

ORDINATION FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF MISSION

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A classic Lutheran understanding of ordination is oriented in direct relationship to the administration of Word and Sacrament, and stipulates that those who administer must be duly called. Many would argue over whether the Lutheran reforming movement intended a complete restructuring of the church or whether it aimed instead to retain structures as long as they served to convey people to a rightly ordered faith, but all would agree that the principle interest of the reformers was to examine and foster the ways in which people came to faith, and that this led them to concentrate their attention on the work of the ministry in congregations. Their singular focus on the workings of faith in hearers has meant that Lutherans almost exclusively place the ordained ministry in a congregational context. Several centuries of development and ongoing reformation in Lutheran nations around the world have repeatedly focused on ways to deepen and renew Christian life in a congregation. For all the clarity that Lutherans have in seeing their ministry and their vocation as local and particular in character, however, a myopic concentration on the congregation can lead to an overly parochial vision of the work of ministry. The clear-sighted Lutheran concentration on the tasks and work of ministry needs to be put in a mission context, so that the work of Word speaking and the work of administering the means of grace is seen as bringing the congregation into a deep and purposeful engagement with the world.

In the seminary where I teach, students focus so intently on learning to be proficient at congregational programming and the internal mechanics of parish ministry that they slight their cultural, political, and economic education. Some fear confrontation and division so they develop considerable skill at dodging controversial questions. This year's seniors have been asked to prepare a sermon on war to be preached on a festival day. I remember a senior who approached me, worried that overt expression of political views would jeopardize the faculty stage of the approval process, where the difference of opinion would presumably be greatest. [Presumably this person imagined that a similar tribunal would never occur in parish ministry.] I am not ready to diagnose our cultural dilemma here, but we seem to have fashioned a curriculum and helped to create a system of professional development in the ELCA that has given us a cadre of ministers who practice efficient pastoral care and who manage a congregation's program but fail to understand ministry in its public and collegial context. Again, for pastoral and strategic reasons, we need to broaden our understanding of ministry, to put it in the context of mission, in order to remain faithful to our Lutheran tradition, and faithful to the purpose that God has for the ordained ministry in the world. It is this wider scope for ministry - a mission perspective - that I will focus on in my development of a Lutheran understanding of ordination.

Ordination places an individual in a position of responsibility to the gospel, to the sacraments, to a community, and to the shared task of ministry. The act of ordaining is not the action of a congregation turned in on itself, but instead occurs within the collegial context of the wider ministry, the wider church, and the wider world. I will argue that the practice of ordination is one that signals the reality that congregations, in fact, are part of a church, are part of Christ's body, and thus belong to the world and not to them selves.

Foundations

In the Lutheran Augsburg Confession, written in 1530 to define and articulate the theological foundation for the Reformation movement, the Lutheran understanding of ministry is sparsely described in Article V: "To obtain such faith [that is justifying faith, described in the preceding Article IV] God instituted the office of preaching, giving the gospel and the sacraments. Through these, as through means, he gives the Holy Spirit who produces faith, where and when he wills, in those who hear the gospel."¹ The way of ordering this office and the practices and relationships implied in installing a person into ministry is not spelled out in this primary and foundational text. In Article 14, the functions of this office are ordered with the brief note that no one should preach [teach Latin] or administer the sacraments without a proper or public call. The office is word centered and divinely made. This office of ministry, Lutherans have argued, becomes the vehicle through which the church is built, since the word, and the sacraments are necessary for the life of the church.

Melanchthon's spare treatment of this important topic in the Augsburg confession has left plenty of room for later elaboration and dispute. Ministry is necessary to the continuity and legitimacy of the church, but how or in what way it should be structured has been determined in different ways by Lutheran churches around the world.

It is my contention that these minimalist instructions have served Lutherans well, for this has allowed them to pioneer church structures and forms of ministry adapted to the exigencies of various cultures and times. The relegation of ministry forms to the category of adiaphora, those things deemed as instrumental² and not necessary in themselves, has given Lutheran churches the freedom to discard outworn models, and also to develop or adopt structures or practices that they haven't had before.

The American Context

Perhaps this is nowhere more visible than in the development of Lutheranism in America. The time of the Reformation was also the time of the exploration and European expansion into what was then called the New World. Luther's movement and the time of the Counter Reformation was part and parcel of a widespread competitive national and mercantile expansion. Portugal, Italy, and Spain competed with France, England, and the Netherlands in organizing vast overseas enterprises. The religious dimensions of this expansion touch on our subject.

It was one thing to claim a territory, and another thing to keep it. The settlement charters granted to companies regularly provided for ministry and the development of churches. Lutherans provided a ready supply of settlers to the large territory of William Penn, and began arriving on the scene late in the 17th century. There was a rather small Swedish colony, with alternatively 3 or 4 Swedish priests already in place in the Delaware region, but there were few German ministers, and most of these had loose connections to any kind of legitimizing authority – they were wont to call each other pretenders so it is hard to know how these individual pastors could have built something given their fractious relations with each other.

The need for ministers, however, became so great that congregations, or better said groups of German settlers, realized that they couldn't wait for one to perhaps arrive from one of the universities in Germany. The first ordination of a Lutheran pastor in America took place on November 25, 1703, and it involved three Swedish priests from the Delaware settlement who together ordained a German, Justus Falckner, so that he could provide ministry to German settlers in Pennsylvania. The ordination certificate, which is in our seminary collection, provided the credentials, or the pastoral letter that attested to any who read it that Justus Falckner was a properly called minister of the gospel. It was not a certificate in the modern sense, however, for addition to signatures and seals it also incorporated a theological and scriptural argument for the necessity of an ordained ministry. The fact that an extended essay was deemed necessary seems to realize and respond to the fact that American settlers did not automatically accept authority. They had to be convinced by a persuasive argument.

The certificate is written in Latin and traces the office of ministry to God's providential care over creation. God has always provided the word, through Noah, Abraham, and the prophets. The argument guides the reader through salvation history in a way similar to our Eucharistic prayers, and notes the way that God has always provided for the preaching of the word, even in wilderness settings, and by implication also here in America. The argument does not align the ministry with the apostolic witness alone, or derive its authority and sanction from its succession from the original disciples. Instead it is the divine office of preaching the word, an office shared with the patriarchs and prophets that is now bequeathed via the actions of the Swedish priests, to one, a German, Justus Falckner. The document also warns readers against accepting just anyone who shows up and claims ministerial status. Justus Falckner is properly called, and not in the ministry for the money. There are pretenders loose in the land, and any who claim this office for themselves without the attestation of other clergy, should not be trusted.

It is this collegial context that begins to create a recognizable history for Lutherans churches in America. The work of Muhlenberg in the middle of the 18th century is widely credited with organizing the first Ministerium and providing for the more regular ordination of candidates for ministry. His organizing ability and ecclesial leadership was so well known, apparently that he was even approached by congregations from other traditions. At one point after the American Revolution, when relations between American Episcopalians and the Church of England were understandably strained, the Pennsylvania Ministerium was asked to ordain an Episcopal candidate. Muhlenberg's first suggestion, that the congregation temporarily authorize a ministry among them that would provide for the preaching of the word in the meantime, did not suit their

more traditional understandings of the office. After four years, with some hesitation, the Ministerium agreed to examine and ordain John Wade for ministry in an Episcopal congregation.³ In this case, it is important to note, the congregation was the party that resisted taking the authority to ‘call’ its own pastor, preferring instead to rely also on the judgment of the gathered ministers. There are interesting dimensions to this story, more revealing of colonial transitions than of the understanding of ministry perhaps, but the more illuminating point is the pragmatic, deliberative, process that Muhlenberg and the Pennsylvania Ministerium used in order to determine their course of action.

Throughout the history of Lutheran adaptation in America, the leaders who emerge and the decisions they make depend on this process of persuasion and argument. I have traced a couple of examples relating to ordination and leadership from the early colonial period of American Lutheran history. The process of decision making, even at that time, involved significant adjustments to their inherited Lutheran tradition. America had no Lutheran theological faculties at universities that could weigh in on the important theological developments that occurred within the young churches.

Pietism, a movement focusing on individual reformation and spiritual renewal made the largest impact on the developing American church. As an activist, voluntary movement, it was more portable than the structures of an establishment. The concept of the ‘priesthood of all believers’ gained a renewed emphasis through the writings of Pietist authors like Philip Spener and the work and promotion of the Halle Institution. The voluntary [non-establishment] nature of American church life depended on the active participation of lay Christians, who provided financial support and local leadership in the work of building up the church. The development of democratic forms of church life characterized the experience of every new group of American Lutherans as they arrived, built congregations, trained and ordained their leaders, established seminaries and colleges, and determined the shape and focus of their collective work.

Social transformations during the 19th century introduced an entirely new agenda to Lutheran churches on the Continent, in America, and eventually around the world. Alongside the massive migrations of peoples from rural settings to cities, and to other lands, came significant disruptions to churchly sensibilities. In Scandinavia a neo pietist renewal among lay people awakened them to a new sense of their own individual Christian calling even as they contemplated leaving home and becoming landholders or businessmen in far away America. Immigrants wrote letters home to encourage cousins and nieces to follow them: “Don’t listen to the parish priest who is warning you against America,” one wrote. “He is just worried about losing his servants. In America everyone can be called a Mr.”⁴ In developing their own understanding of ministry, immigrant church bodies in America built their leadership around ordained pastors, but spent considerable time debating the propriety of lay preaching, and argued about the relative authority of congregations and synods in the calling of pastors. The debates about the relationship of congregation and pastor echoed similar, university-centered debates over ministry in Germany and Scandinavia. Did pastors derive their authority via transfer from the congregation, was the ministry just a set apart dimension of the priesthood of all believers, or was the office of ministry divinely instituted and the minister a representative of Christ? These

varying understandings of ministry all appeared in the structures created by immigrant churches in America. Representatives of Wilhelm Loehe's high view of ministry took the leadership in the German Iowa Synod, while the primacy of the congregation in the ordering of ministry was clearly the position of the Norwegian Lutheran Free Church, whose founding principles opened with the statement: "The Congregation is the right form of the Kingdom of God on earth."⁵ The diversity of views on the relationship between the ordained and the congregation persists within the ELCA. The fact that the important 19th century debates on the nature of the ministry and its relationship to the congregation and society were never quite resolved in the many mergers that occurred in the 20th century contributes to the levels of confusion and political complexity in current theological and mission debates within the ELCA.⁶

Theologians desire statements, and historians look for patterns

In the early 20th century, Lutherans in America worshiped in Slovak, German, Swedish, Danish, Norwegian, Icelandic, Finnish, and English. Each of these separate traditions developed seminaries to train and prepare clergy and colleges to provide a church related education for its young people. It is a popular misconception that these ethnically based churches had a parochial, insular mindset and did not envision for themselves a wider area of service. Their own reconfiguring of their home traditions, however, was a work that had broad significance for the Americanization of these several ethnic traditions and thus had an important social and political dimension.

The transition from older, European forms of Lutheran practice to an American adaptation of these inherited forms brought the immigrant settlers across several boundaries, of place, time, and language. In translating their heritage and finding a new language to worship and pray in, these immigrants participated in their own mission initiative, with themselves, and particularly their own children as their objects of mission. To be involved in mission is to cross boundaries and to attempt to translate the gospel into the living language of a new time and place. Even if the church were to stay in one place, it must be in mission to stay alive, for to transmit the gospel to a new generation, to pass on the heritage, is to cross another boundary, that of the generations. The churches apostolic character is seen in the way that faithful speaking and translation occurs, across generations, and across cultural barriers as well.

This mission task has an intrinsic dialogical character to it. The immigrant Lutheran settlers may not have used the terminology of mission to describe their church building work, but they participated in the basic tasks of translation and apostolic witness in case after case as they set about the tasks of building congregations and crafting unity. I earlier said that it is the Lutheran position that the word and sacraments build the church. Here I describe the church as being necessarily engaged in mission, in crossing boundaries of time and place and culture. The future dimension of the church, its apostolic character, is its mission identity. It must keep speaking, in new languages and time, in order to live. In order to keep together, however, another dimension of apostolicity, congregations must share what they have done in their own vernacular with other congregations. They must keep speaking to each other and they must remain in relationship, in dialogue, in order to test their faithfulness.

Lutherans have traditionally trusted to the functions of preaching the word and providing for the means of grace, the sacraments, to build and preserve the church. What we must also see is the way in which the process of preaching and local translation, through the collegial work of ministry, works to build the koinonia of the congregations. The structure that American Lutherans provided for building the church beyond the congregation was the district/synodical meeting. In these gatherings, the local translations, or adaptations made in congregation after congregation, were tested by the wisdom of the gathered pastors and lay leaders. The leaders of this process were the ordained ministers, those responsible for the local mission, the local translation, of the gospel.

At these early synod or district meetings, pastors examined new candidates for ministry and approved them for ordination. A candidate for ordination could never be approved on the word of only one pastor, nor could a candidate be ordained without the concurrence of other Lutheran ministers. The collegial nature of the ministry was further fostered at the annual gatherings where the ordained provided public leadership in the common deliberations of the church. They discerned together how money should be spent, who should be admitted to fellowship, how discipline should be administered, where new congregations might be started, and responded to social need with support for hospitals, orphanages, schools, and programs for young people. Worship and prayer at these gatherings and the very process of speaking the word to each other, and together asking new questions emerging from their local attempts to apply a heritage to a new situation, shows us how deeply they were involved in the self-critical work of testing their own faithfulness. This is one way to define apostolicity.

This Pattern becomes a Principle: Deliberative structures are mission structures

As American Lutherans developed their distinctive forms of church life, they were at the same time structuring a church that would not only educate ministers and leaders, but also conduct home and foreign mission work. The local translation they were doing in their congregational work was replicated on a much larger scale as these Lutheran church people realized that they were engaged in building much more than local churches. The process of adapting their several traditions and movements to the several regional American contexts in which they settled is a complex story, and from the local level of vernacular translation, through the synodical level where pastors met and tested their message, the incredible complexity and variety of Lutheran styles gradually met and recognized each other. The ELCA may have achieved a miracle in its merger in 1988. There were at one time well over 100 separate synods or groupings of Lutherans in the United States. The process of learning to recognize the essentials of a Lutheran church in the many represented was never even or easy, but the mere force of living the faith with some public integrity persistently forced Lutherans out of isolation and into communion. When Lutherans began to speak in English, their internal bickering could be overheard. Perhaps this shamed them into talking to each other instead of about each other.

Clergy voices dominate in the mid-century discussions on unity among American Lutherans. Given the nature of the disagreements over doctrine and polity, it is understandable that lay people did not expect or demand to be included in these deliberations. The hoped for unity across

the entire span of American Lutheranism did not emerge, however, particularly because of issues relating to the ordination of women, including differing views on scripture and the congregation that kept the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod out of the broader, more ecumenically oriented American Lutheranism characterized by the ELCA.

The shift in understanding authority represented by this struggle among Lutherans over the ordination of women has a direct bearing on the way that ordination and mission should be yoked. If there ever was a time when a minister could step into a congregation and assume a kind of automatic authority to speak the word and make it stick, to help the gospel come alive in a place and time, this time was past. The ordination of women dramatically reoriented everyone's ordinary and probably outworn assumptions about authority. If the move to ordain women signaled an undue idealism on the part of proponents, the women who joined the ranks of the clergy shouldered the task of negotiating authority within congregations. The experience of these women demonstrated that ordination did not confer upon these women the authority of office, or character that could elicit from congregants the same kind of understanding or response that they gave to a male holding the position. It was a new experience for congregations to be preached to by a woman, and most often by a young woman figuring out how to be a pastor.

I was ordained twenty years ago by the bishop of the Minnesota Synod of the former Lutheran Church in America. I could take many things for granted. My father had had a long career as a pastor and theologian at a church related college. My two grandfathers had been Lutheran pastors and I had a large complement of ordained uncles and aunts married to pastors. I was the first ordained woman in our family but no one uttered any misgivings. Most of the expectations and challenges seemed to be of the pragmatic sort – how would two working people manage a household, and live into this new role, that of a minister, after all the years of study?

An African proverb sums up my experience in this way: "Walking makes the road." There is not a road out there to find, but the very process of working out a solution, of creating relationships of trust and influence, created for all of us a way to understand this new role. I am not suggesting that it is only women who have to negotiate a new relationship with a congregation, and that men can step into a role ready made for them. Neither can assume an automatic authority in the parish or in society. We live in a time when authority does not come with the office, or adhere to a person. My experience in learning to build trust has helped me read American Lutheran history in such a way to notice that Muhlenberg and the many immigrant pastors who followed him also had to persuade and argue their way in their ministry. Jesus' advice to the disciples who went out to the towns and villages and who sometimes met people who would not hear them, tells us that our situation is hardly novel. You don't carry much with you, you don't impose, you eat what they give you, and sometimes you have to wipe off the dust from your sandals.

The classic debate about ordination, whether it should be understood as functional or ontological, a matter of office or of character, does not give us any purchase on the complex dynamic of actual ministry in a place. It too easily assumes a static form of authority that is given; somehow, in the office, or to the person, and that the community should recognize this and respond accordingly. The classic Lutheran understanding of the operation of the word – that it is preached

and through the Holy Spirit triggers a faith response – can also be faulted for assuming a static view of the authority of the ordained. The congregated hearers are not recognized as active participants in this encounter. Similarly, during the missionary heyday, Westerners assumed that the word had only to be preached, in western forms and ideas, to create Christian communities mimicking in every respect the patterns of the sending culture.

What we know about mission, and about the incarnational aspect of translation, that the word became flesh, and that the gospel can be spoken in any language, tells us that the receiving of the word, the listening of the people, is very much dependent on a mutual relationship of influence and trust. Ordination is very much a community affair, it is very much the inauguration of this mission relationship, a relationship of local speaking and receiving, and the relationship of pastor and people is formed as this is worked out.

I haven't spoken about the sacramental, grace giving hospitality of the table, about welcoming guests, about pilgrim lives, about visiting each other and extending the Christian koinonia through mutual recognition and sharing gifts. Ordination can also be understood in this mission dynamic, as providing order and purpose for our hospitality. I only mention that here in order to suggest that the relational network that Christians have worked so hard to build in the last century's ecumenical movement, and the transformation of former 'daughter' churches into sister churches, will be advanced as significantly by practices of hospitality as they will by the deliberative, word centered methods of ongoing, local translation and collegial discussion.

Our Mission and Collegial Context of Translation

America's new immigrants come from the South – from Latin America, Africa, and Asia. One might think that fewer and fewer Lutherans would be among them. New arrivals from Sudan, Ethiopia, Liberia, and Tanzania, together with Palestinians, Philipinos, and El Salvadorans occasionally show up in unsuspecting Lutheran congregations, and remind us otherwise. These refugees and immigrants are living examples of the process of globalization, but they travel on older paths that had once carried traffic in the opposite direction. These new immigrants bring with them their own Christian heritage, some from Lutheran churches. Ethiopian Christians [Mekane Jesus] have formed congregations in the Northeast United States, and their internal development shows all the signs of repeating the internal devotional and ecclesial disputes that shaped Lutheran communities in the 17th, 18th, 19th and 20th centuries.

Lutherans in America will never be finished arguing and defining themselves, for the process of adaptation to a new environment and time is rigorous and stimulating. But Lutherans will be well served by recognizing the key role that the ordained have in the midst of these developing communities, and in the public sphere. Church involvement in this work of welcome will depend on proper leadership, and it is one of the more hidden, but important challenges that will face Lutherans in the United States. Shortly put, the kinds of complications in negotiating among so many political variables demands a high degree of cultural proficiency. Being a pastor of a congregation in this globalizing world is not a simple matter.

There is a mission dimension, a universal aspect, to the work of speaking the word, and the actions that assemble the people around the sacraments. The ongoing speaking of the gospel, in terms that the local people can hear and understand, must be tested against the word spoken in other places. Clergy cannot be faithful to their calling if they isolate themselves in their own particular setting and do not shape their ministry collegially. In our ecumenical agreements this process of mutual admonition and encouragement is mentioned as a fruit of the new arrangements. I would argue that this coming together to speak to one another is not something that can be safely put off or reserved until some unilateral move by one partner offends another. Admonition is not something that can be delivered unilaterally, and cheerleading from the sidelines does not materially affect the work at hand. To be involved in mission, one must cross a few boundaries, and in crossing divest oneself of any presumed authority. The context for our work today is a world in need of relationships that transcend race, nation, class, and tribe. These relationships need to be developed not only through personal encounter, but also on a corporate, deliberative level. Lutherans have understood their ministry as fostering common speaking and discernment. This understanding of the role of the ordained and the role of other rostered leaders can help us develop a new capacity for fellowship, for speaking to, and for hearing each other.

Dialogue does not have to end in agreement, but it will create a relationship. Developments within any one communion can provoke argument and should be discussed in common precisely because they might otherwise seriously impair the relationships that build the wider unity sought for the church. The ordination of women has been a major change among Protestants, and many argued that it would stand in the way of the ecumenical movement. For those who assume that traditional, more static conceptions of authority must or will prevail in the church, the ordination of women will be a stumbling block. The living experience of churches that have experienced new leadership and engagement with their local context provides another witness that will need to be heard in wider and wider circles. Lutherans will ask, in the wider deliberation of the church, whether the gospel is reaching people, and how we can bring the word further into the lives of people and whether the encounter with the word brings congregations and people into a deeper and more significant engagement with the world.

Supporting and encouraging the work of local decision making, as churches discern how to speak the gospel in their own particular place, is an important mission practice. At the same time, the local translations that are made must also be tested in relationship to the experiences of other churches in their own places. African churches that determine how to speak the gospel in a context where plural marriages are the norm have also to bring their decisions about the gospel's word to a wider circle. And, for us all, the bigger issues may not, in the end, be about sex, but about money. There was a time when the church worried about food, and missed the bigger point about an inclusive gospel. We also, may be missing the point in our own deliberations, but the fact that we are talking together, and speaking the word to each other, makes us engaged in the work of the church, and I believe that the Holy Spirit will not fail to be with us.

Endnotes

1. Article V, Augsburg Confession, printed in the Kolb and Wengert edition of the Book of Concord, Augsburg Fortress, 2000, p 40.
2. An examination of the way that adiaphora is translated in the German –mittelting – and Scandinavian – medelting – versus the English –indifferent – reveals some interesting differences in meaning. Mittel, or medelting implies means to an end, rather than something dispensable or neutral.
3. Muhlenberg’s diary entry on June 11, 1783, states that he considered the situation to be an emergency and recommended the action. John Wade was examined then by the Ministerium and ordained in August 1783. Cited in James Pragman, *Traditions in Ministry*, St. Louis, 1983, pg 118.
4. Immigrant letter collection printed in the Augustana Historical Society, volume 6.
5. *Guidelines and Principles for the Lutheran Free Church*, pamphlet printed in 1938, Archives of the ELCA.
6. I am indebted on this point to the Wartburg Theological Seminary’s *Response to the ELCA Study of Ministry*, 1991. Appendix D, pg 6. ELCA archives.