

THEOLOGY AND IDENTITY

TRADITIONS, MOVEMENTS, AND POLITY
IN THE UNITED CHURCH OF CHRIST

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EMPOWERMENT AND EMBODIMENT: UNDERSTANDINGS OF MINISTRY IN THE UNITED CHURCH OF CHRIST

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The United Church of Christ states in its constitution that every member is called to participate in and extend the ministry of Jesus Christ by witnessing to the gospel in church and society (paragraph 17). Through baptism the ministries of all Christians are "authorized." However, the constitution also states that "the United Church of Christ recognizes that God calls certain of its members to various forms of ministry in and on behalf of the church for which ecclesiastical authorization is required by the church" (paragraph 18). Ecclesiastical authorization, through ordination, commissioning, and licensing is one of the ways in which the UCC undergirds the ministry of all members by nurturing faith, calling forth gifts, and equipping members for Christian service.

In the history of the church ordination has been, and remains, the primary rite whereby the UCC "recognizes and authorizes that member whom God had called to ordained ministry, and sets that person apart by prayer and laying on of hands" (paragraph 19). "An Ordained Minister in the United Church of Christ is one of its members who has been called by God and ordained to preach and teach the gospel, to administer the sacraments and rites of the church, and to exercise pastoral care and leadership" (paragraph 20).¹

What does it mean to set apart someone in this way? How does this action continue general historical patterns for authorizing leadership in Protestant churches? Does the United Church of Christ have any special ways of understanding ordained ministry? What are the forces that continue to shape ministry in the UCC? These are important questions for the future of the United Church of Christ.

HISTORICAL ROOTS

All discussion of ministry in the United Church of Christ must begin by recalling its roots in the sixteenth-century Reformation. The thinking of

the Protestant Reformers shaped and continues to influence UCC definitions of ministry. The seventh article of the *Augsburg Confession* declares that the church is "the congregation of the saints in which the gospel is rightly preached and the sacraments are rightly administered."² Calvin defined the church as "where the preaching of the gospel is reverently heard and the sacraments are not neglected."³

Furthermore, the United Church of Christ is a denomination that refuses to separate theology and polity. Reformed history, from which all streams of UCC history flow, regards the polity of the church as divinely instituted. Ministers of the church, according to Reformed tradition, have God-given responsibilities to protect right Christian teaching and pure doctrine. In 1562 Henry Bullinger wrote in the *Helvetic Confession*: "Only such persons are qualified to become ministers who possess adequate and holy learning, pious eloquence, and simple prudence and are persons of moderation and honesty."⁴

Calvin wrote that the significance of the ordination ceremony was "to admonish the person ordained that he [or she] is no longer his [or her] own master, but devoted to the service of God and the Church."⁵ Deviation from established ecclesiastical order was considered heresy and one could be removed from office for blasphemy, drunkenness, playing prohibited games, and dancing. Such things were irreconcilable with Christian ministry. Furthermore, in Geneva ministers were admonished to avoid arbitrary exegesis of scripture, presumptiveness, preoccupation with speculative problems, indolence in the study of scripture, tardiness in the denunciation of vice, avarice, irascibility, cantankerousness, and unseemly dress.⁶

Zacharius Ursinus, remembered in the United Church of Christ as one of the authors of the *Heidelberg Catechism* (1563), stated his reasons for the institution of the ministry: it was for the glory of God, as an instrument for conversion, to teach and to provoke godliness, praise, and worship, so that God might show divine mercy by committing to humanity "that great work, the ministry of reconciliation, which the Son of God (himself) discharged." Ursinus concluded that the ministry exists so that the church may be visible in the world, so that "the elect may know to what they ought to attach themselves, and that the reprobate may be rendered perfectly inexcusable" in all attempts to make God's call ineffectual.⁷

In the earliest German Reformed churches there were five offices: evangelist, pastor, teacher, healer, and deacon. According to Ursinus their duties were:

1. A faithful and correct exposition of the true and uncorrupted doctrine of the law and gospel, so that the church may be able to understand it;

2. A lawful administration of the sacraments, according to divine appointment;
3. To give the church a good example of what constitutes a Christian life and godly conversation;
4. A diligent attention to their flocks;
5. To give proper respect and submission to the decisions of the church;
6. To see that proper respect and attention be given to the poor.⁸

In later German ecclesiastical history Evangelical churches had similar concerns. However, the German Evangelical Synod of North America came to speak of ordained ministry as even more essential to the work of the church. If the "mission of the church is to extend the Kingdom of God," to lead humanity "to Christ and to establish Christian principles in every relation of life," the pastor is the means whereby the church carries out its mission.⁹ Where the pastor is, there is the church. Lutheran and Evangelical understandings of clergy emphasized ministry as servanthood, and refused to become preoccupied with credentials or duties.

By way of contrast Congregationalism developed a somewhat different understanding of ministry. Puritan views remained grounded in Reformed theology, but they were increasingly influenced by voluntary church polity. The *Cambridge Platform* defined the church as "a company of saints by calling, united into one body, by a holy covenant, for the publick worship of God and the mutuall edification one of another, in the Fellowship of the Lord Jesus."¹⁰ The form and matter of the church exists in the local gathered community. Although officers were not deemed essential, they were there for the "well-being" of the faithful. Leadership was exercised by preaching and teaching officers, known as Pastors and Teachers; and by ruling officers, known as Ruling Elders and Deacons.

The Pastors special work is, to attend to exhortation: and therein to Administer a word of Wisdom: the Teacher is to attend to Doctrine, and therein to Administer a word of Knowledge: and either of them to administer the Seales of that Covenant . . .¹¹

Congregationalism was always eager to insist that the essential church existed with or without its officers. It was helpful to choose officers, "tryed and proved" leaders, but it was not essential. Furthermore, the power of all officers came as a result of being freely elected by the church members. Ordination remained a secondary rite, confirming an already held election. For this reason, the duties and responsibilities of ordained ministry were not immediately transferable beyond a local community.¹²

Among the Christians, the small denomination of Christian independents on the American frontier that eventually joined the Congregationalists, ordained ministry was more expendable. The Christians embraced a simple faith consistent with the "republican" zeal of American independence. A Virginia elder wrote, "We have no reverend, nor right reverends among us, no masters—we are all brethren [*sic*]." ¹³ The Christians believed that God would guide the churches to find fitting leadership.

THE UNITED CHURCH OF CHRIST SYNTHESIS

The United Church of Christ in the late twentieth century is an interesting mixture of polities, peoples, and principles drawn from scripture, Reformation history, colonial experience, frontier practice, democratic ideology, and personal piety. Out of these various pieces it has created a distinct way to define and justify "authorized or set apart ministry" in the contemporary world.

On the one hand, in an effort to preserve the importance of the laity and the ministry of every Christian, the UCC has downplayed the specialness of ordained ministry. Ordination authorizes an ordinary church member to be a Christian leader for the whole church. This argument may be called an *empowerment* justification for ordained ministry.

On the other hand, in an effort to recognize the fact that God has blessed certain individuals with gifts to enrich the church, the UCC continues to acknowledge the specialness of ordained ministry. Ordination authorizes a gifted leader to serve church and society in the name of Jesus Christ. This argument may be called an *embodiment* justification for ordained ministry.

Both of these views of ministry begin with the conviction that God alone calls the church into being. Both of these perspectives insist that the whole church is engaged in the ministry of Jesus Christ. Both of these traditions claim that Jesus Christ is the sole head of the church. Both of these viewpoints proclaim that every follower of Jesus Christ is called into ministry through his or her baptism. Both of these approaches to leadership agree that the ultimate source of authority for ordained ministry will always rest with the whole church. ¹⁴

Yet within the United Church of Christ the tension between *empowerment* and *embodiment* understandings of ministry provides a creative energy. By examining the differences between these two perspectives it is possible to appreciate the unique synthesis that informs and justifies all authorized ministry in the United Church of Christ.

EMPOWERMENT

In those regions of the United Church of Christ rooted in Congregationalism and the free church traditions of American life there is an *empowerment* view of ministry. This view is also congenial with certain Evangelical Synod traditions on the midwestern frontier.

The empowerment view believes that ordained ministers are called out of the community of the faithful and “empowered” to carry out the functions of preaching, teaching, and administering the sacraments. A minister is no better, no more holy, no more powerful than any other Christian. He or she simply has the gifts and graces needed in that community at that time. Words like “enabler” and “facilitator” describe the minister.

This view of ministry reminds the church that all Christians are called to ministry. Ordination occurs only when there is a need in the church for the services of an ordained person “to preach and teach the gospel, to administer the sacraments and rites of the church, and to exercise pastoral care and leadership.”¹⁵ Logically, this understanding of ministry always relates ordained status to function. Authorization is only valid in a specific place, and it is only appropriate for as long as it is needed.

The faculty at Eden Theological Seminary describes this functional view of ordination by pointing out that the authority for ordination is operative only in relationship to specific tasks and responsibilities within the life of the community of faith. “The function of ordained ministry is for the formation, enhancement, discipline, empowerment, and reformation of the Christian community in its life of worship and mission.”¹⁶ This position rejects all “substantialist” definitions of ordination, which center on the nature of the person to be ordained rather than on the function of the office to which a person is being ordained.¹⁷

Liturgically, an empowerment view of ministry approaches the ordination service as a covenant service between the individual and the gathered community. It does not ask for, need, or recognize wider authorization. It does not expect other clergy to be present, except to “extend the right hand of fellowship.” When the people elect their pastor, offer prayers, and lay on hands, the person is ordained. In early Congregationalism the one who was being ordained preached at the ordination service. In an inaugural sermon he (they were all men) affirmed and accepted the call to that congregation. When and if the relationship between a particular congregation and a pastor came to an end, the process began again. The pastor could not “take” that ordination to authorize service in another congregation.

One of the benefits of this view of ministry is that it reminds the people that they are not dependent upon ordained ministry in order to

be a church. When two or three are gathered together the church exists. Jesus Christ is its head. This view of ministry moves away from sacerdotalism and hierarchy, and it keeps strong lines of accountability between clergy and laity. However, it also creates some problems.

Empowerment views of ministry focus upon the clergy as intellectual leaders, preaching and teaching for the upbuilding of the church. This can lead to less emphasis upon sacramental life and pastoral gifts. Because clergy hold membership in the congregation they serve, this can sometimes result in narrow parochialism. An empowerment understanding of ministry diminishes and even erases the idea that a church vocation demands any special calling from God. In the name of common discipleship, clergy are congregational "functionaries" who may fail to have any vision beyond organizational maintenance. Finally, it can be argued that prophetic witness sometimes weakens with a functional view of ordained ministry, because it is too risky to offend those who create and sustain one's job.

All of the problems mentioned thus far occur when a congregation chooses to empower one person for ministry. There are also problems that develop when an individual feels a call to ministry, is obviously gifted, but for various reasons the church chooses not to ordain that person. Sometimes the church community does not believe that there is an ecclesiastical need for ordained authority. Sometimes the church decides not to entrust its authority to that particular person.

EMBODIMENT

In those regions of the United Church of Christ rooted in the European traditions of state churches and strong pastoral leadership, there is an *embodiment* view of ministry. Indeed, this more "substantialist" view of ministry has largely prevailed in the history of the Christian Church and it continues to be the normative view in ecumenical discussions on the nature of ministry.¹⁸

This view of ministry begins with the recognition that throughout the history of the world there have been people in every community who have religious or spiritual gifts. Anthropologists study this phenomenon; they document the work of the shaman, the priest, the medicine woman, or others who represent and are in touch with the "holy," or the "numinous." Although such religious leadership is difficult to define, in all cultures there are ways in which people "know" that some persons have a "presence" that marks them for ministry.

In its most extreme form the previously described empowerment view of ministry denies this reality. It insists that there is radical equality in Christ Jesus and equal potential for authorized ministry in every Chris-

tian. When the community sets apart some persons as clergy, they are not considered to be "holier" or more in touch with God than anyone else. Yet often one "empowered" by the community rises to the challenge. Stories abound of unlikely persons who have been elected to leadership and rendered remarkable service.

The embodiment view of ministry does not reject this possibility, but it does acknowledge that some persons already possess gifts for ministry. The primary task of the church is not to "empower," but rather to discover and release what already exists. Within the United Church of Christ this view of ministry is strongest within those congregations historically linked to our German Reformed roots. Like the empowerment view, the embodiment view of ministry has its dangers and benefits.

Basically, an embodiment view of ministry insists that there is a unique quality to Christian ministry which is more than professional competence or entrusted faithfulness. Clergy are in touch with mystery. Clergy have a special relationship and responsibility to God.

Luther's influence is significant here. He wrote that "to rule souls through the Word of God . . . is the highest office in the church."¹⁹ For centuries, people have considered ministry a "higher profession."

The German word *Pastorenkirchen* points toward an embodiment understanding of ministry. It means that where the pastor is, there is the church. It insists that ordained clergy are necessary for the church to be fully constituted through Word and sacrament.

Probably the strongest example of the embodiment view of ministry in UCC history found expression in Mercersburg theology, a "high church" movement in the nineteenth-century German Reformed Church. The 1866 Mercersburg ordination service states, "The office is of divine origin, and of truly supernatural character and force." Ministers represent God's authority and function as "ambassadors" of God's grace. Furthermore, the ordained "are charged also with the government of the Church, and with the proper use of its discipline, in the way both of censure and absolution."²⁰ John Nevin argued that ministry comes from God to the church, "downwards and not upwards, from the few to the many and not from the many to the few." Ordination is the "veritable channel" of institutional apostolic succession through which "is transmitted mystically, from age to age, the supernatural authority in which this succession consists."²¹

This view of ministry upholds a strong sacramental and priestly role for the clergy. Education is advised to prevent "dumb reading" of the liturgy, but not necessarily for preaching. Ecclesiastical authority is not located in the gathered congregation, but vested in the ministry of teaching and ruling elders. These clergy and lay leaders represent the

best interests of the congregation and govern the church through "consistories" or representative "councils."

Liturgically, from an embodiment perspective, the ordination service is most fittingly held in the home church of the person being ordained. It is more than a covenant service with the congregation where the person will eventually serve. At the ordination the local family of faith, which has produced and nurtured the gifted leader, hosts the service, but the leadership of that congregation is not in charge. Rather, the clergy in the area, authorized by regional bodies of laity and clergy, lay hands upon the candidate to "pass on" the authority entrusted to them and to honor God's call for that particular life. Ordination understood this way is timeless, global, and indelible. Clergy are ordained to the whole church of Jesus Christ and not simply to one particular congregation. For this reason, in the Evangelical and Reformed Church clergy belonged to the synod, never to a local church. It is argued that because one is ordained to ministry within the universal church in all times and places, an embodiment understanding of ministry allows greater freedom for prophetic witness, unencumbered by the prejudices of local congregations.

The dangers in the embodiment view of ministry are obvious. Such a lofty view of ministry creates a great gap between clergy and laity and can limit lay leadership. It creates dependencies and leads to clergy overload. It feeds professional elitism and, if it loses contact with its sacramental source, it degenerates into idolatry. At the same time it is also an important way to distinguish the church from other social organizations and to celebrate ministry as God's gift.

EXPRESSIONS OF EMPOWERMENT AND EMBODIMENT IN UNITED CHURCH OF CHRIST POLITY

With the recent publication of the new *Manual on Ministry*, the United Church of Christ has become more self-conscious about its procedures and its justification for authorized ministry.²² Building upon 1983-84 constitutional amendments, the *Manual* exhibits more directly some of the ongoing inconsistencies and tensions in UCC theology and practice around the authorization of ministry. Critics of the *Manual* point out that there are no faith qualifications for ministry in the United Church of Christ. Furthermore, the stipulation that there will be periodic and special reviews of clergy raises some question about the autonomy of the congregation protected in other parts of the constitution. Finally, there is concern that the conduct of "disciplinary hearings" could lead to clergy trials subject to great abuse and error.²³

Empowerment and embodiment understandings of ministry continue to shape all authorized ministry in the United Church of Christ. Constitutional provisions, implementation procedures suggested by the Office for Church Life and Leadership, and ambiguous attitudes among clergy and lay people stand as evidence. This creative tension in UCC polity is expressed in the following ways:

- Ordination in the United Church of Christ is for life, an unrepeatable act similar to baptism, yet it is possible to lose ministerial standing and cease to be a minister in the UCC.
- Ordained ministers in the UCC are members of local congregations, but hold ministerial standing in the association.
- Ordained ministers in the UCC are usually ordained in their "home" church and installed in the church where they will serve.
- Ordained ministers in the UCC must be educated at an accredited seminary and "good preaching" is the single most important quality considered by committees seeking pastors; yet normally it is impossible to be ordained without a call "recognized by the Association" which necessitates opportunities to "administer the sacraments and rites of the church."
- Ordained ministers in the UCC like to think of themselves as enablers and facilitators, no better than committed laity in the churches, yet clergy tax benefits, congregational expectations, and peer pressure assume that ordained persons have special privileges and burdens.

The United Church of Christ refuses to embrace a single unified justification for authorized ministry. Empowerment and embodiment thinking are both necessary to describe what is going on when the church sets apart one of its members to ordained ministry by prayer and laying on of hands.

On the one hand, the UCC holds to a functional view of ministry. Yet within the church "functional" can have two important meanings. First, it refers to particular tasks carried out by the clergy. But second, to speak of a functional ministry is also to recognize that ministry is a function of the gospel, that is, having no independent status, but only an agent of its source.²⁴

On the other hand, the UCC also recognizes the representational character of ordained ministry. Within the church "representational" can have two meanings. The sacramental leadership of clergy has a representational responsibility to stand before the church on behalf of that event remembered and reenacted which makes the church the church. At the same time the clergy always stand for the church and within the church, representing the people.²⁵

When the United Church of Christ authorizes persons to become

ordained ministers for the church, empowerment and embodiment thinking are evident. The church is lifting up someone who is quite ordinary to serve the community. The church is also recognizing someone who is extraordinary to serve God's purposes. Both things need to happen. Within the church of Jesus Christ Christians authorize ministry to sustain the church in the world, and to serve the world through the church. The history and polity of the United Church of Christ provide unique resources for the task.

NOTES

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2. "The Confession of Augsburg," in *Documents of the Christian Church*, Henry Bettenson, ed. (New York and London: Oxford University Press, 1943), 298.
3. John Calvin, *The Institutes of the Christian Religion* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1960), IV.1.10.
4. Quoted by Wilhelm Pauck, "The Ministry in the Time of the Continental Reformation," in *The Ministry in Historical Perspective*, H. Richard Niebuhr and Daniel D. Williams, eds. (New York: Harper & Row, 1983), 138-39.
5. Calvin, *Institutes*, IV.3.16.
6. Summarized in Pauck, "Ministry in the Time of the Continental Reformation," 143.
7. Zacharias Ursinus, *The Commentary of Zacharias Ursinus on the Heidelberg Catechism*, trans. F. W. Willard (1852; reprint, Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1956), 571.
8. *Ibid.*, 572.
9. *Evangelical Catechism* (St. Louis: Eden Publishing House, 1957), question 92.
10. "Cambridge Platform," in *The Creeds and Platforms of Congregationalism*, Williston Walker, ed. (Philadelphia and Boston: Pilgrim Press, 1960), II:6.
11. *Ibid.*, VI:5.
12. *Ibid.*, IX.
13. Quoted in D. T. Stokes and William T. Scott, *A History of the Christian Church in the South* (Elon College, N.C.: Elon College, 1973), 39.
14. An earlier treatment of this typology appears in Barbara Brown Zikmund, "Minister and Ministry in a Covenant System," *New Conversations* 4 (Fall 1979):23-28.
15. *UCC Constitution*, para. 20.
16. Walter A. Brueggemann et al., *A Perspective on Ordination* (St. Louis: Eden Theological Seminary, 1983), 7.
17. *Ibid.*, 8.
18. *Ibid.*
19. Quoted in Roger Hazelton, "Ministry and Sacraments in the United Church of Christ," *Encounter* 41 (Winter 1989):98.
20. *An Order of Worship for the Reformed Church* (Philadelphia: Reformed Church Publication Board, 1869), 215-16, quoted in Charles Hambrick-Stowe,

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21. James H. Nichols, ed., *The Mercersburg Theology* (New York and London: Oxford University Press, 1966), 359-61.

22. *United Church of Christ Manual on Ministry* (New York: Office for Church Life and Leadership, 1986).

23. James N. McCutcheon, "Pastor's Response to New Ministry Document," *The Witness* 7 (December 1986):1, 3.

24. Brueggemann et al., *Perspective*, 7.

25. Hazelton, "Ministry and Sacraments," 101.