

## Angelika Piché : Reflections on One Order of Ministry

The *Statement on Ministry in The United Church of Canada* (2012) highlighted the need to re-think ministry:

*The church is about God's mission in the world. Therefore the Holy Spirit continually calls the church to renew its understanding of ministry opening itself to new expressions that serve the needs of the present day. In particular, existing paradigms of congregational identity are changing. People no longer maintain formerly expected patterns of participation. The United Church is challenged to re-image the nature of life in the church. As the church has begun to experiment with new expressions of community it will develop a greater variety of forms and models of ministry that will involve all of the people of the church. As the church carries God's Word into the world in new ways, ministry will be characterized by more collaboration, networking and transparency as well as a variety of educational approaches. Ministry will be transformed as the church itself is transformed.* (The United Church of Canada, *Record of Proceedings* GC41 2012, TICIF – Statement on Ministry, p.286)

We are aware that we are rapidly exiting Christendom and thus leaving behind a highly institutionalized form of Christianity. Our offices of ministry can no longer derive their authority simply from their role in a religious institution or as a recognized profession in society. On the other hand, we see in the postmodern cultural context a hunger for authentic spiritual experience and belonging. Spiritual leadership is needed more than ever. This kind of leadership is less defined by specific tasks, as we have done in the past, than by the integrity of a person living her faith in authentic ways. The spiritual quality of a person and her leadership for a given community will be first and foremost discerned by the community itself. Since the time of Reformation, the church has recognized a good pastoral relationship as the core of effective ministry, and so congregations have been responsible for calling their ministers. It seems to me that this is one area where we can also learn from Aboriginal partners and how they discern and value the elders in their circles.

What then is the role of the wider church? As the United Church, we claim a common identity among our faith communities, along with the overall values and foundational theological beliefs that comprise that identity. As the United Church, we are therefore responsible for discerning if the features of that common identity are present in any specific pastoral relationship. Formation for ministry plays an essential role in this regard, as it lays the ground for common understanding of our core values and beliefs and assures the connection with the Church's historical roots. However, formation cannot be solely centered on the capacity to perform particular functions in a given ministry context. In the theological schools, we are aware that we are preparing leaders for styles of ministry not yet imagined. We are indeed preparing leaders who are capable of imagining new forms of ministry. And these forms will be more varied than the traditional categories we have known as

congregational, educational, chaplaincy, social justice ministries, etc. How, then, are we to describe and understand ministry for the future?

It seems to me that we can re-imagine the nature of ministry for future expressions of the Church, when we uphold the affirmation, present in all Reformed confessions, that no office in the Church exists on its own but only in relationship to a community. To be ordained in ministry in the Reformed tradition does not describe a quality of a person, but a covenant-like relationship created by the Church. Therefore we do not ordain someone without a call or an appointment to a ministry setting. Ordination happens as a public confirmation that the Church has recognized the gifts and abilities of a person who is entering into a pastoral relationship with a particular community.

I suggest neither Diaconal nor Designated Lay Ministry would be different in this regard: they are necessarily ministries carried out in relationship to a community. That relationship needs to be recognized by and be accountable to the wider Church. Since New Testament times, the Church has recognized this relationship through the laying on of hands and a common prayer for the inspiration of the Holy Spirit.

We have traditionally associated ordination with the proclamation of the Word, the administration of sacraments, and pastoral care. Only if one understands these terms as narrowly defined functions in an established congregational model, like “preaching a sermon” as synonym for “proclaiming the Word,” can one uphold distinctions in this regard between our current three streams of ministry, and even then we realize that ministers in all three streams are preaching regularly. At the time of the Reformation, proclamation of the Word and administration of sacraments were used to describe the marks of the Church, meaning they were seen as constituting church community. They were, however, understood in a very large sense. “Proclaiming the Word” can happen in a variety of ways, including administering the sacraments or doing pastoral care, but also in educational settings or diaconal service. According to Jan Rohls, Zwingli defined the particular office of ministry by the proclamation of the word, so that “The ministers of the word are responsible for leading the community by the word of God[.]” (*Reformed Confessions*, Columbia Series in Reformed Theology, Westminster John Knox Press, 1998, p.239),

As we journey toward new expressions of community and ministry leadership, the basic activities that constitute the Church, and particularly “leading by the word” in a large sense, will remain the same, but the specific manifestations of these activities may look very different from traditional congregational ministry. As has been highlighted in the United Church’s “Regional Team Models Report” (2012), we will probably move towards more regional models of ministry and thus team ministries, which allow us to draw on a variety of competencies (United Church of Canada, *Record of Proceedings GC41 2012*, pp. 623-627).

If we move to a place where the Church reclaims its call to mission, all forms of ministry will be involved in “leading by the word” in a variety of ways. Ministry will specialize even more in order to respond to the needs in different contexts, and at the same time its essential purpose to connect people with the Word of God will remain the same. In that sense, the *One Order of Ministry* proposal seems to be a good solution in that it offers the possibility of different educational paths, which could allow for specialization in certain areas, as well as emphasizing the common call into a covenant relationship with the Church.

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