

Bradley T. Morrison: My Order vs. One Order

Identity can be understood as *ipse* (selfhood) and *idem* (sameness).¹ The United Church of Canada's theological discussion of one order of ministry conflates these two understandings of identity. Consequently, we frame as a doctrinal problem what is more properly a contextual issue for the denomination and a psychosocial issue for ministry personnel.

The concept paper of the Joint Ministry Working Group (JMWG) claims, "At the heart of these issues is the identity and functioning ... of designated lay ministers ... diaconal ministers ... ordained ministers... and paid staff."² Identity here relates to the "who" or selfhood of ministry personnel, which is the *ipse* understanding of identity.

Unfortunately, the JMWG is correct: we ordained, diaconal, and designated lay ministers have placed our individuality, our *ipse*-identity, at the heart of the denomination's discussion of ministry challenges. Consequently, we've eclipsed a robust discussion of the *idem*-identity questions that should be at the heart of our missiological and ecclesiological reflection.

Identity as sameness denotes the capacity to recognize a person or institution as the same over time and in different spaces despite change or mutability. The individuality and *ipse*-selfhood of ministry personnel is important and deserving of care; however, the more important issue at the heart of the one ministry discussion is the self-sameness of God's church, the body of Christ.

Self-sameness applied to the church does not mean conservatism or preservation of traditions. Rather, self-sameness denotes our capacity to be recognized by God, the world, and ourselves as the same body of Christ over the mutability of time and space—one, holy, catholic, and apostolic.

Theological reflection on the ordination, commissioning, and designation of ministry personnel, rather than being a discussion of the self-esteem and identity issues of paid accountable ministers, should be a discussion of God's identity and the self-sameness of God's mission despite changing history and sociological contexts. Otherwise, we place ecclesiology before missiology, making mission a function of church rather than seeing church as God's strategy for *missio Dei*.

Our denomination's discussion of the meaning of ministry acknowledges that "Traditionally, ordination, commissioning, and, more recently, designated lay ministry are always understood, not in terms of what they give to the individual, but in terms of a relationship with and responsibility within a community."³ Even with this statement, we should be careful that the *ipse*-identity of the faith community does not eclipse the missiological and societal analysis.

The conflation of *ipse*-identity and *idem*-identity causes us to apply doctrinal solutions to sociological problems. The denomination's struggle to survive through changing times (*idem*-identity) will not be solved by any adjustments to our ecclesial doctrines and polity related to ordination, commissioning, and designation of ministry personnel (*ipse*-identity). This is misplaced energy.

¹ Paul Ricoeur, *Oneself as Another* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1992).

² Joint Ministry Working Group (JMWG), "Thinking about One Order of Ministry: A concept paper from the Joint Ministry Working Group." (Toronto: The United Church of Canada, 2014), 1.

³ Meaning of Ministry Task Group, "Report of the Meaning of Ministry Task Group," in *Record of Proceedings of the 40th General Council, 689-700* (Toronto: The United Church of Canada, 2009), 692.

The conflation of *ipse*-identity and *idem*-identity reflects a methodological problem—a bad habit—in our theological discourse. We're in the habit of wrapping our discussion of social scientific problems in the garb of theological reflection and letting our analysis of the doctrinal questions and theological themes stand as the measure of the adequacy of our analysis of the social scientific problem. Society is changing around us, and a proper analysis of these social scientific issues will bring us more readily to the social and organizational tools needed to adapt (*idem*-identity) to this changing environment.

My order of selfhood is not the foundation upon which one order of ministry is constructed.

Bradley T. Morrison is assistant professor of practical theology at Huron University College and an ordained minister serving Grace United Church in Sarnia, Ontario.