for the 42<sup>nd</sup> General Council did tussle with this issue. But I believe they came to the wrong decision. They concluded that since most DLMs, diaconal ministers and ordained ministers end up doing the same job, that of providing a “Ministry of Word, Sacrament and Pastoral Care” that they should all be ordained. However, at least for diaconal ministers, the intention of their training is not to do ordained but diaconal ministry. And many DLMs and ordained ministers will end up leaving congregational ministry of “Word, Sacrament and Pastoral Care” to provide administrative leadership for the church, to enter into educational or other forms of ministry. When these people retain the designation of “ordination” while no longer serving the ordination function, the title in their case becomes an expression of status and not of function.

I suspect that a significant reason why DLMs and diaconal ministers wish to be ordained, despite having undertaken significantly different educational and formation roles from those people traditionally moving towards ordination is two-fold. Indeed, they may recognize that they are performing the same role and function as ordained ministers and therefore feel they should receive the same designation. However, could it also be that they desire the same status that ordained ministers acquire with the ordination designation?

What strikes me as the most appropriate solution to this question is to remove all vestiges of a special status being endowed upon ordained ministers and to assign the word “ordination” strictly to function. In that case, ordination would no longer constitute a lifelong designation but would be strictly utilized as a title for people engaged in the ministry of “Word, Sacrament and Pastoral Care”. In such cases, it would be locally applied by the judicatory responsible for assigning ministers to congregational ministries. The designation would be associated more truly with the ministry than the minister, and the minister would lose that designation when she or he left the position.

In this case, the church would still need to establish appropriate educational and formational eligibility requirements for people conducting ordained ministry. And I would argue that those requirements be strengthened rather than diminished given the complexity of today’s world and the demands of ministry. But there could be different routes toward and mixes of education and formation to achieve those eligibility requirements. However, as long as I can remember, our church has been characterized by a tension between those in “ordained” ministry and those in the other streams of ministry. Perhaps the solution is not to endow the designation of “ordination” on everyone in ministry, but to assign it more selectively to those situations where it is truly appropriate and to remove all last vestiges of status associated with the term.

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