

Keith Gale

I agree with the reasoning behind the proposal for one order of ministry in The United Church of Canada (UCCan). We currently have leaders from three streams of ministry, the vast majority of whom end up occupying the same functional office. At the Pastoral Charge level, minimal distinction is made between ordained, diaconal, and designated lay ministers. What matters is that there is someone to do the work of preaching and teaching, of praying and staying at the sides of the sick, of hatching, matching, and dispatching. Ministry in the UCCan already functionally operates as if there is one order.

Our current model seems to cause more confusion than freedom to express our varied gifts. The Scriptural defense offered by the Joint Ministry Working Group and fine theologians such as Harold Wells helps us realize that all forms of leadership are equally important and necessary. Our sense of unity and mutual appreciation will serve us well; may our identity be defined by the way we love one another. Yes, we need some work. These conversations help us to get closer to where we need to be.

I appreciated the proposal's reiterated value for in-ministry training. Doing more to help ministry candidates experience what pastoral life is really like will only serve us and them well. The benefits of practical experience in helping form excellent ministers is one of the enduring gifts of the Designated Lay Ministry program.

If we are all mostly engaging in the same functional office, establishing a common minimum standard of education for all paid, accountable ministers makes good sense. My concern arises at setting the minimum education requirement at a total of eight academic credits, with program entry being the equivalent of one year of university studies. This seems insufficient, even if it is completed over a minimum time frame and supplemented with additional readings and discussions. I understand that the current requirements have made it difficult for some people to follow a call into ministry. Extending the time frame might help, although it would effectively mean some will live out the entirety of their ministry as a paid, accountable candidate. Increasing access to online models of education makes completing these requirements more possible, as geographic and time-of-day limitations are alleviated. There seems to be a general agreement that we want an educated order of ministers; with eight credits, I believe we can barely scratch the surface.

The equivalent of a two-year, full-time academic load (20 credits) would be a minimum requirement with which I would feel more comfortable. The first ten credits could be foundation courses, and the next ten could move toward a particular specialization. This is how the Nova Scotia Community College (NSCC) delivers their excellent Human Services program. (I am biased, being a graduate of that program. In my two years at NSCC, I learned a lot of practical skills that have been extraordinarily useful in ministry.) I also think that a previous two-year diploma, two years of university studies, or equivalent life experience is a reasonable prerequisite for entry to this program.

Restructuring the education requirement is a good opportunity. Making the minimum standard a Diploma of Pastoral Ministry instead of a Master of Divinity might better reflect the requirements for pastoral ministry, but only if a certain theological depth is assured. I sincerely hope that our current theological institutions are consulted in the program criteria for this diploma, and are also provided resources and support to help prepare for implementing this change.

However our church decides to proceed on this matter, I pray it be a reflection of where we hope the church will go and grow, rather than where it has been. I find it exciting that our functional reality, which brought about this conversation, is showing us where we need to go. Wherever the Spirit is leading us, we still have exemplary faithful people who are willing to dedicate their lives to the work of the Gospel. Let us not grow weary of doing this good work, but let us use this opportunity to follow the call to be the Church varied in gifts and parts, united together in our one and only head Jesus the Christ.

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