

Joanne Anquist: Reflections on One Order of Ministry

If there's one thing I've learned in my theological studies, it's that context is everything.

If you truly want to understand what a biblical writer is saying, you have to know about their time and place and the struggles that confront and challenge them. The harsh, nationalist God found in many parts of Isaiah can only be understood in the context of an oppressed people who have lost their center economically and religiously, and who are yearning to have God on their side once again.

The Gospel of Luke is richer when we overlay the conditions of first century Palestine – things such as the patronage system infused with honor and shame that marginalized many people, the displacement of people due to Roman commercial farming, and a religious system that was trying to survive the Roman occupation sometimes at the expense of diversity in its ranks. We understand more fully the truly revolutionary message of Jesus when we place it in context. One need only examine the battles of Nicaea, or the arguments of Augustine and Pelagius to understand how context also contributed to the development of theological frameworks that continue to influence our modern faith. In many ways, in narrowing the field by considering context, we expand our understanding of how God has worked, and is working in the hearts of people who are called to follow Jesus. The Body of Christ is a living, breathing organism that has always adjusted to the cultural realities in which it finds itself.

And so it is that context must be considered as we ponder how to best serve the people who call The United Church of Canada home. We are a diverse bunch: urban and rural, theologically progressive and conservative, with worship that is both liturgically textured and inspired by simplicity. It isn't possible for our church to train and educate leaders for such diversity in a monolithic way.

At the same time, our culture is producing more organic ways of learning and collaborating that rely on web-like inter-connectedness that often leads to unusual combinations of people and ideas that enrich our institutions and allow them to creatively meet challenges and further shared objectives. So in our context of diverse congregations and a denomination that seeks to create partnerships to enrich our ministry, it is imperative that we prepare and select our leaders in ways that resonate with these realities. Our pathways to “paid accountable ministry” in our church should be diverse and flexible if we want to respond to the needs of our congregations and ministry units.

Alas, this is easier said than done! The present model often gets in the way of service to a congregation. Let me give some examples.

I helped teach a workshop at Calling Lakes Center (now closed) on church transition. Many of those present were Designated Lay Ministers who were serving small congregations. Some of these churches had tried to get a full time ordained or diaconal minister, but none were available. Others could no longer afford even a half time salary, so a member of their congregation took it upon themselves to get training so they could continue as church. These

individuals provided sound leadership and were as passionate about the future of their congregation as any other minister. Even so, they only had communion when an ordained minister could come to serve.

I did my internship in a rural setting that was being served by a minister trained at the Center for Christian Studies. Her duties and responsibilities were the same as that of a minister who was ordained. However, she ran into trouble with presiding over sacraments because her ministry was done in two Conferences and she needed licensing from both.

In my own life, I had been working in churches for more than 15 years in various capacities, but none of my experience was relevant to the official bodies as I considered becoming a minister. The residency requirements for my degree meant adjustments for my family as I was away from home. I took a January entrance for my internship which finished in August, after the June meeting of Conference, which offset the timing of my ordination to the following spring. Even though I had finished my M.Div. and completed my internship, and was hired as a supply minister for a congregation, an application for a license to perform sacraments was initially rejected because I was not yet ordained and hadn't been in the congregation for at least a year.

Many of these barriers to ministry for people and congregations could be resolved with the One Order of Ministry proposal. But there are those who are wary of this evolution. When the report was released in May 2014, many of my fellow seminary students feared that competency-based assessment would spell the end of the M.Div. and the seminaries which offer it. After all, who would want to dedicate 3 years of full time study if equivalent experience was just as good? But our social context recognizes that different people thrive in different educational models.

I loved my time in seminary. I was inspired and challenged by my classes and the other students, and chose an M.Div. even when other options were open to me. Others seek a more practice-oriented education. Churches are the same – some prefer a more academic approach to sermons and spiritual nurture, while others want leadership that is thoroughly grounded in pastoral care.

Our present system was developed for a context that has passed. By adapting the process individuals will be able to pursue education in diverse ways that meet their interests and abilities. Congregations will have more ministry personnel options that fit within their local context.

The United Church can recognize and honor the good work that has been done by lay people who have dedicated themselves to the ministry of the Church outside traditional roles. In this way, our church will continue to be blessed with talented, dedicated, passionate people who serve in a new and living way.

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