

Lois Wilson: Which Way will the United Church Go?

I welcome the current discussion around One Order of Ministry because we need clarity in this area of our church's life. Ephesians 4: 11 puts it succinctly, "The gifts we have were that some should 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 until we all come to the unity of the faith." This affirms the particularity of various ministries and gifts, and affirms diversity for the sake of the health of the whole body. The United Church is in need of the particular and unique gifts of ministry offered from a variety of perspectives: laity, ordained ministers, diaconal ministers, designated lay ministers, racialized ministers, and aboriginal peoples for starters. Strength comes from four legs to the stool rather than just one. We need to think less about status and position and become more accepting of diverse gifts that people offer.

I became an ordained minister when members of the congregation, with whom I worked as a layperson, approached me and asked if I had ever thought of ordination? I had not pursued ordination up to that point, choosing marriage instead (in the 1950s it had to be a choice for a married woman!) and I refused to view ordination as "my right." But now (four children and fifteen years later), the time seemed ripe. The congregation had recognized God's call in my work, and perhaps I could be "settled" in the same congregation. This happened and we began a team ministry in 1965. My call, recognized by the congregation, was now affirmed by the church through ordination. How was that different from lay ministry?

First, it did not devalue lay ministry. But it was a different contribution. **Ordained ministry** is, among other ministries, meant to "equip the saints" for ministry in the world. It is the church's role to recognize those whom God has called and to ordain them. Is it a vocation or a job? A calling or a career? The Reformed tradition as expressed in *The Doctrine of Christian Ministry* by John Line¹ is that the minister is "where she is through the decision of God." Bereft of this vision and conviction, ministry becomes a human career or pedestrian employment. In some sense, the ordained person also **represents the historic tradition** of the whole church through the offices of priest and prophet, going far beyond the "functional" view of ministry.

One of the hallmarks of ordained ministry in the United Church has been the importance placed on an **educated ministry** emphasized by our Presbyterian forefathers. I am aware that educational methods other than academic are valued and necessary for the work of ministry. I wish more male clergy had exposure to group dynamics, which many women of my generation experienced through youth groups such as C.G.I.T. But that surely doesn't mean we devalue the many years ordained ministers have invested in comprehensive Biblical, theological training and formation. For my generation, a prerequisite for entering theological education was the passing of a test on the Biblical narrative, which you were required to have read. The test was not on interpretation, but on demonstrable familiarity with **the text**. Before I was eighteen my minister had preached an eight part series of sermons on "The Law and the Prophets," which convinced me that being a Christian could include using one's own critical faculties and brain as well as one's personal religious experience. Because theological education utilizes a variety of academic disciplines, it is set in a university context at both the graduate and undergraduate levels. I would have found it difficult

¹ John Line, *The Doctrine of the Christian Ministry* (London: Lutterworth Press, 1959)

to sustain my vocation through sixty-five years without a rigorous and wide academic education. Incidentally, Jesuits undergo focused education in the humanities, language and politics, followed by philosophy and theology. *This is not to downplay the importance of other kinds of education necessary for ministry, but to emphasize that we must never lose sight of **this** kind and its attendant disciplines.*

The main One Order discussion seems to revolve around **relationships**; the accusation of the ministers' "hierarchical" stance; and their authoritarian approach to ministry. Non-ordained personnel resent these high and mighty attitudes and practices and in the United Church we should not hesitate to call them out when they occur. We need to recall Paul's admonition "not to think of yourself more highly than you ought to think" (Romans 12:3). I have some empathy with these accusations, having spent twenty years in the ecumenical global scene. On one occasion while concelebrating the Eucharist with an Anglican colleague, a woman came to the altar rail, took one look at me and said, "I'll have mine from the other minister." At least she recognized that I **was** a minister. So I turned to my colleague and said, "That woman needs counselling."

Set beside the accusation of hierarchy of course must be the sterling record of ministers who know that they are ordained not to dominate but to represent the church through all the ages, **to serve** and facilitate the ministry of laity. "Have this mind among yourselves, which you have in Christ Jesus, though he was in the form of God...emptied himself, taking the form of a servant" (Phil 2:6-7). We have all experienced many ordained ministers like that. So let's not throw out the baby with the bathwater. Ordained ministry is not to elevate a person above others. Yet the office separates the person, not to rank itself officiously above others, but to free it from whims and trends. The ordained minister is charged (along with others) to transmit the Christian tradition and gospel narrative from one generation to the next, ensuring that those traditions are carried forward along with current and contemporary discoveries previously unknown.

Over the years of my ministry the United Church has been buffeted by embracing fads and trends. These ranged from the "Encounter Group" movement of the 1970s, which were intended to help you find yourself through truth telling. Instead, they destroyed many people and many marriages. Then there was the practice of preparing for worship through relaxing (which meant lying on the floor on your back with heads touching and breathing deeply). Currently the church is embracing a trend in thought, "social justice is enough." Theologian Douglas Hall claims that eventually people will ask, "why?" This emphasis is frequently detached from the gospel proclamation in its fullness. A former United Church member, now a Buddhist, told me that she "got" the social justice part but she never "got" the Jesus part. It is my conviction that fleeting trends morphed into a theology diminish the faith community's mission. The diverse gifts of all God's people are needed to ensure a faithful future, not the least of which are the gifts of ordained ministers.

So my question is, "Which way will the United Church go?"

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