

Marion Best

I did not attend GC42 but have read the One Order of Ministry proposal; I am not sure what has prompted the recommendation at this particular time for One Order of Ministry and ordination for all streams.

Is it because the DLM category is no longer localized and temporary and there is concern that the educational equivalencies are lacking relative to the current preparation for Ordained and Diaconal Ministry? Is it because the majority of Diaconal Ministers are serving solo in congregations and must receive permission to administer the Sacraments? Is it because there seems to be a desire to re-establish the Staff Associate category of ministry? Is it to facilitate ministry appointments in Ecumenical Shared Ministry positions where the other denomination will only accept ordained ministry personnel? Would they accept an ordained Diaconal or DLM minister?

I recall many years ago there was a decision that Lay Pastoral Ministers would take courses at theological schools and upon successful completion, they would be ordained. I believe the intention was to end the Lay Supply stream. However there continued to be a desire and a need for Lay Pastoral Ministers and so a new programme of study and period of supervision was devised around the same time as the Diaconal Ministers became part of the Order of Ministry. This LPMIT programme later evolved to the current DLM programme.

Since most DLMs and Diaconal ministers are carrying out solo ministry in congregations, if all three streams were to be ordained I think it is reasonable that their educational requirements for competence in Bible, theology and preaching would need to be equivalent to the ordination stream. This latest proposal calls for significant changes to the DLM education and length of supervision, which will entail considerable additional cost in both time and finances for the individual. One wonders how many people would choose this stream in the future?

The starting point for entering into professional ministry is through interviews (with pilot programmes in some places, the interviewing bodies vary) where one's call is tested, and promise and suitability for candidacy is determined. Which stream to pursue is part of the conversation. To my knowledge, the process of determining the validity of one's call is carried out the same way regardless of which ministry stream one chooses to enter. There is no hierarchy of call. Therefore it seems the issue here is how to make the educational preparation equivalent if there is to be One Order of Ministry with all being offered ordination.

As I reflect on my 60 years as a lay member of the United Church, I am especially grateful for those ministers who opened the scriptures to me in a way that illuminated the scripture's context and made connections with what was happening in our lives, our community, our country and the world. There were those who 'tapped me on the shoulder' and called me into a lay volunteer ministry of education with children, youth and adults.

These ministers formed small groups where we studied scripture, shared our faith and prayed together. These were formative and supportive for serving in the congregation and for living my faith in the world as a parent and in my vocation as a nurse.

These ministers had a love of scripture, an enquiring mind, a deep prayer life and Spiritual presence. In addition there was a desire to share the faith and help equip and support the laity for playing their part in ministries of education, outreach and pastoral care. These were ordained ministers but I believe there are Diaconal and DLM ministers who are doing the same. I believe for most people in the pews, the various forms of professional ministry don't matter. The minister's spiritual being, authenticity, integrity, competence and commitment is what matters. In most congregations the solo minister, no matter which stream, carries out the same functions but they may perform those functions in different ways or styles.

I don't know whether all Diaconal and DLM minister want to be ordained. For some their 'lay' status or their membership in the diakonia are important to who they are and how it identifies their ministry. What would happen if a Diaconal or DLM Minister currently in place declined to be ordained? Would ordination be a choice for future candidates or would ordination for all streams be mandatory in future?

This discussion raises the question for me about the place of lay ministry in the United Church. I believe there will be more need than ever for an educated, faith filled laity to assist one or more Order of Ministry personnel where a regional form of ministry may be the next step. It is a viable alternative to closing congregations. Due to shrinking congregations, there are increasing numbers of part time ministry personnel in place. Unless it is their lifestyle choice, it is hardly fair. If we are to maintain a presence in some communities, we will need more Licensed Lay Worship Leaders and competent lay volunteers to work alongside one or two Ordered people serving several congregations. We need an increased commitment to encouraging and supporting lay leadership.

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