

ORDINATION FOR ALL WHO EXERCISE THE MINISTRY OF WORD AND SACRAMENT: A PRACTICE AND ITS IMPLICATIONS

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The aim of this paper will be to suggest that all who serve as ministers of Word and sacrament in this church should come to that service by the same process of call and ordination. There should not be two kinds of ministers of Word and sacrament: synodically authorized lay ministers and ordained ministers; nor should there be a distinction between those ordained for service to the whole church and those ordained to place. Because there is one ministry of Word and sacrament, we should try to imagine a process of call and a practice of ordination that displays the unity of that ministry. And lest this exercise of imagination become a fantasy, we cannot forget the pressing need of some congregations for such ministry, the missional urgency for an adaptable and diverse ministry, and a recognition of its place in relation to the ministry of the whole people of God.

Imagining a Practice

In my previous paper, I reflected upon the relationships that are symbolically enacted in call and ordination. The ritual process of call and the ritual moment of ordination establish the one called and ordained in relation to a local assembly of the church, in relation to supra-local communion of the church, and most importantly in relation to God, who by the gift of the Spirit empowers a ministry that gives us Christ by the means of Word and sacrament. In contrast, the practice of synodical authorization is conveyance of authority apart from the full realization of these relationships. For example, without ordination, there is no prayer of the people of God for the Spirit to show how the exercise of ministry is utterly dependent upon God and sustained in relation to a local assembly of God's people; and there is no laying on of hands by bishop and pastors to show in a public way that the wider communion of the church is present in the local exercise of this ministry. The whole process of synodical authorization is not completely devoid of these relationships, but they are attenuated at best and far removed from the liturgical context, where these things are most fully shown and given.

The only solution to this deficiency in practice is for these persons to be called and ordained as ministers of Word and sacrament.¹ From a liturgical perspective, the way a "lay" person is authorized for such a ministry is by being publicly established in a set of relationships to the community of faith (to the local assembly and to the wider communion of these local assemblies) and to the work of the Holy Spirit in the means of grace. This is what is accomplished in the ritual and symbolic context of ordination as the culmination of the process of call, which also has ritual dimensions. An administrative procedure may convey the authority to exercise the ministry of Word and sacrament, but it does not fully realize the way that authority stands "in relation" — in relation to God and the people of God. Such authority "in relation" is far removed from the exercise of special powers given to a person.

The current dilemma and confusion surrounding these matters, it seems to me, has its source in a value deeply embedded in our practice of ordination: the value of seminary education in the training and formation of pastors. We are pressed into administratively authorizing “lay” persons to exercise the ministry of Word and sacrament because of genuine needs for such ministry (in de-populated areas, in places of economic distress, in ethnic communities, etc.) that are not being met by seminary-trained pastors. Our understanding and practice of ordination is so linked to the value of theological education that we maintain this connection even if it means undermining the relation of ordination to the ministry of Word and sacrament. To put it baldly, our operative theology of ordination finally has more to do with the attainment of a certain level of theological education and formation than it does with the exercise of a ministry of Word and sacrament. Furthermore, the priority given to the value of seminary training results in a continuing struggle with clericalism. The pastor has a privileged status in the community because of his or her superior knowledge, leadership abilities, and spirituality or piety, rather than a distinctive role in the community clearly defined in relation to Word and sacrament. The more we dissociate the relation of ordination to the ministry of Word and sacrament, the more need there will be to create other reasons for why someone is ordained; and these reasons will inevitably perpetuate a privileged clerical status.

There are indeed good reasons why theological education has such a high value in our practice of call and ordination. Seminary education emerged (among Protestants and Roman Catholics) as a result of the Reformers’ critique of a poorly educated clergy and its dire consequences for the proclamation of the Gospel and the teaching of the faith. There is no question that the responsible exercise of the ministry of Word and sacrament demands considerable training and formation: What is the Gospel message that we are to proclaim and teach? How is it grounded in scripture and the confessions? What are the distinctive marks of the Gospel community? How does the Gospel message and the Gospel community relate to God’s purposes for the world and the whole shape of a person’s life? What are the particular contextual and missional issues that the Gospel message and community must engage in our time and place? The exploration of these questions (and more) is a part of what it means to exercise the ministry of Word and sacrament, which always involves more than the repetition of biblical language and static religious formulas and the observance of ritual routines.

My aim here is not to diminish the importance of theological education. Given the powerful cultural forces at work in our affluent society and the missional situation that we face, it is in fact more important than ever. Clarity about the Gospel message and the Gospel community, public accountability for that message and to that community, and intentional strategies for

communicating that message and embodying that community are critical to the ministry of Word and sacrament, and these things are (or ought to be), at least in part, the outcome of theological education and formation.² Theological education is essential to the formation of those who exercise the ministry of Word and sacrament. Nonetheless, it is not the source of pastoral identity. That identity is located in the relationships constituted in the process of call and the rite of ordination — to God, to the local assembly, to the church as a communion of local assemblies.

Is it possible for us to re-imagine our practices in such a way that, first, the identity of the person to serve as minister of Word and sacrament is constituted by the relationships enacted symbolically in call and ordination and, second, theological education serves this identity? As I see it that means giving priority to the connection between ordination and the exercise of the ministry of Word and sacrament, rather than to the link between ordination and seminary training. But this will be a step forward only if we can manage such a reversal of priorities in a way that maintains, even enhances, the value of theological education as essential to the formation of pastors.

Conversing with Our Ecumenical Partners

There were a number of convergences in the conversation with our ecumenical partners at the Bishops Academy in January that I would like to highlight as part of the process of re-imagining our practice.³

1. *Focus on the community, not the leader.*

Bishop Jim Kelsey from the Episcopal Church made this point clearly when he noted that in his diocese they were learning to focus not on the development of the sacramentalist but on the sacramental community, on the congregation gathered for ministry rather than a gathering around the minister. The point here is the responsibility of the whole people of God for the ministry and mission of the church, and specifically, in regard to matters of call and ordination, the role of the local congregation in identifying its ministers. He was talking about parishes in the Upper Peninsula without a priest, but the point can be extended even to congregations who do not face this dilemma. This is the kind of leadership “in relation” that the practice of call and ordination are fundamentally about; in contrast to a heroic model of leadership that sees the one who ministers as personally invested with special powers and authority. What if congregations saw themselves as instruments of God’s mission in the world, and as a consequence they were more actively involved in identifying persons to be called and ordained as ministers of Word and sacrament; in contrast to what is often self-identification.

2. *Avoid making distinctions among those who exercise the same ministry.*

All of the Reformed partners expressed discomfort with the creation of two tiers of ministers of Word and sacrament — ordained and lay — although practice in their churches continues to provide for this. The Episcopal Church has now abandoned the canonical distinction between the regular, seminary route to ordination and the local ordination of priests (and deacons). Although candidates for ministry may be dealt with differently on a procedural level, there is a single canon that governs ordination. On the one hand, this means no more “ordination to place” as a category distinct from regular ordination; on the other hand, there remain alternate educational routes to ordination, and some priests may in fact remain “in place,” though nothing about their ordination would prevent them from serving elsewhere. Both the Reformed discomfort with the distinction between lay and ordained ministers of Word and sacrament and the Episcopal backing away from a distinction within the practice of ordination bear upon our own consideration. From theological and practical perspectives, the ministry of Word and sacrament is a single ministry and our practice should reflect this unity. As one of my teachers was fond of saying about different terms for the same liturgical practice, “Words are words, and things are things.” Or less elegantly, it is the “duck principle:” if it walks like a duck and quacks like a duck, it’s a duck.

3. *Adaptability and diversification are critical factors in the shaping ministry for current needs.* Although there is movement toward or desire for a unified conception of the ministry governed by certain practices, there is also a sense of urgency about being responsive to local needs. This pushes all of us toward structures of ministry and policies that are adaptable to local circumstances. This is already leading to different ways of preparing for the ministry of Word and sacrament; it will affect the delivery of theological education and formation. It will also encourage a diversity of ministries, some formally defined, as we have seen with the emergence of diaconal ministers in our church. More and more, the ministry of Word and sacrament will function in relation to other ministries, and we will have to clarify the distinctive character of various forms of public ministry.

4. *Deepen both local and catholic commitments.*

This was a point made by Rev. Gregg Mast of the Reformed Church in America: whatever we do in regard to practices surrounding ministry, it needs to deepen both local and catholic commitments. The local commitment will tend to move us in the direction of adaptability and diversification of ministries (#3 above); the catholic commitment will tend to move us in the direction of a unified and ecumenically recognizable conception and practice of the one ministry of Word and sacrament (#2 above). Both locality and signs of communion ought to characterize our practice of call and ordination.

5. *Keep the seminaries engaged with the church and with the delivery of theological education in various forms.*

I sensed in the remarks of our ecumenical partners a recognition that there is benefit in a seminary system that is genuinely engaged with the church and with the shape of its current life and mission. I also heard some concern that seminaries not remain distant from or be cut “out of the loop” in the development of alternative strategies for theological education and formation. From my own vantage point within a seminary faculty, I see extraordinary commitment to this conversation but also concern that we will develop competing systems of theological education with divergent standards that in the long run will not serve the Gospel message and the Gospel community in the need for clarity, public accountability, and intentionality.

Sketching a Proposal

Although my own perspective and experience is admittedly limited, let me risk offering some preliminary thoughts toward a practice of call and ordination consistent with the direction of these reflections. Much more thought and many more voices, however, will need to go into this conversation.

- All ministers of Word and sacrament will be ordained. In the worshiping assembly with prayer for the Spirit and the laying on of hands, we fully realize the whole set of relationships — to God and to the church — that make ministry an exercise of service to Jesus Christ and not an exercise of special powers.
- All candidates for ministry will be received and approved through the same candidacy process although there may be alternative routes of theological education and formation. The availability of candidates for call and the mobility of persons already ordained will be

discerned and administered by the synod according to common guidelines. There will be no ordination to place. Nonetheless, the mobility of some pastors will be restricted procedurally. In principle, every minister of Word and sacrament will be able to serve anywhere in the church; in fact, some will remain in place.

- Processes for the communal identification of candidates for ministry will be developed, both for persons who will likely remain in place and for those who will have broad mobility.
- The high value placed on theological education and formation will be maintained through a clear set of common standards. The seminaries and teaching theologians of the church will be engaged with the delivery of theological education in various forms. Although the seminary route will remain the norm; other routes to ordained service will be developed, including strategies such as TEEM and more locally-delivered forms of theological education, e.g., synod or regional ministry schools. Significant continuing education will be expected of all pastors, and it will be all the more critical for those whose preparation is less front-loaded. Mentoring relationships with experienced and skilled pastors will further pastoral formation.
- Those responsible for candidacy, theological education, first-call theological education, and continuing education will work together to develop a well-integrated system of preparation and continuing formation for ministers of Word and sacrament.
- “Lay” ministries both within the congregation and outside of it will be developed, encouraged, and supported, some of it through the already existing forms of diaconal ministry and AIM.
- There will be provision and encouragement for “lay” preaching and “lay” presidency at non-sacramental services with the oversight of ministers of Word and sacrament, who are the principle stewards of proclamation and worship. A minister of Word and sacrament will preside at baptism, absolution (in its declarative forms), and the Lord’s Supper. These distinctions in particular deserve much more thought and theological articulation.⁴

In conclusion, I want to express my hope that these comments contribute to the ongoing deliberation about these matters in the conference of bishops and my gratitude for the opportunity to take part in this conversation.

Endnotes

1. Let me be clear that this deficiency is not a lack in the person who exercises ministry or in what the Spirit of God accomplishes through the ministry of Word and sacrament. It is a deficiency in the ecclesial system; it belongs to and affects the whole church.
2. I am indebted to my colleague James Nieman for the categories of clarity, accountability, and intentionality.
3. My comments are based upon what I heard at the presentation; I would want to check the accuracy of what I say here with our partners.
4. Here is a start in that direction. The proclamation of the word differs from the celebration of the sacrament in that the general ministry of all the baptized includes proclaiming the Gospel message *in the world*; proclamation *in the assembly* is the responsibility of ordained ministers, but it can be shared with those who have a gift for giving voice to the Gospel.