

Susan Browning: A Reflection on One Order from both Sides of the Stream

It is 1989 and I am sitting in the parlour of St. Andrew's United Church in Chatham, Ontario. The room is filled with all the familiar accents. Hymn books and Bibles sit on a bookshelf in the corner, paisley fabric chairs and chesterfields encircle the room, a coffee table adorns the centre with a silk flower arrangement that has seen better days.

Surrounding me are kind faces whose nods and smiles urge me to reflect on my academic and spiritual growth at Emmanuel College. Occasionally an eyebrow raises when I talk about feminist theology, but mostly I see glimmers of pride as they silently pat themselves on backs for their ongoing contribution to the wider church.

But then the energy shifts uncomfortably. People glance at each other across the room, someone clears his throat, and I know that awkward question is about to be spoken. "So Susan, I know we ask you this ever year but we must ask again, why are you being commissioned and not ordained?"

Fast forward twenty-six years and I am sitting in a hockey arena in Corner Brook, Newfoundland. Emanating from the bluish background of my laptop screen are the words "One Order of Ministry." I cannot hide a smirk as my memory floats back to that church parlour and the ominous question that ended each interview.

Title Protection

At the same time that the "One Order" document was being constructed, I was beginning the process of joining a Registered Psychotherapy college in Ontario. In this process my colleagues and I became very familiar with a term called "Title Protection".

While it may sound like an elite expression, "title protection" is no small thing. It weaves together important elements such as professional training, relevant education and skill, adherence to a body of ethics, a code of conduct, and demonstrating core competencies. This fabric is then tied together by a process called quality assurance in which members of the titled profession are expected to prove that they are in compliance with the expectations of the title they hold.

Many of us in paid accountable ministry resist viewing ourselves as "professionals" claiming we are "called" to a vocation not a job. While theologically I agree with this, I also believe that professional standards are an essential foundation upon which we layer theological and biblical principles.

Shifting Vision

It is my belief that the Joint Ministry Working Group struggled honestly with the importance of professionalism but advanced a new vision for how professional standards and vocational integrity are secured. One of the distinct changes highlighted in the One Order model is the weight placed on core competencies: "there is increased movement in some denominations away

from assessing fitness for ministry through completion of a degree or diploma toward denominational assessment of competencies” (1).

At the 42nd General Council I observed that this shift was met with passion. On one side people spoke of the “beginning of the end” of theological education and raised concerns about the impact of uneducated clergy in pulpits across the country. On the other side were those intrigued by how core competencies might be assessed and whether this would make a vocation in ministry more accessible to faithful and competent candidates.

In a background document for the candidacy pathway’s proposal, four competencies were outlined: “Personal, Spiritual and Vocational Formation; Knowledge and Skills for Ministry and Mission; Cultural, Contextual and Global Literacy; and Leadership” (2). It seems clear that these competencies would be difficult, if not impossible, to secure without theological education in some shape or form.

Identity Crisis

Another impassioned response to the One Order proposal seemed to involve identity. The working group appeared to predict such a challenge amongst the diaconate by writing, “In this proposal, ‘diaconal’ ministers would continue to identify themselves as members of the diakonia” (3). But there was division amongst diaconal delegates at General Council about whether this was attainable.

Identity issues were also raised by the ordained. This is not surprising. In the 2012 Statement on Ministry in the United Church of Canada we read, “Ordered ministers maintain the historical connection of the United Church to the church catholic through the faithful witness to the apostolic tradition and the interpretation of the living faith” (4). While both diaconal and ordained ministers are ordered, the apostolic tradition and the tie to the wider catholic church are integral parts of identity for many Ordained clergy.

This dimension of *identity* is of profound interest to me as someone who switched “identity” partway through her ministerial career. I began in diaconal ministry because I felt called to the functions of that ministry, but as years advanced I found God leading me into congregations where the primary call was to worship, pastoral care, and sacrament. Would I have made the shift if there had been one order? I cannot be sure. I can say that I was always puzzled as a diaconal minister that ordained ministers could perform my functions without preparation and training but I was unable to participate in theirs without accessing “privileges”.

This brings me to another reflection on identity. I deem that being a follower of Jesus is my foundational identity in ministry. Following this call invites me to consistently reflect upon whether any perceived threat to my *identity* is actually so, or more truthfully a threat to my ego. As Richard Rohr writes, “Your True Self is who you objectively are from the beginning, in the mind and heart of God...your absolute identity, can be neither gained nor lost by and technique, group affiliation, morality, or formula” (5).

Catching the Spirit

In the final line of the Statement on Ministry we read, “The Holy Spirit continually calls the church to renew its understanding of ministry, opening itself to new expressions that serve the need of the present day....As the church carries God’s Word into the world in new ways, ministry will be characterized by more collaboration, networking, as well as a variety of educational approaches” (6).

I believe that this statement is critically important as we approach the One Order conversation. If Phyllis Tickle is correct in asserting that “we are moving towards a system of ecclesial authority that waits upon the Spirit” (7), we would do well to imagine how the Spirit may be calling us to move to new understandings of how ministry will unfold in the future.

Ministry today may not look exactly as it did when I sat in that church parlour 26 years ago at my Education and Students Committee interview, but whether we risk change or not, engaging in a conversation about serving God in Christ through ordered ministry can only help us in discerning where the Spirit might take us next!

Notes

1 “Thinking about One Order of Ministry,” A Concept Paper from the Joint Ministry Working Group (May 2014), 6.

2 “Competencies for Faithful and Effective Ministry in the United Church of Canada,” Report of the Working Group on Leadership Formation for Ministry, 6.

3 “Thinking about One Order of Ministry,” 11.

4 “Statement on Ministry in The United Church of Canada” (2012), 3.

5 Richard Rohr, *Falling Upward: A Spirituality for the Two Halves of Life* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2011), 86.

6 “Statement on Ministry in The United Church of Canada,” 4.

7 Phyllis Tickle, *The Great Emergence: How Christianity is Changing and Why* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2008), 153.

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