

Kate Jones: Reflections on One Order of Ministry

Ministry does not exist for its own benefit; ministry exists for the benefit of the church. Likewise, the church does not exist for its own benefit; the church exists for the benefit of God's mission in the world. Therefore the question must be asked, "what would ministry in the United Church of Canada look like in order to best equip the church to carry out God's mission in our world?" While some changes may be necessary to our current situation, I would argue that the changes proposed by *One Order of Ministry* do not fulfil this requirement, as they are inconsistent with both biblical witness and the doctrine of the United Church of Canada; they have the potential to increase confusion among Pastoral Charges and congregants; and they have the potential to be disruptive to ecumenical relationships.

In the current cultural context of Canada, we are in an era of rapid technological change and increasing uncertainty, while the church is moving towards the margins, in effect becoming a counter-cultural movement. In a context such as this, there is a need for leaders in the church who are educated and equipped to lead congregations living in the midst of change and uncertainty. The original *One Order of Ministry* document agrees with this, stating that, "it is critical at this time for the church to maintain an educated paid accountable ministry capable of equipping people to live out their faith in meaningful, loving, and mature ways."¹ It goes on to propose increasing the educational requirements for those entering ministry through the current DLM stream, while acknowledging that there already exists a basic educational equivalency between preparation for Diaconal Ministry and Ordained Ministry. Despite this commitment to maintaining or improving the educational standards of paid accountable ministry personnel, I have other concerns with the proposal.

The doctrine of the United Church of Canada is based on the primacy of scripture and four subordinate documents – the Basis of Union, A Statement of Faith, A New Creed, and A Song of Faith. Scripturally, there is support for the current system of Diaconal and Ordained ministers with different but complementary roles. In the Acts of the Apostles, we can read about the growth of the early church and the whole work of ministry becoming overwhelming for the apostles. Seven disciples were then selected and, through prayer and the laying on of hands, appointed for the task of service in order that the apostles could focus on prayer and serving the word of God (Acts 6:1-6). Two separate ministries with complementary work so that the whole work of ministry may be undertaken. A similar model is recognized in the doctrinal section of the Basis of Union – Article XVII recognizes that there is, "an ordained ministry of Word, Sacrament, and Pastoral Care and a diaconal ministry of Education, Service, and Pastoral Care."² This is echoed, less explicitly, in A Song of Faith which speaks of "specific ministries of leadership, both lay and ordered" which include witness, worship, comforting, guiding, building up the community, and working for justice; and concludes that, "to embody God's love in the world, the work of the church requires the ministry and discipleship of all believers."³ There is not one ministry alone that can fulfil God's mission – rather a diversity of gifts and skills are required.

One Order of Ministry speaks of the need for a "simpler, more transparent and understandable order of paid accountable ministry."⁴ It references concerns such as the fact that Ordained Ministers, Diaconal Ministers, and Designated Lay Ministers are often called or appointed to similar situations (i.e. solo pastoral ministry), and that there is usually a need for Diaconal Ministers and Designated Lay Ministers to be licensed for the sacraments. I believe that rolling the different orders of ministry under one name would increase confusion rather than increasing transparency.

There is a distinctive call for each of the orders of ministry, as well as a distinctive education process. Even though most ministers of each order function in solo pastoral ministry, there is not homogeneity in the calls. Some solo pastoral ministry situations may benefit from the skills and training of a Diaconal Minister; others may benefit from the skills and training of an Ordained Minister. Changing the names may clear up some superficial confusion while at the same time creating deeper confusion about why different calls and training are grouped together under one name. Rather than re-structuring the orders of ministry, it may be better to increase overall awareness of the different orders of ministry and open up the search and call process to all orders of ministry.

The issue regarding licensing for the sacraments could be easily cleared up by making this a part of the commissioning of Diaconal Ministers. Even though the call and primary focus of Diaconal Ministers is to Education, Service, and Pastoral Care, most are also involved in the ministries of Word and Sacraments. Likewise, the call and primary focus of Ordained Ministers is to Word, Sacrament, and Pastoral Care, and yet most Ordained Ministers also participate in the ministries of Education and Service. The two orders of ministry are not exclusive, but rather overlapping and complementary.

Finally, the concern regarding ecumenical relationships seems to have been addressed in the proposals brought to General Council 42. The proposals include keeping the term “ordination” and applying it to both Diaconal and Ordained ministers in keeping with the ecumenical consensus outlined in the *Baptism, Eucharist, and Ministry* paper of the World Council of Churches.⁵ The proposals state that a person called to the diaconate could be ordained to the diaconate, however it is unclear what a person called to ordained ministry would be ordained to.

As the United Church of Canada continues to strive to be faithful to God’s mission in today’s world, some changes in our understanding of ministry may be required. However, enfolding all orders of ministry into one order of ministry as proposed by *One Order of Ministry* does not appear to be the direction that the church requires. Distinct but complimentary orders of ministry are more likely to serve the church and empower her to continue to embody God’s mission in our world.

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¹ Joint Ministry Working Group, The United Church of Canada, *Thinking About One Order of Ministry*, 3, accessed January 27, 2016, http://www.united-church.ca/files/general-council/gc41/one-order-ministry_proposal.pdf.

² The United Church of Canada, *The Manual* (Toronto: United Church Publishing House, 2013), 14.

³ *Ibid.*, 26.

⁴ Joint Ministry Working Group, *One Order of Ministry*, 2.

⁵ “General Council 42 Workbook, 2nd Revision August 2015,” 367, http://252171b255e88fd7c65a-dec189f157202212a76b23fc4d185c40.r92.cf2.rackcdn.com/workbook_complete_rev2.pdf.