

John Lawson: Reflecting on One Order of Ministry

Imagine with me the exiles – refugees – trudging away from the smoldering ruins of the Jerusalem temple after the Babylonian victory of 587 BC. Among the group is a whole cadre of people who managed and ran that great temple organization. Priests. Incense bearers. Scribes. Cantors. And a host of other functionaries – we might well call them bureaucrats and support staff.

Later they wept by the waters of Babylon for many reasons. Perhaps one of them was that their old religious roles now made no sense whatsoever. What is the role of a priest without a Temple? But eventually new spiritual leaders arose that made sense for that new context – leading them eventually to learn to sing the Lord’s song in a strange land. It was a tumultuous but also incredibly creative period for the Jewish people and set a trajectory of a resilient and alive faith that we see today.

The mainline church in North America, and our United Church of Canada in particular, are well into the journey of exile within our culture and society. Our Temple was a national church from sea to sea to sea driven by a vision of religious and national unity (and uniformity). We had a bureaucracy that mirrored the successful national companies of the early 20th century with regional managers and local agents and clear lines of reporting and accountability.

There have been signs for a long time that the national leadership model no longer works for many congregations. Throughout my entire 30+ years in ordained ministry I have witnessed the bureaucracy trying to organize and baptize leadership models that keep popping up like mushrooms in local contexts. In addition, there has been a continual national dialogue between those who are threatened or aggrieved as new forms of ministry leadership jockey for a place within the bureaucratic hierarchy.

The One Ministry document, it seems to me, falls within that interminable conversation and bureaucratic jockeying. However, coming at this conversation from an institutional or bureaucratic point of view is of little value, it seems to me, in this new context of exile.

So many of our congregations, for example, can’t imagine a church that does not have paid accountable ministry. One of the saddest things for me as I watch many congregations close is that they cannot imagine a church that really is a church without a paid accountable minister. And so instead of meeting in each other’s homes, singing the songs of faith, reading the scriptures and praying together and discovering leadership raised up by God within themselves – in short finding new ways of being the church in their community – they close up shop. Without a good housekeeping seal of approval from a national accrediting organization, they simply cease to be. Conversations such as those we see in the One Ministry document do not help raise up a new imagination within the people of God.

The truth is that we were never “United” in the way imagined by a national organization. There have always been unresolved tensions that come with a colonial mentality of “hinterland” and “center.” We have to look no farther than the troubled relationship with First Nations churches within the United Church to see this tension.

Now is the time to explore what leadership looks like in this new context of post-Christendom Canada. How can we foster and equip leaders in the variety of contexts that we see across the church? How can we support those called to explore the wonderful history and depth of our tradition? How can we break free from the professionalization of ministry to empower the one ministry of the whole people of God?

These are the questions worth pursuing from our vantage point in exile.

John Lawson is a United Church minister serving Three Willows United in Guelph as well as working in a Presbytery designated ministry in the community and on the campus of the University of Guelph. He feels richly blessed in pastoral ministry.