

Paul Miller: “One Order of Ministry”

The concept paper entitled “Thinking About One Order of Ministry” from the General Council’s Joint Ministry Working Group addresses the United Church’s current labyrinthine system for identifying, training, credentialing, and overseeing ministers.

The paper asks this central question: “What forms of ministry will faithfully and effectively serve the life of the church in the future?”

On one level, it succeeds in answering this question. For sure, our present system is needlessly cumbersome. We have three different categories of “paid accountable ministers,” each with its own separate preparation track. But most people in the pews have no idea what difference there is between an OM [Ordained Minister], DM [Diaconal Minister], DLM [Designated Lay Minister] (recognized), DLM (not recognized), OS [Ordained Supply], RS [Retired Supply], etc. The minister is the one who does the work of ministry regardless of their designation. When it comes to ministers, the attitude of congregations is, “If it looks like a duck and quacks like a duck, it’s a duck.”

So it makes sense to simplify our current situation. But does the proposal really get at the forms of ministry we will need in the future? I don’t think it does.

The proposal suggests one Order of Ministry because in practice, most ministers, regardless of their designation do essentially the same work. But why is that so? If we train ministers in three different ways, presumably it is because the church saw a need for different forms of ministry. So why does almost everyone, Ordained, Diaconal, and Designated Lay, end up leading a congregation?

Ministry grows out of ecclesiology – our understanding of the church. How we understand the church shapes how we understand ministry. When people think “church,” they have in mind the local congregation, housed in its own building, its life centring around a weekly worship service, a twenty-minute sermon, a variety of church-based activities and pastoral care, especially for the sick and elderly. In my experience, it’s very difficult for people to imagine the church taking any other form.

We’re repeatedly told that the world has changed and the church must change with it, and yet we continue to operate with a single, one-dimensional concept of the church that hasn’t really changed since the 1950s, when the core leadership of most United Churches were young. And we continue to prepare ministers to do one thing – to serve and maintain that form of church.

But it’s a form of church that is rapidly disappearing.

Maybe in addition to focusing on how to categorize ministers to serve the present church, we should also turn our attention to preparing leadership for truly emerging needs.

For example, we need to train people to plant new churches. The United Church is closing churches at the rate of one a week and most congregations are in decline, at least according to the

traditional measurements. If the United Church is to have a future, we need to relearn how to do something we used to be really good at – starting new churches.

We need to imagine new forms of church that will reach new generations that are not connecting with our existing congregations. That will be extremely challenging, however, because we do not train people with the entrepreneurial, pioneering gifts and skills that church planting requires. We train and deploy people to maintain the present system.

Ephesians 4 lists five fundamental types of ministries the Church of Christ needs – apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors, and teachers. Almost exclusively, we turn out pastors, because that's what existing churches want and expect. This is made clear to me every time I participate in a Joint Needs Assessment. For all the time and energy congregations invest in JNACs, most end up wanting what they have always had – a preacher, a teacher, a pastor. A post-Christendom church, however, will also require apostles, prophets, and evangelists to fulfill its mission.

A second issue that we need to address is how it will be possible in the future for ministers to make a decent living. The church is structured around the expectation of ministry as a full time occupation. Why are so many diaconal ministers in solo congregational ministry rather than the ministries of education and social justice they were trained for? Because that is where they are able to find employment.

But the number of full time ministry positions is decreasing every year. We have to face up to the fact that full-time ministry may no longer be the norm.

Maybe the form that ministry will take in the future will be increasingly bi-vocational. What is the church doing to prepare for that?

Candidates for ministry have to complete a process of discernment. But discernment only asks if an individual is suited for congregationally based ministry that is less and less capable of providing a liveable income. What if candidates combined ministry with another occupation, not out of mere necessity but out of a sense of calling? What if the church intentionally encouraged people to combine paid ministry with another vocation, and worked with candidates to ensure that have employable skills to supplement and complement their work in the church? It could lead to a flowering of new, flexible, and creative kinds of leadership.

Could we foresee a time when the work that a bi-vocational minister does outside the church as a teacher, a counsellor, a bus driver, a carpenter, or a hairdresser was seen as an expression of the church's ministry in the community?

Congregations' traditional expectations of "the minister" would need to change. In spite of forty years of talk about "the whole people of God," our churches remain highly clergy-dependent. They cling stubbornly to the idea that ministry is something they pay someone to do for them. Necessity will compel congregations to look at their own responsibility for their mission and ministry, and to be more selective in what they need paid ministry staff to do.

The Joint Ministry Working Group has fulfilled the mandate given to it, to come up with suggestions for simplifying our current cumbersome system of ministry preparation and categorization. It has done its job as far as it goes.

But if we're going to answer the question the report says is central – “What forms of ministry will meet the needs of the future?” –we must cast our vision much farther and wider than simply tinkering with the present system.

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