

Jane Doull: My perspective on United Church Ministry

My view of ministry is shaped by feminist, liberation and contextual theology and by over 20 years in rural and small town prairie and Maritime settings.

All Christians are called to ministry. From the second generation of the Jesus- movement, designated or recognized leaders have had the function of supporting and guiding this ministry. Ideally they serve in continuity with the teachings and practice of Jesus as mediated by the beloved community. But how they do this changes with time and circumstance.

As the church evolved from movement to institution, the relation of clergy to laity tended to become hierarchical. Not only the Reformation but also many reformation movements - including Christian feminism and base Christian communities - have tried to reclaim the discipleship of equals. In this spirit, I accepted ordination, not to exert power-over, not to be a different, let alone a superior, kind of Christian, but to lead from within/among the people.

Power-with, rather than power-over: this is more easily said than done. One is set apart, not only by education and training but by being in a particular position of trust, and by full-time, long-term commitment to the church. Many congregants defer to the clergy and also to perceived congregational leaders. One must constantly invite, sit loose to one's own agenda, evoke and honour other ideas and perspectives, and one must learn when to hold back and remain silent.

On the other hand, one must learn when to speak and act boldly and prophetically, when to stand up for just relationships inside as well as beyond church, when to take risks. One must give strong voice to an inclusive and prophetic Christianity, the needs of the world, and the unfolding story of one's faith community. Further, one needs to share – carefully - some of one's own story, humbly as a work in progress but positively as a unique expression of Divine Creativity. This is how we help build trust and develop safe space. Also, we model by admitting wrongs but not abasing ourselves (or others), and by appropriately receiving ministry (both from and beyond the congregation) in time of need.

What does this have to do with streams of ministry or theological education?

First, what I have said describes my experience of congregational pastoral ministry, but such experience is not specifically representative of ordained ministry. I sought ordination because I could and did take a residential M.Div. programme and because I believed ordination would open more doors. But I do not think my rural ministry is different in kind (or value) from that of rural diaconal and lay designated colleagues.

Secondly, the nature and needs of paid accountable ministry have changed rapidly since 1994. Increasingly my work has a diaconal focus. Sunday morning now requires education for all ages, promoting biblical, theological and liturgical liturgy in worship content, design and leadership, with all learning styles in mind, involving different senses, contextual to people's experience. Some look not to Sunday worship but to alternative midweek ministries and practices. More and more, I find myself networking and cooperating in the wider community as a progressive inclusive

spiritual voice. Sacraments continue, but more and more, the most meaningful sacramental encounters arise outside the sanctuary.

In this era, I think ministry is more and more fluid, not limited to two streams but flowing wherever community and context require. Need we retain the two streams? First we must consult diaconal ministers. Diaconal ministers are fewer in number; and they have often been treated as less than equal to ordained ministers, which is why some with diaconal inclinations have opted for ordination, wishing to avoid barriers. Learning lessons from other amalgamation projects, we may intend equality, but instead lose sight of diaconal perspectives and skills just when we need them most. My own education and formation were significantly influenced by diaconal professors, friends and colleagues, as may have been the case for others on the prairies in the 1980s and 1990s. The adult education models learned so well in the diaconal stream can help all of us in congregational ministry, social justice animation, supervision and mentorship in field-based education, and more.

Should lay designated ministers remain as a separate category? As a colleague and sometimes an educational supervisor, I observed that their calling differs little from mine. They do the same work in pastoral charges. Most of them serve more than one appointment, and when retired have gifts and skills for leadership not easily distinguished from those of ordered ministers. Indeed some are more directly engaged with church work than are some retired ordered ministers. Some - not all - DLMs have argued, and our church polity to some extent agrees, that they are laypeople, part of the congregation, in a way that ordained and diaconal ministers are not. However, congregations see them and treat them as ministers, and they are in a professional role, with the boundaries and the set-apartness this implies. In practice, whatever their title, they are not laypeople.

Many DLMs took that route because of lack of time and resources, and, for some, the educational credentials to take a residential course. The DLM course has been improved and revamped over the last 30 years. However, now that field-based theological education is increasingly available, future paid accountable ministers could all receive the same level and quality of education. It is difficult, indeed impossible, to develop the same competencies in all such ministers, and impossible to predict exactly what competencies will be required where. However, educated ministry is increasingly essential to help people explore, develop and live an open-minded, deeply spiritual and compassionate faith.

While encouraging ecumenical and interfaith studies, I hope we continue to stipulate some percentage of United Church courses. Our paid accountable ministers - whatever their title - will need a clear vision of the identity and the special gifts of the United Church of Canada, and we need to retain scholars who can help them develop this.

For me, paid accountable ministers, whatever our titles, are there in order to help the whole people of God be beloved community, connected deeply with the Divine and living out the Divine vision of compassion and justice and peace in relationship with each other, and in service to community and world. May it be so!

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