

Kimberley Heath

Since the birth of the Christian church, God's call on individuals to reach out with the good news of Jesus has not changed. How the church recognizes, equips and continues to support and guide that call has changed radically over the centuries, and it will and indeed must continue to change, as the context in which we serve continues to change.

Phyllis Tickle, the American author and lecturer who passed away just last September, believed that the Church is currently undergoing the greatest shift since the time of the Reformation. I agree.

Since my ordination in the United Church of Canada almost 17 years ago, I have noticed that there are fewer and fewer full-time jobs available in the church, and therefore fewer ways to make a living wage solely by working in a church. The cost of education has also escalated. I have a ministry colleague who will no longer recommend to anyone that they pursue an M.Div., because he doesn't believe that anyone could reasonably expect to have a stable enough position in the future to pay off the student debt they would incur to receive the degree. We have no choice but to change and streamline how we recognize, train and support our ministers, so that we can continue to share the good news.

If I had to choose one of the options proposed by the Joint Ministry Working Group, I would go with door #3, and have each of the diaconal, ordained, and Designated Lay Ministry streams merge and become 'ordained'. This is what the majority of clergy in the church currently are, and what is currently ecumenically recognized by other denominations in the holy catholic Church. My ordination and my education would not be diminished by different streams joining my stream. After all, there is already enormous diversity within the streams we currently have. Some of my ordained colleagues have doctorates; some have more life experience or more years of service than I do. Some within their ministry feel a greater call to pastoral care than to preaching, or to social justice than to sacraments. Are they more or less ordained than I am?

God's call has not diminished, but our ability to fund the current model of ministry has. The move to 'One Order of Ministry' is only the beginning of the changes the United Church of Canada must make in order to meet the needs of the changing church and to reach those not now in our church. We will need to increase and further support what the proposal is calling 'Staff Associates'. In our congregation, we have begun a 'Tent-Makers Ministry Team'. Empowering lay people who will always have their source of income from another source (jobs, retirement etc.) to reach out to the community with the message of God's love is absolutely critical.

I also believe we should consider some kind of apostolic model where there are 'bishops' (perhaps too hierarchical and loaded a term!) or some kind of overseeing minister for a region. The proposal speaks briefly of a 'Regional Team Model'. I can imagine a system where more traditionally trained and educated ministers help to support and guide less educated or experienced — but equally 'called' — ministers in an area. I can imagine a

system where ministers are supported in a region primarily through online discussion, telephone and occasional get-togethers for further education and support.

As we consider whether or not to create One Order of Ministry, I believe we have placed too much focus on the needs and wants of those currently in the different streams of ministry. I have noticed that we in the UCC are obsessed with things being 'fair'. We worry that the proposed One Order of Ministry won't be fair. How does one honour diversity and difference and then at the same time keep things equal? As we move forward, we will need to sacrifice 'fair' in order to allow the gospel to continue to be shared in changing times. It is not the needs of those specially called (diaconal, ordained, DLM) that should be considered first, but rather the needs of the church and the needs of those who have not yet experienced the life-changing message of the Gospel.

We who serve are 'God's Postal Service' delivering the message. The focus must always be first and foremost on how we can best ensure the delivery of the package intact, as efficiently and effectively as possible to those who need it most, and only secondarily on the titles, compensation and needs of the postal workers themselves.

God's call on the people of God has not changed. Society has changed dramatically. If we remain too rigid in our definitions and oversight of 'who is a minister', then ministry within the walls of the church will continue to contract. God's call never contracts, but it does and will continue to slip outside the walls of the institution of the United Church. In this great shift away from past traditions, may we have the courage to change how we empower, equip and support those whom God has called, and so continue to be the Church.

*Kimberly Heath was ordained in 1999 and is the Lead Pastor at Wall Street United in Brockville, Ontario.*