

Lori Crocker: “Reflections on a Single Order of Ministry, inclusive of diaconal, lay and ordained persons”

In the latter years of the 1970s, I experienced a call to diaconal ministry that has grown, changed and strengthened over 35 years. The call came to me in a burst of passionate indignation. I was sitting in an Acadia University undergraduate classroom taking a basic course in the introduction to the Old and New Testament given by the Religious Studies department. I was on my way to becoming a high school English teacher and since the bible is alluded to in many works of literature I thought that a good grounding in it would be beneficial.

First off, I was introduced to hermeneutics, matters of interpretation, basics in biblical scholarship and what we knew of the context, origin, and date of various biblical documents. I was shocked and intrigued. My basic questions became, “Why did I not learn these things in the United Church congregation that I grew up in? Where had I got the impression that being a Christian meant at least pretending that all biblical material was literally true?”

I began to explore the possibility of becoming a religious education teacher in the schools. At this point, I gave no thought to becoming a minister because I thought all ministers were Reverends who preached sermons, led worship, and presided at baptisms, weddings and funerals; none of which I felt was related to my passion for teaching.

By pure luck, a person who was a student at the Centre for Christian Studies crossed my path and I discovered there was an alternate path to ministry in my church. Who knew? So I ended up at CCS where I discovered, lo and behold, there are diverse calls and approaches to ministry. I was interested in Christian Education work; others had a passion for social justice and community based mission work; others global ministry; others resource development; others youth work; others wanted to study theology and engage in ministry preparation and still remain lay persons – imagine!

I discovered that my kind of call to ministry had a world-wide tradition lived out in many denominations and called “*diakonia*.” I began to understand the words of First Corinthians 12:4 (“*Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit...*”) and Ephesians 4:11 (“*the gifts he gave were that some would be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, some pastors and teachers, to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ*”) in terms of call. I now understand that God’s calls to ministry are diverse and that a variety of calls unfolding in new and different ways are what best serves the emerging church.

So the words “One Order of Ministry” make me nervous. The reality still is that many people both inside and outside the church understand a professional paid accountable minister to be the one in the gown behind the pulpit whom we call “Reverend.” Others tend to be seen as oddities that complicate matters in that they don’t quite fit. Their education is different; are some getting into ministry through the back door? Is it fair that congregations can pay Designated Lay Ministers less to do the same work? If the functions done by different types of ministers overlap, why do they all have to have different names, training programs, and pay scales? In theory we understand and embrace God’s vast and complex variety of ministries, but how to “order” them into a simplified and united system that can be readily explained and understood might be an

impossible endeavor. No matter what new system we come up with or no matter how we adjust the present one, there will always be some whose call and experience just does not fit. Perhaps that is fitting and acceptable to God, because how will new forms of ministry emerge if not from a mix of complexity and chaos? Perhaps our goal could be toward a more flexible and adaptable system rather than a more simple and unified one.

Throughout my ministry there have always been attempts to simplify things. The question has been asked again and again: “what about ordaining everyone to different functions?” I believe that once we are unified under one term we will all be seen as “Reverends.” What need will there be to nurture a variety of calls? The Presbyterian Church of Canada has for some years now ordained both their diaconal and priestly folks. As a result they no longer have diaconal training and there are no new people entering their diaconate. The Wesley diaconal community of the Methodist church of the Caribbean and the Americas have made a similar move and now see fewer numbers entering their diaconate as well.

In conclusion, I note that none of the documents I have read on “One Order of Ministry” mentions figures. The fact that ordained ministers are far more in number than either diaconal ministers or Designated Lay Ministers must be considered. Very few ordained ministers are asked to explain their title or who they are because they are the “norm.” I, however, am asked to explain myself more or less daily, and I suspect that the same is true for most Designated Lay Ministers. The fact that we are “constantly explaining” is a privilege in that it opens up to people the fact that there are a variety of calls and that we need a variety of ministries in a changing church.

I believe that the church needs a better balance in the numbers. Perhaps a third, a third, a third? What a dream. The fact that we all find ourselves performing the same functions in what are more and more often solo ministry congregational settings is not good. It speaks to an unhealthy dependency on priestly ministry. Even in our present reality, the church needs to be committed to developing educational, transformative, and community ministries and supporting those that are called to them.

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