

Christine Jerrett

“Thinking about One Order of Ministry” is the latest in a series of papers and reports in which the United Church has considered the meaning of ministry. This particular paper proposes that “designated lay ministers serving in pastoral ministry, diaconal ministers and ordained ministers” all be considered as part of one order of ministry since that is often how they are functioning already. It directs a significant amount of attention to ensuring that there would be “educational equivalency” for all persons in the one order.

In making this recommendation, it is apparent that those who authored the paper were carefully attending to a number of different voices:

- ecumenical partners and their definitions of ordination
- the United Church’s commitment to an educated leadership for the Church
- seminaries that have been adapting to new realities over the years but are still facing declining enrolments that threaten their viability
- United Church Learning Centres
- Conferences and Presbyteries who are responding to trouble in congregations related to the accountability of leaders
- Members of the Order of Ministry who are struggling with significant challenges to their identity and function as the Church moves into a dramatically changed culture
- Designated Lay Ministers, some of whom are wrestling with their place in the current structures
- congregations who can no longer afford full-time paid ministry personnel and who are looking for ways to stay open.

For the past few years, I have had the privilege of hearing the voices of Licensed Lay Worship Leaders (LLWL) across the country as well. Some of them are functioning as the pastoral leaders of their congregations, even though the polity of the United Church does not ‘allow’ it. Their congregations could not find ordered ministry personnel to serve them — either because of finances or because no Order of Ministry (OM) person was available for a call. In many instances, if the LLWL had not stepped up to fill the role that in the past was filled by OM personnel, the congregation would have had to close.

Thinking about One Order of Ministry states that its central question is: *What forms of ministry will faithfully and effectively serve the life of the church into the future?* It did not name the ministry that is being offered by LLWL’s but, the reality is, the number of congregations being served by LLWL’s is increasing. Any proposal that seeks to serve the emerging forms of the church will need to take this reality into account.

Re-introducing the “Staff Associate” category might address some of these situations, provided that there were OM leadership available with which to team. In some situations, the distance between pastoral charges would require creative use of technology for the team to function.

Expecting that those LLWL’s who are providing ongoing pastoral leadership in a congregation would enter the process to become DLM’s and take one year of university studies and “eight academic courses offered by UC theological institutions” is unrealistic and would leave a number of congregations without leadership. These LLWL’s are eager to continue the learning that was begun in their initial training. They recognize their need for greater knowledge and

skills and spiritual formation. However, they are often not able to access the kinds of education that are available for ministry personnel. Age, family circumstances, health, the requirements of their jobs, and finances all make travelling to distant places for extended stays difficult or impossible. Different models of ministry, of church, and of education are needed.

Personally, I would not have wanted to be in pastoral ministry without the gifts that came through a seminary education. However, I recognize that being able to attend seminary was a great privilege and is not available to all the people whom the Holy Spirit is calling into ministry these days.

At the same time, I agree with the paper that “a commitment to lifelong learning” is critical for ministry in our time. Without it, the well runs dry and pastoral ministers get distracted from the core, essential actions of their work. Many congregations are hanging on by their fingertips, uncertain about the way forward. The landscape in which they witness to the gospel is changing rapidly. Their leaders need deep and thorough grounding in the Scriptures, in the tradition, in theology, and in spiritual practices so that they can lead communities of faith wisely and creatively.

I have found William Willimon’s *Pastor: The Theology and Practice of Ordained Ministry* helpful in considering a way forward. He points out that it was not until the Council of Chalcedon (451 CE) that “ministry is referred to as an order. The Romans spoke of the *ordos cenitorium*, the upper class that was permitted to rule, as opposed to the order of the plebes, or the people in general. It is significant that this sort of imperial interpretation is now laid over the ministry. People are being ordained to membership in an order, a class.”¹

Willimon also notes that, “In the earliest time of the church, the community showed admirable ability to adapt and to create new forms of leadership to serve new challenges of the church (Acts 6:1-7). Furthermore, there seems to have been more spontaneous recognition, on the part of the community, of the *charismata*, the spiritual gifts, of those who were called to leadership.”²

New models of education and formation for congregational leadership are emerging. What is evident is that the methods by which that education and formation are delivered are becoming increasingly diverse. Systems are changing because the kinds of people that the Holy Spirit is calling into leadership are changing. The shape of the congregations those people serve is changing. The *One Order of Ministry* proposal attempts to address the concerns of multiple voices. The resulting complexity suggests that we are at a point where it is not enough to tweak the system. A fundamental shift in culture is at hand.

Christine Jerrett received a McGeachy Scholarship in 2014 - 2015 to study education and training for lay leaders in the United Church of Canada and beyond. She blogs at <https://christinejerrett.wordpress.com>

¹ William Willimon, *Pastor* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2002), *e-book version*, chapter 1, pp 79 - 80.

² *ibid.*, chapter 1, p. 14.