

Basil E. Coward: "It's About Mission with Those for Whom I am Called to Care"

I was nurtured under the watchful, all-seeing eyes of strong gifted Black women: my mother, grandmother and women of the community who were deeply committed to Jesus and to the mission of the church. These women provided leadership and did the ministry of deacon, deaconess, and of minister. I observed as they followed Jesus in subverting oppressive systems that often led to fragilities in their own lives, and I witnessed how selective they were in embracing teachings of the church if those teachings affirmed their lived experiences; and they never hesitated to reject the teachings that suffocated. These women were strong advocates, often accompanying each other to courts of law in search of supports for which they were qualified, and they were justice seekers for themselves and for the community.

None of them were commissioned or ordained, yet they did the work that enabled effective ministry. Thus I struggle with the reference that theirs was "*Work resembling that of an ordained person*," and I resist this discourse, especially because the implication of this approach is that their expression of ministry was somehow less valid than that of an ordered/commissioned person. This was more than a symbolic standing in. It was the 'real thing,' ministry in all its glorious complexities. It was sacramental and it was missional.

Having been gifted with the wisdom and rootedness in Christ of these Black women, somehow, unconsciously, I gave myself to the ministry of the church.¹ For many years I searched for words to give voice to my "Call Narrative" until I embraced, hesitantly, the reality that I *do not* have a call narrative per se (at least not the Damascus Road experience), except that I am unable to separate my life from mission and ministry within the church – perhaps this was the response to sensing the Holy Other leading me into a life of service!

So twenty-four years ago I was commissioned to solo pastoral ministry in Toronto, a few years later I was ordained a deacon, and still a few years later, consecrated as a presbyter. Each of these ministries was identical to that which engaged the women in my home congregation: The Ministry of Word, Sacrament, Pastoral Care and Presence in all of its brokenness, humility, authenticity, commitment and loveliness. Each ministry was about mission and ministry with "Those for whom I am called to serve."

The other side of the coin is that I have always known of the separateness of the minister since each time the minister showed up in my home congregation, deference was given and authority ascribed in the traditional language of reverend or pastor; a language ostensibly meant to convey prestige, privilege, position, connection and power. I was drawn in a visceral manner to that specialness vested in the position even though I had a growing understanding that the minister's position was but "A calling out from within, to serve among," since I was honoured thrice in my youth to read those words at ordination services. Yet I continue to struggle to free

¹ These important women in my life recognized gifts in me and trained me as Sunday school teacher, youth leader, organizer and advocate and again, against all odds, they supported me as I pursued teacher's training and theological education. I also watched as they trained and shaped the lives of young ministers after their theological education: challenging and accepting, giving and taking, pushing and pulling, caring for and allowing themselves to be cared for. And this witness shaped me in profound ways.

myself from the illusion of grandeur and uniqueness of ordination, most days unable to resist the elitism that too often accompanies it, mostly, because it served me well.

The current conversation helps us to engage critically and extensively on the purpose of ordination in the milieu of the present context of the “One Order of Ministry.” The question that I hope to have answered (and I promise to read the other reflections) as a relative newcomer to The United Church of Canada is: “What grounds our ministry?” For me the bookends of “One Order of Ministry” is Christ’s mission, and by extension, the United Church’s mission in the present ministry context of the twenty-first century. I somehow sense that it is from our mission that our ministry and their orders are best shaped.² And if I could move the hands of the clock back, I would gather the strong, Black women who did mission and ministry with their entire beings into the “One Order of Ministry.” I wonder what acts of transfiguration – recall the crowds at the foot of the mountain waiting to be healed: mission – might be witnessed across this church that we love!

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² This is not an essentializing discourse around the survival of The United Church of Canada, nor is it a suggestion that were we to remove the requirement for the testamur and provide other pathways, somehow the messiness of effective leadership would be tidied up in the United Church (if that were possible, it would be worth every drop of ink!). This conversation underlines the importance of continuing the discussion of ministry and leadership as the United Church explores new expressions of ministry and re-imagines what new and renewing vibrant communities of faith might look like, knowing there are many different ways of doing mission. This is also an invitation to glimpse what new form of congregational leadership emerges and to continue to provide multiple pathways leading to equivalency ensuring the depths of theological education and the honed skills and gifts needed for ministry in the twenty-first century are had ... I affirm the absolute necessity of “*An educated paid accountable ministry capable of equipping people to live out their faith in meaningful, loving and mature ways.*” And two questions that continue to guide my reflection are: Is all ministry, regardless of who executes it, valid? Knowing that “God calls all followers of Jesus to Christian ministry” (Song of Faith), do we believe in the priesthood of all believers? I trust that I will continue to answer, “Yes” to both.