

Greg Smith-Young

The Joint Ministry Working Group responded to an unenviable task, namely bringing order to the conflicting understandings of ministry within the United Church, with its document, “A Proposal for One Order of Ministry” (*OOM*).

Most significantly, *OOM* recommends dismantling the distinctions between different ministry streams (Ordained, Diaconal, DLM). Most of these ministers are performing very similar functions: serving solo (not on staff teams) in congregationally-based roles. This strikes me as what Ordained ministers, for the most part, have always done. Why, then, make distinctions between the streams at all? *OOM* recommends that all ministry personnel (except staff associates) be Ordained. This makes sense.

Efforts to justify the current categories often cite the differences in how various ministers are educated. Diaconal ministers claim a strong identity springing from their formation, which “emphasizes teaming, mutuality, and non-hierarchical style, with a commitment to justice, diversity and at its heart rootedness in community and transformation” [*OOM*, quoting from *The Working Group on Diaconal Ministry*]. Is this approach to formation distinctive of Diaconal ministers? If so, that’s a problem. I expect values of teaming, mutuality, justice, rootedness in community and so on would characterize the formation of every minister. If not, they should!

The distinction between DLMs and Diaconal/Ordained ministers is likewise collapsing. What was originally understood as a time-limited call to a particular location has changed, at least for many the DLM stream. They now see themselves, and are often seen, as having a lifelong call to serve the whole church. Once again, differences in education and formation seem to provide the only material difference — its length, rigour, and whether it is primarily residential or distance-based. *OOM* rightly proposes to reduce that gap by increasing the educational requirements for DLMs. Also, programmes for equipping Ordained and Diaconal candidates have been helpfully embracing distance-based models.

Meaningful differences between the existing categories are dissolving, and rightly so. How much effort, passion, and angst do we exhaust rationalizing, buttressing, and policing these distinctions?

Meanwhile, new diversities in ministry practice are opening up. New forms of “communities of faith” are developing alongside traditional congregations. Ministry personnel are needed with a greater range of gifts, skills, and experiences. This range, however, has nothing to do with the current Ordained–Diaconal–DLM categories. Rather, these categories seem increasingly beside the point. Does our focus on them distract us from focussing on the real diversities the church truly needs for its ministers in our unfolding mission field?

It makes eminent sense to have one order of ministry. Ordained ministers would encompass a wide range of giftings, callings, styles of formation and skills, without trying to categorize them into different types of ministers. Communities of faith would seek out those within that “one order” who have the attributes best suited to their particular mission.

While I agree with the direction toward “one order of ministry,” I remain concerned that we continue to operate within an understanding of ministry that belies the true nature of the ministry of Christ’s church. Ministry orders have distinguished a particular class of Christians (*klêros*, an allotment) from the vast majority (*laos*, the people). Those to whom were allotted the ministry of the church (priests, ministers, those in religious orders) served the people. Ministry was the work of a few, done for the many.

We are now realizing that, biblically and theologically, Christ’s call to ministry is to all his people. Countless church signs and bulletin headers proclaim this. Yet shifting our practice from “ministry is done for the people” to “ministry is done by the people” is taking a while! Simply put, and echoing George Orwell, our practice says that “*all are ministers, but some are more ‘ministers’ than others.*” The terminology of “minister” still trips us up. We agree we all share in “ministry,” yet only some are called “ministers” (a search through the current edition of the *Manual* will bear this out).

Christ calls all the baptized to his ministry. Baptism ordains us. Jesus calls and the Spirit gifts most to “neighbourhood-centred” ministry. Neighbourhoods are the various communities in which we live, work, go to school, volunteer, etc. Our neighbourhood can be as small as our home, and as broad as the world! Most baptism-ordained ministers serve there. They come together, weekly or more frequently, as the “church gathered” for community, worship, prayer, learning, and equipping. Most of the time, though, they will be the “church-deployed” into their neighbourhood-centred ministries.

Within the community of the baptized, Jesus calls and the Spirit gifts a much smaller number to “church-centred” ministry. They tend to the community of the baptized—its worship, prayer, learning, equipping, mentioning and organization. *OOM* exclusively focusses on these church-centred ministers.

Church-centred ministers are vital. Their calls must be discerned through a careful and rigorous process of prayer, conversation and testing. They must be well-formed, educated, and receive ample mentored experience. They must be in a relationship of accountability with the church. And they must be amply supported, encouraged, nurtured and, often, reasonably remunerated. (I wonder if this should be true for neighbourhood-centred ministers too!)

In figuring out how to do all this for church-centred ministers, however, let’s start by asking what sort of neighbourhood-centred ministers Christ is calling to live his mission in our communities today. We’ll never nail that down completely — it’s always fluid and highly contextual, for instance — but if we begin there, then we can more helpfully move to the question of what church-centred ministers the church needs to support all of its ministers, and all the other questions that flow from that (including the ones *OOM* seeks to answer).

Questions of ministry are about all of us, not just a few.

*Greg Smith-Young has been an Ordained minister since 1996, and currently serves with the Elora-Bethany pastoral charge near Guelph, Ontario.*