

AUTHORIZING MINISTRY IN THE UNITED CHURCH OF CHRIST: Slouching Towards Order

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My thesis in this lecture is that the United Church of Christ is innovating in polity and ecclesiology in ways not imagined by the founders, and that we need to pay more attention to these innovations. I will argue that association and conference committees on the ministry are the innovators as they engage on our behalf in authorizing ministry. I borrowed “slouching towards order” from the last line of William Butler Yeats’ poem, “The Second Coming,” where the beast in the desert is slouching towards Bethlehem waiting to be born, because I believe we are moving toward a new kind of church order almost without noticing it. “Slouching” seemed a good way to say that. Presently I will discuss five such slouchings, if I can turn Yeats’ participle into an ugly noun. But before that, I must explain why this is an important topic and what I mean by the founders’ intentions.

AUTHORIZING MINISTRY

A lecture on authorizing ministry may seem, to many of you, like a computer manual—useful if you’re doing that sort of thing, serving as a conference minister or as a member of a committee on the ministry, but not otherwise intrinsically interesting. I hope I can persuade you to the contrary. Order, after all, along with word and sacrament, is one of the marks of the church, according to our Protestant Reformation traditions. Our theologies of order and polity in the United Church of Christ define our identity more clearly than our confessional heritage. And with other members of the Reformed theological family, we insist in ecumenical relations that ordering the church and its ministry are at the heart of Christian fidelity, and so we have difficulty with the emerging ecumenical consensus on a threefold ministerial order of bishop, presbyter, and deacon.

If I cannot persuade you of the importance of order on those grounds, let me try one more approach; Can you recall when you first heard the phrase “authorizing ministry” in United Church of Christ discourse? For me it was in the nineteen-eighties when drafts of the new Manual on Ministry were being circulated. Conference ministers and executives at the Office for Church Life and Leadership gave this reason for that phrase in my conversations with them: more and more candidates for ordination were passing through college and seminary with a strong personal, or inner, or secret call, expecting association committees to embrace them, support them, and find them jobs in non-traditional ministries. Why this change? The sixties of course, were to blame. (how wonderful it is to have a decade to blame for our personal and social ills, rather than sin or Satan!) that time when young people dropped out, did drugs, protested many things, especially the war, and tried to create a new order, one without corrupt institutions and craven leaders. When these flower children got religion and looked around for something to do with it, the United Church of Christ was an attractive venue, liberal or radical in its social views, open, nonjudgmental, flexible, an ideal place to have their ministries recognized!

In the phrase “authorizing ministry” the United Church of Christ tried to respond to this situation by reminding us that the ministry is finally the church’s ministry, not the individual’s, and that however profound a person’s sense of call may be, the church has both the right and responsibility to examine candidates for the gifts and graces of ministry leadership, and for adequate scholarly and professional preparation.

It was in the 1986 *Manual on Ministry* that the phrase, authorizing ministry, became thematically controlling for the entire volume. And surely there were many other worthy aims behind that phrase than the one I have just delineated—aims such as providing greater detailed guidance to committees and staff, and helping our practice to become more uniform and reliable across the church.

It was a bold step for our church to talk about authorizing and authority at a time when those words were in disfavor, a time when the legal and coercive power of the state was judged to be corrupt and self-serving, and when other authorities were judged to be sexist, racist, classist, heterosexist, and all those other “ists” we have learned to detect and deplore. Only the authority of one’s own experience should be followed. That conviction remains strong to this day.

I have tried to sketch in the foregoing remarks something of the history and import of the phrase “authorizing ministry” in the United Church of Christ. Now I must explain my assertion that innovations in polity have taken us beyond our founders’ intentions. How can I say that? What does it mean?

Without a more thorough historical investigation, we cannot, of course, invoke the founders’ intentions in any detail. But a few things seem clear, nevertheless. Our founders struggled to create a polity that would not violate any of the sacred principles of congregationalism, but at the same time one that would not simply continue the extreme local autonomy of some Congregationalists, Baptists, and other such fiercely independent local groups. A system of mutual accountability and obligation, free from the coercion of law but still sufficiently binding to satisfy those coming from a presbyterial system, needed to be created.

Louis Gunnemann writes of the hopes for a new polity, something never before imagined.¹ It was Gunnemann who first proposed that we have a policy of covenant,² a proposal quickly taken up by the writers of the *Manual on Ministry*. Now the language of covenant comes quickly to our lips. We have taken covenant to mean sacred obligations, agreements made with one another and with God, initiated by divine grace. To covenant means to relate mutually, respectfully, trustfully with one another, especially in actions of associations, conferences and the General Synod. I believe the founders trusted that, over time, this sense of sacred obligation would grow and deepen, that local churches increasingly would nourish ties of affection for and support of the other parts of the church, and that even though the Constitution had formally protected local autonomy, that phrase and thinking might eventually wither and die out. Alas, that blessed day has not yet come.

FIVE POLITY INNOVATIONS

What our founders did not and could not foresee, I believe, was that innovations in polity would not grow out of practicing a covenant polity—not from exegeting paragraphs 15 and 16, which protected local church autonomy and called on churches to hold actions, decisions, and advice from associations, conference and the General Synod in the highest regard, —but rather out of two other constitutional paragraphs, 21 and 31, where ordained ministerial standing and the standing of local churches are granted, determined, conferred, and certified by associations.⁴ In fulfilling these constitutional provisions, association committees on the ministry responding to pressing issues of our day, have developed five innovations in the practice of our polity that I want to identify and discuss briefly: intentional interim ministry, licensed ministry, clergy discipline, congregational discipline, and ecumenical ministry. These five areas are the slouchings of my subtitle, and to them I now turn.

Intentional interim Ministry

The first slouching, intentional interim ministers—the word intentional seems misleading here; surely “professional” would be more clear and accurate, but that word is in such disrepute that it is probably irretrievable these days—are clergy who have special training and a particular calling to work with congregations in transition, helping them to deal constructively with grief, anger, conflict management, and future planning, so that a successor is wisely and carefully chosen—not destined to become an unintentional interim. This new professional group, however, has emerged, not just to help congregations manage transitions. The specialized category of intentional interim ministers also meets the needs of older seminary graduates who have commitments to spouses or partners and children. They seek calls—and require specialized training—to become interim ministers because they can honor those commitments while serving congregations in their home regions. Where these arrangements are brokered by a conference, with pensions and health care provided by the conference, intentional interim ministers begin to look very much like the United Methodist itinerancy, where all clergy are members of the annual conference, from which they are episcopally appointed to their charges. Part of our inventiveness in polity, then, arising out of the legitimate needs of congregations and of older seminary graduates, is the creation of a quasi-itinerant cadre of clergy who, though properly called in four-way covenants, in fact look and act more like the United Methodist itinerancy than the traditionally “settled” minister in United Church of Christ traditions. Do we want this? Want it or not, we have it already. How far will it go? That is difficult to say. Perhaps it will go farther than any of us imagine.

Licensed Ministry

The second of my five “slouchings” is licensed ministry. Our traditions of licensing go back to the days when seminarians serving congregations or chaplaincies needed short-term authorization to perform sacramental and liturgical functions ordinarily reserved to the ordained. With the constitutional and bylaw revisions of 1984 creating the category of licensed ministers, however and with the incorporation of this category in the 1986 *Manual on Ministry*, we have slowly been developing another authorized group of pastoral leaders who are likely to be settled,

but who still hold a short-term and more closely supervised calling in leading congregations too small or poor to offer a full-time salary and benefits package for an ordained minister.

We have not yet decided as a national church how these people are to be educated *and* equipped for their leadership—except that committees on the ministry carry major responsibility. Some conferences have leadership training programs—almost mini-seminary curricula—taught by conference/association staff, other clergy or visiting seminary professors. Some theological schools offer short courses and extension courses designed for licensed ministers. Perhaps the Office for Church Life and Leadership will help us to bring greater order and coherence to this training and to the ways we esteem and support these ministers. Or perhaps we will leave it as it is. Whatever we decide about their education, however, licensed ministers are not only here to stay. They will grow in number, and, increasingly will earn the respect they deserve, even though at the moment they, their churches, and the rest of us in the United Church of Christ look upon them with faintly disguised embarrassment, as those who fall short of the ideal. This is particularly unfortunate because many licensed ministers I have known are persons of deep faith, mature wisdom, filled with a love of the church—the actual church, the local church—a love not always so evident among our seminarians or ordained clergy. Perhaps they love too much, uncritically. But we need a good measure of that love of the church in the United Church of Christ today

Clergy Discipline

The third slouching of which I speak is the discipline of clergy. Cases of sexual abuse, harassment, misbehavior, and boundary violations have brought clergy discipline to the fore in our committees on the ministry and onto the daily work agendas of conference and association ministers. The public and media seem to have tired of clergy peccadilloes. But it is my impression that these cases still crowd the agendas of committees on the ministry and the calendars of conference or association ministers. The Office for Church Life and Leadership reports that since 1990, 163 cases of censure, discipline, or termination have been reported to them by association committees.⁵ To protect victim and accused, both legally and morally, committees and staffs have been required to establish rules and procedures more typical in courts of law than in courts of the church—which, of course, we do not have in the United Church of Christ. Or do we? These quasi-legal proceedings are a far cry from the informal style we prefer in committee and staff relationships. We cringe under their disciplined formality. Committee members think about resigning. Staff members update their profiles. But still, we know we must act on these matters. They cannot be left to informal, quiet, confidential, hidden proceedings. So committees on the ministry are becoming courts of the church, even though we would not ever want to call them that.

Local Church Discipline

The fourth slouching of which I speak is local church discipline. This is a matter that looms on our ecclesial horizon. It is not yet, like clergy discipline, a body of law and precedent. But it is coming. I believe. One indication is the new congregational profile being developed by the Office for Church Life and Leadership.⁶ Churches seeking a minister will be asked to describe their own recent history of pastoral placements, particularly noting any cases of

involuntary termination of an ordained minister. Even a pattern of frequent turnover might indicate not just bad luck or poor choices, but a deeper systemic difficulty about which candidates should be warned. G. Lloyd Rediger, in an article two years ago in *The Clergy Journal* entitled “Clergy Killers,” described congregations with a history of vicious treatment of their ministers.’ While I am not in sympathy with the overheated rhetoric of the article’s title, I have been amazed at the volume of response to the article—mostly from clergy who believe they have been abused by such a congregation. If committees on the ministry are to review congregational standing with the same care they are reviewing clergy standing, surely matters other than the abuse of clergy can legitimately come before them, such as fidelity to the United Church of Christ as evidenced in support of its wider mission, or in fidelity to the faith and ecclesial practices of the church. Newly developing congregations are increasingly asked by association committees on the ministry to follow procedures suggested by the Board for Homeland Ministries and the Office for Church Life and Leadership to help the Association and the new congregation make sure that the United Church of Christ is their proper ecclesial home.⁸ The widely prevalent attitude that we need to hold on to every congregation we can keep in the denomination, and that we should therefore keep them solely on their own terms, surely breeds disrespect and disdain, even while it seems to honor the principle of autonomy

Ecumenical Ministry

The fifth and final of my slouchings is our movement toward becoming a more fully ecumenical church. You may be surprised that I include ecumenism under the heading of the work of committees on the ministry. It is true that the more immediately visible and dramatic of our ecumenical efforts appear in the arenas where we engage in official dialogues—councils of churches, commissions on faith and order, and our own national Commission on Ecumenism—all guided by the Assistant to the President for Ecumenical Concerns. In these areas it has become clear that the United Church of Christ has special *contributions* to make and special difficulties to overcome: contributions in common with other Reformed bodies in claiming that church order is part of faith and ecclesiology, in affirming the right of ordination for women and, —more on our own at the moment—persons of gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender orientations; and difficulties in making it clear how we are a church, since we seem to lack recognizably authoritative teaching offices and confessional standards.

Committees on the Ministry I would guess, have not engaged in extensive study and discussion of these ecumenical issues. But whenever a UCC-Disciple partnership becomes a matter of two actual congregations working together, or whenever a Lutheran congregation and UCC congregation enter into covenant, or whenever the Consultation on Church Union covenanting congregations in a neighborhood or region begin to explore shared ministry, the association committee on the ministry inevitably becomes involved in its consulting and judicial roles. Even in current yokes and federations—driven more by scarce dollars and numbers than ecumenical zeal perhaps—these committees, along with conference and association staff, play key roles making this kind of practical, local ecumenism work. I have no doubt that when our commitment to be both a united and uniting church takes root and flowers locally, it will be the committees on the ministry that will be the active midwives to such new birth, not the Commission on Ecumenism or the Assistant to the President, however much their work has paved the way.

A NEW CHURCH ORDER

As my lecture subtitle derived from Yeats indicates, I believe that these five slouchings are taking the United Church of Christ towards the birth of a new kind of church order. What is that order? And what is its ecclesiological significance? These are the questions to which I now turn, in concluding my lecture.

An Associational Polity

This new order is surely not the “freedom in fellowship” revered by our Congregationalist ancestors, since fellowship remains formally voluntary. These committee actions are binding, grounded in constitutional authority. This new order is surely not the presbyterial order familiar to our Reformed ancestors because only clergy and local church standing are authorized by association committees. All other authority is reserved to the local church. This new order is surely not the absolute congregationalism familiar to our Christian Connection and German Congregational forebears, since they would never have given binding authority to an association committee. This new order bears little resemblance to that distinctly German mixture of local, clerical, synodical, and episcopal authority practiced in the old Evangelical Synod of the West. And since we presently say our polity is covenantal—because that means sacred obligation, not binding authority—the language of covenant also seems misleading. What to call it, then, this emerging new church order? The best I can suggest is an associational church order; we are creating an *associational* polity

Ecclesiological Implications

Finally. I ask you to think with me about the ecclesiological implications of this emerging associational church order. To do that, we first need to review basic ecclesiological convictions shared in our church. With the church ecumenical, we believe that the church is gathered by those who confess “Jesus Christ, Son of God and Savior.” With the sixteenth century Protestant reformers, we define the church as that community of Jesus’ followers where the word is rightly preached and the sacraments rightly observed. In common with our Calvinist forebears, we hold that Jesus Christ is the head of the church, and exercises that rule through word, sacrament, and order, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit. And we hold that the church lives, not just for its own life centered in word and sacrament, but also for the sake of its mission in the world: witness to the gospel, service to those in need, solidarity with the poor and the oppressed, and prophetic practice for God’s justice and peace in all creation.

When we think about the ways Jesus Christ rules in the church and reflect on this emerging associational polity, then we will undertake more deliberately that deferred ecclesiological work to which Gunnemann called the United Church of Christ. I propose three ecclesiological implications for your reflection: a revised doctrine of Christ’s rule in the church; a revised ecumenical strategy; and a fresh ecclesiological consideration of associations, conferences, and the General Synod.

A revised doctrine of Christ's rule in the church would not deny or qualify our current convictions that Jesus Christ, through the Holy Spirit, rules in the consciences, hearts, and minds of each believer; and rules in the gathered community of the local church in word and sacrament, in its educational and stewardly ministries, in its care and compassion, in its gospel and prophetic witness. A revised doctrine of Christ's rule would add the affirmation that Christ also rules through providing authorized ministry leaders and authorized local churches as judged by the wider church, represented by a community of churches in a given region.

Such a revised doctrine of Christ's rule would also provide the foundation for a *revised ecumenical strategy* where the United Church of Christ would be set free to entertain, theologically, various alternative understandings of a wider church authority that would be binding. We are not yet ready to discuss bishops or confessions, or ruling synods, to be sure. But we could at least engage in ecumenical conversations on church order and ministry with our own theological and practical acknowledgement that we too believe Christ rules both within and beyond the local church.

Such a revised doctrine of Christ's rule could enable us to take up the long-deferred question of *the ecclesiological status of associations, conferences, and the General Synod*. In the Cadman case Douglas Horton argued that the Congregational Christian General Council had the same freedom and responsibility for its own decisions as enjoyed by local congregations, that it was not an entity deriving its ecclesial authority from the delegated authority of local congregations.¹¹ And we still talk that way about the “free and voluntary relationships” that exist between all parts of the church.¹² Yet we structure ourselves by nominating and electing delegates, and by passing all sorts of legislation. No wonder we are confused when we hear that the General Synod speaks only for itself. A revised doctrine of Christ's rule in the church, and an acknowledgement that our polity practice already entails a limited but very important wider church binding authority might facilitate a more serious and thorough consideration of the ecclesiological status of all parts of our church.

I hope we will engage these polity and ecclesiological issues more broadly in the United Church of Christ. There are barriers to overcome, particularly our abhorrence of such words as authority, authorizing, and rule. They have been used abusively, it is true. But that does not mean we can do without them. Furthermore, ecclesiology is not everyone's idea of an exciting subject, and we do love excitement and urgency in the United Church of Christ.

A CLOSING PLEA

Having acknowledged that, I ask you to hear my closing plea. The way the church orders its life of mission—centered around word and sacrament—will have much to do with whether the word will be preached and heard, whether the sacraments will be celebrated properly or at all; whether pastoral care and prophetic witness will challenge and transform; whether organizations will be effective or inept; whether money will be raised and wisely spent for mission; whether new churches will be gathered and built; whether our purview will be narrow self-interest, or the whole of the human family and creation.

So make no mistake about it: The ways we order the mission of the church and understand it theologically are at the heart of our human response to the gospel. Not often glamorous, it is behind-the-scenes work. Still, we need to do it for the sake of faithful mission in the world. So let us resolve to pray urgently, think clearly, and work vigorously for a growing understanding and practice of Christ's rule in his church.

NOTES

- 1 Louis H. Gunnemann, *The Shaping of the United Church of Christ* (New York: Pilgrim Press, 1977), 32, 33.
 2. Louis H. Gunnemann, "Order and Identity in the United Church of Christ." *New Conversations*, Fall, 1979, 15.
 3. *Constitution of the United Church of Christ*.
 4. These verbs are from paragraphs 21 and 31 of the *Constitution of the United Church of Christ*,
 5. From an author's conversation with The Rev. Charlotte H Still, Minister for Church Life and Leadership, the Office for Church Life and Leadership of the United Church of Christ. February 16, 1996.
 6. C. Still. *loc. cit.*
 7. C. Lloyd Rediger. "Clergy Killers," *The Clergy Journal*. August, 1993, 7.
 8. C. Still. *loc. cit.*
 9. Preamble to the *Constitution of the United Church of Christ*.
 10. Louis H. Gunnemann. *United and Uniting* (New York: United Church of Christ Press. 1987), 2. *passim*.
 11. Louis H. Gunnemann, *The Shaping of the United Church of Christ*. 40)
 12. This phrase appears in the Preamble to the Bylaws of the United Church of Christ.
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