

Sean Handcock

When Paul writes to the Christian community in Corinth that “*there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit; and there are varieties of services but the same Lord*” (1 Cor. 12:4-5), I’ve always taken this to refer, at least in part, to what we attempt to discern when we assess a candidate’s suitability for ministry. Do they have the gifts? Do they have the call? And when the answer is “yes” we invest the next several years in honing those gifts, refining that call, through field placements and further education until such time as we deem them adequately prepared for a life of ministry; a process with which I think Paul would be pleased.

There is, however, an inequity in our system. As a ministerial candidate who took the traditional route of obtaining a Master of Divinity I was ordained in the United Church of Canada as a Minister of word, sacrament, and pastoral care. What this means in practice is that while I get to call myself, “Reverend,” administer the sacraments, and enjoy a greater degree of respect (and even financial remuneration) within our church, the Designated Lay Minister with whom I share my ministry – despite the fact that she is equally well educated and has successfully ministered to our community for eight years – does not. It is a situation which, quite frankly, strikes me as hypocritical.

Do my colleagues within the Diakonia not share the same sense of call? Are the DLM’s in our midst in some way less gifted? Do we not experience the same joys and sorrows that a life of ministry entails when our church asks us to take on the same heavy weight of responsibility that is parish ministry? I wouldn’t think so – especially not when every individual who serves our church has been discerned to have the gifts and call to do so – and yet not all are afforded the same rights and privileges. This is an inequity in practice that the *Proposal for One Order of Ministry* attempts to resolve by ordaining all ministers.

But, make no mistake, when it says that all diaconal ministers should be ordained, this isn’t a blow struck at the distinct call and identity of the Diakonia, but an acknowledgment of the equity of their call and ministry that opens the door to other distinct ministries, like prison chaplaincy and youth ministry, to establish their own unique identity (and admission qualifications) within the one order. Nor does it lower the educational bar by admitting DLMs and establishing a more flexible framework for acquiring said education (after the Sandy-Saulteaux Spiritual Centre model), but instead tightens it by insisting all ministers – regardless of educational path – be equally qualified prior to ordination.

What it says is that while “*there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit; and there are varieties of services but the same Lord*” so too should there should be only One Order of Ministry within the United Church of Canada; a bold declaration with which I wholeheartedly agree.

*Sean Handcock serves in ministry at St. David’s United Church in Rothesay, NB.*