

Janice Frame: One Ministry? Really?

My first career was as a Medical Laboratory Technologist in a city hospital. A small portion of my time was spent in blood collection as a phlebotomist, while most of my work was in the lab, running tests on patient samples and reporting results. I worked alongside Medical Technicians whose job was almost exclusively phlebotomy, blood collection.

To anyone who asked, I patiently and carefully explained the difference between technologist and technician, the training each received and the expertise each developed... until someone said to me, "Look, it really doesn't matter. To the patient, you all look the same. When he sees you coming at him with your blood collection tray, he just wants to know that you can do the job with as little discomfort to him as possible."

Hmmm. Is that why The United Church of Canada is considering One Order of Ministry? Because it really doesn't matter whether we're ordained, diaconal, or designated lay ministers? Because to the person in the pew we all look the same, and she just wants to know that we can do the job with as little discomfort to her as possible?

In its *Proposal for One Order of Ministry* presented to the 42nd General Council, the Theology and Inter-Church Inter-Faith Committee observes that "most members of the church do not understand the differences between the various streams of ministry" (GC42 Workbook Plenary, 42). The TICIF proposes that a reasonable response to these muddied waters is to move toward an ordination of "one ministry, many different expressions" (GC42 Workbook Plenary, 44).

All Christians are called to ministry, or service, as the people of God.¹ This broad understanding, then, allows one to say that tending to those in need is ministry, providing for one's family is ministry, caring for the environment is ministry, because these actions – and many more aspects of service – contribute to the holistic well-being of God's world. Isn't this what Jesus meant when he said, "Go and do likewise" (Luke 10:37)?

But the "One Order of Ministry" proposal is addressing *vocational* ministry, and that's different.

Vocational ministry is a response to a deep-seated yearning to bring one's entire being, and offer one's entire compliment of gifts, to the service of God through Christ's church. With an open heart, and through careful and prayerful discernment, an Inquirer's call to vocational ministry is explored and tested, both internally and in community. If it is embraced with a true desire to follow the Spirit and not simply regarded as a bureaucratic exercise to endure, then the discernment process reveals to the Inquirer and community an honest and clear vision of vocation.

Whether that vocation is to designated lay, diaconal, or ordained ministry is significant. Each is valid and valuable, and – being born of the Spirit – each is worthy of respect in its own right. More than simply a different expression of the same ministry, each vocational stream is fundamentally different, and none is "greater than" the others. Doesn't Paul imply that the Spirit, the Lord, and God are the same, but the gifts, the services, and activities – the *ministries* – are different (1 Cor 12:4-6)?

¹ www.united-church.ca/files/handbooks/entering-ministry.pdf, page 23

The commitment in the “One Order of Ministry” proposal to expand the educational requirements of the current DLM training program is to be commended. In this transitional time, it is important that our vocational ministers are as well-equipped as possible to assume the role of resident theologian, articulating God’s present and future hope to re-shaped and emergent communities of faith.

But the main thrust of the “One Order” proposal, in effect, is to institutionalize the perception that all ministry is essentially the same, just played out a little differently in different contexts. This does not respect the distinct call inherent in each of our three recognized vocational ministries, and those who respond to them. Nor does it respect the ability of communities of faith to understand the difference between the vocational ministries, once it has been explained to them.

I’d like the person in the pew to “know that I can do the job” with as little discomfort to her as possible, because the Spirit has led me to a specific vocational ministry, and has equipped me accordingly, just as the Spirit has led and equipped my diaconal and designated lay minister colleagues. Each of us can do the job. But we’re not the same. And it would be unfortunate if the United Church ordained us all as if we were.

Janice Frame was a Staff Associate for twelve years before being ordained in 2012. She now serves the Western Manitoulin Pastoral Charge, having stepped into the shoes left behind by a retired Designated Lay Minister.