
MINISTRY

Focus

What is ministry? The Greek word we translate as ministry, *diakonos*, means service. So a working definition, proposed by R. Paul Stevens, might be "ministry is service to God and on behalf of God in the church and in the world."¹

This may sound overly broad to our ears. What about ordination, word and sacrament, titles, collars--you know, *the* ministry? Many discussions of ministry do in fact begin with the ministry of ordained clergy as it has evolved, and then asks which functions laity may be permitted to perform.

This conversation, however, begins with what all Christians share in common, the privilege and responsibility of serving God, *ministry*. As Letty Russell says, "Ministry is the response of each and every Christian to Christ's call to freedom."² We will sketch a brief history of how attitudes to ministry have developed, through history and in our UFMCC context. We will explore what it has meant, and can mean, to be clergy or laity. First however, we will begin with a few quotes, and then some brief testimonies of people describing their understanding of ministry.

Centering Quotes on Ministry

"Christians are told that ministry is something that everyone in the church does, that some people do it more than others, that not everything is ministry, that ministry may relate to certain functions more than others, but may 'happen' in almost any context, is done by some full-time but others part time, yet ministry *par excellence* is what the pastor does. No wonder good Christians are screwed up."

(R. Paul Stevens, *The Other Six Days*, p. 132)

"The twentieth-century professionalization of ministry has created a clericalism by which the ordained minister becomes the skilled provider of services and church members, at least in matters of faith, become passive consumers of religious goods."

(B. Edmon Martin and Lance Barker, *Multiple Paths to Ministry*, p. 178)

¹ Stevens, p. 133

² Russell, p. 51

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"(Ministry of the whole people of God) will be realized only if the 'non-clergy' are willing to move up, if the 'clergy' are willing to move over, and if all of God's people are willing to move out."
(Thomas Gillespie, *The Laity in Biblical Perspective*, p. 327)

"I myself am an ordained clergyperson in the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)... I must confess, however, that the growing alienation and disillusionment with the church and clerical structures that so many women share are part of my life as well. I am very clear at this point in my life that I would rather not be ordained, as I do not believe that ordination makes one any different than other baptized Christians, and I know that the received traditions and practice of ordination are frequently harmful to the health of many lesbian or heterosexual women, gay men, and laypersons, as well as to the health of the church.
(Letty Russell, *Church in the Round*, p. 53)

"Neither the hairshirt nor the soft berth will do. The place God calls you to is the place where your deep gladness and the world's deep hunger meet."
(Frederick Buechner, *Wishful Thinking: a Theological ABC*, p. 95)

Some Testimonies about Ministry

From Linda Beckstead, MCC Omaha

Although Brenner-Beckstead Ministries has been official since 2005, my partner Susie Brenner and I would tell you that God has been preparing us for our work for nearly a decade. Susie started a Christian band, The Mustard Seeds, in Kansas City, and I began helping my pastors at MCC Omaha with pulpit fill, and assisting them with holy unions, memorial services, and funerals. Not long after our paths crossed, we realized that we'd like to begin sharing a ministry with others outside our church homes.

When Susie and I begin praying about how to proceed, I often wondered about this label of "ministry." It sounded so clergy-bound--a select group of people anointed by God. And while we both believed that God has blessed and ordained those called to become pastors, we spent a lot of time wondering whether it would be possible for God to send lay people into ministry. Perhaps the pressing question was whether God would bless us, specifically Susie and Linda, in ministry.

Over the last five years, and after much prayer, we began to better understand what we now claim as our calling. We soon defined our primary outreach: Susie was best able to connect to those who were broken or healing from addiction, and I was able to share my version of Biblical parables using my humorous, personal experiences. But we also wanted our ministry to be one of joy, and we found that in sharing music and stories each time we gather. As we continue to pray for discernment, our ministry continues to evolve, and God continues to challenge us. Our biggest discovery, or maybe it's been a confirmation, is that God is in the middle of our ministry, if we allow it.

From Ken Greene, MCC of the Rockies (Denver, CO)

When I decided that I was a gay man and that could jeopardize my career in ministry, I left the church and the traditional path to ordination. I have always viewed other activities I am involved with as ministry. I came out playing volleyball in Cheesman Park. I found many people without a connection to a community of any kind. I felt volleyball could be that place where they fit in, they were cared about, and they belonged

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and were important. I also carried that same sense of ministry into my real estate business. I find that many of my clients open up to me in ways that extend beyond routine conversations about their real estate needs. Making sure that they know that I care about them is a powerful way to share the gospel. This is the ministry that I feel called to. I love it. I have no backup plan.

From Carla Sherrell, MCC of the Rockies (Denver, CO)

My work and my life in the world are supporting others in developing inclusive and socially just communities. It is deeply spiritual. My awareness of this work as ministry has not come to me in a direct manner. No voice or angel came to me to deliver the message that "this is it" How do I know that this is my calling?

- 1) At the time I was first exposed to doing this work, I was in a quandary about the next steps in my personal and professional lives. Upon experiencing this work as a participant, my sense of loss and fear disappeared. I thought, "This is my next step."
- 2) The first time I facilitated this work I felt, for the first time in my life, that I completely trusted my skills *and* my limitations. The latter was remarkable. I, an African heritage, gay woman, raised in poverty, felt a deep sense of peace. This peace came from knowing that I would survive even in my fallibility.
- 3) Upon coming to the decision that I wanted to pursue this work, I discovered that it required *much* of me. It required that I sit still and wait for my corporeal self to connect with spiritual aspects of myself that I had forgotten how to access and utilize.
- 4) I discovered that this calling was grounded in humility. I came to understand that, if I was to live in the state of facilitating social justice through love, I must give my ego a rest and to pray for the wisdom to see beyond it.

I have come to believe that my calling and ministry is grounded in my own openness to transformation for inclusiveness and social justice. Raised as a Christian, I believe that the teachings of Jesus are all about this mission.

From Jim Burns, MCC of the Rockies (Denver, CO)

MCC of the Rockies had been exploring establishing a parish extension in Boulder for some time. Through a series of educational programs, we had gathered a small group of interested local people, who were meeting with Denver folks who felt called to this project.

We had offered one public worship service, and our group was planning the next one. On a whim, I asked Kelly and Lorelei, two UC Boulder students, if they'd like to consecrate communion together.

"Sure," they said, and I thought no more about it.

It wasn't until the service itself that I felt the power of what we were doing. In their own Roman Catholic tradition, Kelly and Lorelei could never hope to serve in this way, no matter how much training, education, or certification they received. Yet in MCC, they were welcome to perform this ministry at only the second service they ever attended. It was one of those moments that prove to me the power, and the importance, of MCC's witness.

Holy Conversations: Exploring My and Our Understanding of Ministry

Points of Reflection (Small Group Discussion): Which of the above testimonies did you most relate to? Why?

Points of Reflection (Small Group Discussion): What were you taught growing up about ministry? How has that changed as you got further on your spiritual journey?

Point of Reflection (Large Group Discussion): Some of the stories described church work as ministry (preaching, singing) others talked about things outside of church (work, social activities). Are both ministry? Are they different types of ministry, or the same?

Additional Thoughts About Ministry

SERVING GOD TOGETHER: A History of Attitudes Toward Ministry

The ways that ministry and God's calling have been understood have developed throughout history. We can start with the people of Israel after reaching the Promised Land. They were called into a community marked by a covenant with God, and each person's part was to be a full member of that community, obeying the law, living justly with their neighbor, and worshiping God. Liturgical leadership was reserved to the Levites, a hereditary order of priests.

Occasionally God would call individuals out for a special purpose (Moses, Deborah, Samuel, David, Elijah, Isaiah), but these people were exceptions to the rule. While Moses once wished that God's Spirit would fall on all people, and the prophet Joel envisioned a time when the Spirit would be poured on all humankind, most people did not experience an individual call; they simply took their place as a faithful member of the community.

Jesus preached a gospel of God's indwelling presence, and called people to repent, follow him and to participate in his ministry of preaching, teaching, healing, and casting out demons. It may be fair to say that Jesus called everyone he met into ministry. Some women and men he mentored closely, and others he healed and sent on their way. Jesus himself was not a member of the clerical caste of his day, and he chose to work largely outside of the temple system. Education and credentialing were never a requirement to be a disciple of Jesus.

In Acts, we see the church begin to form an ongoing structure for ordering its life together. People were commissioned to do ministry together (Paul, Barnabas, Silas) and there was the beginning of conflicts over authority (the Jerusalem leadership vs. Paul's ministry to the Gentiles). Offices began to form as need arose (deacons in Acts 6) and people were commissioned for ministry based on a number of criteria, including character, having been a witness to the resurrection, or in one case (Matthias) the casting of lots.

Paul's writings reveal his belief that all Christians are called to ministry, and that while each has different gifts and a different place in the body, all are of equal value. In the writings of the early church there are no clergy/lay distinctions made; all believers are *kleros* (*appointed, endowed*), just as all believers are *laos* (*the whole people of God*).³ All are clergy, all are laity, there is no difference. Ordination as we know it was not yet a practice, "there is nothing in the Bible like a hierarchical pattern of ordination, ordination for life,

³ Stevens, 5, 26, 32

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or ordination as a sacrament that conveys grace, ordination that leaves an indelible mark on the ordained and gives the priest the exclusive right to celebrate the eucharist."⁴

The last in that list is significant, given that many believe that one of the reasons we need clergy is that they alone are empowered to consecrate communion. In fact, in none of the many New Testament discussions of proper and improper ways to practice communion is it implied that certain people are needed to officiate, the community makes the meal holy.

Different offices do emerge, including elders, presbyters, bishops/overseers, deacons/deaconesses, evangelists, apostles, prophets, and pastor-teachers. These were roles that qualified people filled as needed, not a separate status. They may have been defined differently from church to church. One office is conspicuously missing from the list of New Testament leadership terms, *hierens*, or priest, is only used to refer to Jesus (Hebrews) or to the entire community (Revelation). Not until the second century did individuals begin to be called priests.⁵

As the church continued to grow, this formalization continued. While a careful reading of the gospels and epistles reveals many more than twelve apostles, including women (Mary, Junia), a belief emerged that only the Twelve were truly commissioned by Jesus into ministry, and that they had they had the authority to transmit that status through the laying on of hands (apostolic succession). By the third century only those who were ordained by the hierarchy were considered *kleros* (clergy), all others were *laos* (laity). Reasons for this shift include a perceived need for standardization due to increasing theological diversity (aka heresies), and imitation of the structures of the Greek-Roman world. During this time women ceased to exercise the ministry of *kleros*, and the structures became increasingly hierarchical and self-perpetuating. Priests and bishops were granted enormous authority; consider this quote from the Apostolic Constitutions:

The bishop is your ruler and governor, your king
and potentate, he is next after God your earthly God,
who has a right to be honored by you.⁶

Roman Emperor Constantine's proclamation that Christianity was the state religion created a world where everyone was nominally Christian, and (much like in Israel) people were called simply to be a faithful member of the community. It began to be believed that only those who worked in the service of the church (monks, nuns, friars, priests) were truly called by God. From the fourth to the 16th centuries, clericalism grew gradually stronger.

The bishop of Rome came to be regarded as the head of
the church on earth; the language of worship ceased to
be the language of the people; the clergy dressed differently
and were prepared for ministry in an enculturating seminary;
ordination became an absolute act so that congregations
were no longer needed for the celebration of eucharist;
clergy became celibate and thus distant from the normal
experience of the laity; the cup was removed from the laity in the eucharist."⁷

⁴ Stevens, 157

⁵ Stevens, 146

⁶ Warkentin, 43

⁷ Stevens, 45

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It was practices like these that Martin Luther and other reformers reacted against, articulating the doctrine of the priesthood of all believers. Luther taught that all work, all vocations can be honoring to God and considered ministry. "The idea that the service to God should have only to do with a church altar, singing, reading, sacrifice, and the like is without doubt the worst trick of the devil. How could the devil have led us more effectively astray than by the narrow conception that service to God takes place only in church, and by works done therein."⁸

While Luther, John Calvin and others also opposed some of the extremes of the clerical system, most Protestant traditions did retain the practice of ordination and the division of laity and clergy. Some of the reasons include order and stability, respect for tradition, and the now established belief that ordination was required to offer the sacraments. With only a few exceptions, such as Quakers, the distinction between clergy and laity continues to this day.

Some marginalized communities find value in continuing the clerical office. For example, not too long ago African-Americans in the U.S. were shut out of most professions; and clergy became an important source of community leadership. Many women, if they are in a denomination that ordains them, find special meaning not only in ordination itself but also in the symbols that accompany it (others seek to redefine the office in a less hierarchical manner). Many gay and lesbian people have sought out MCC precisely because they could not be ordained openly in their own tradition.

One of the hallmarks of MCC's current values is to embrace the concept of the priesthood of all believers giving laity a stake in sharing the gospel of Jesus Christ. Metropolitan Community Church of Charlotte cite 1 Peter 2: 5-10:

“...you also, as living stones are being built up as a spiritual house for a holy priesthood...you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for God's own, that you may proclaim the mighty acts of the one who called you out of darkness into God's marvelous light...”

Many MCC churches incorporate the Priesthood of All Believers as a guiding principle. MCC defines this value in a document called “MCC Creates Communities of Justice.”

“MCC affirms the universal priesthood of all believers, and lay people minister actively at all levels. Programs provide opportunities for lay training and networking, lay-oriented spiritual renewal, and grass roots theologizing in which the doctrine, beliefs and ministry of MCC are derived from people in local churches.”

However, this belief system was not among initial MCC values. In the retelling of MCC's early history in the document “UFMCC First Quarter Century,” Rev. Kittredge Cherry relates that ordained clergy had a dominant role in the growth of the denomination. Cherry describes a strong desire to identify with clergy at the first General Conference in 1970. Here, the first bylaws called for the ordination of deacons, exhorters—later called student clergy—licensed ministers, and ordained ministers. A layperson, Richard Ploen, was elected to the first board of elders, and was ordained on the spot! Only ordained ministers could consecrate communion, except in remote places.

Structural changes empowered lay people from 1973-84 and allowed them to serve as district coordinator, a predecessor to the regional elder system. In 1981, Michael Mank was elected as the first lay

⁸ quoted in Stevens, 77

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elder and a bylaws revision affirmed the “universal priesthood of all believers.” This affirmation was further defined at the 1983 General Conference when lay people were listed among those now allowed to equally celebrate and consecrate communion. This decision may have had particular significance since MCC's inclusive communion is one of its defining sacraments separating it from other denominations.

Because MCC's Bylaws state that all people are part of the priesthood of all believers, laity can participate in many of the activities that some religions reserve for clergy including preaching, consecrating communion, and providing pastoral care. The Bylaws also state that ordained clergy are professionally trained to build up the Body of Christ and equip the saints, which again underscores the denomination's commitment to empower and train laity called to ministry. UFMCC in its short history has made several changes to affirm the mutual ministry of all people; where might God lead us in the future?

Biblical Passages About Ministry

Genesis 1:26-31

Exodus 3:1-12

Numbers 11:26-30

Joel 2:28-29

Mark 1:14-20

Acts 2:1-13

Acts 6:1-6

1 Corinthians 12

1 Peter 2:9-10

Holy Conversations: Seeking, Sharing and Stretching

Point of Reflection (Small Group Reflection): What is your ministry? Do you know? Is it practiced primarily inside or outside of church settings?

Point of Reflection (Small Group Discussion): As we prepared this study, Linda Beckstead expressed a profound shock at the idea that Jesus was not a clergyperson. Did this surprise you? Why or why not?

Point of Reflection (Large Group Discussion): MCC has grown and changed over the years in how we have practiced the priesthood of all believers. Are there any appropriate next steps that would further implement this value?

Point of Reflection (Large Group Discussion): What was the most challenging idea you heard/read in this study?

Pulling it All Together: A Ritual of Blessing

We invite you to close with a time of individual blessing for each person and the ministry they have been called to. One by one, ask each participant if they are ready to name a ministry they currently practice or feel called to explore. Then have a representative of the group (you may rotate this role) pray that God would bless, lead, and equip that person for their ministry.

As an option, you might consider the ancient practice of laying on of hands. This is simply a method of prayer where the group gathers around the person being prayed for, and gently touches them (on their arms, back, shoulder etc.) as they pray together. It was a frequent biblical practice as people were commissioned into ministry. Please be sure to ask if everyone (recipient and those praying) are comfortable with the touching aspect of this ritual before you proceed.

Additional Resources

- Barker, Lance R. and B. Edmon Martin eds. *Multiple Paths to Ministry: New Models for Theological Education*. Cleveland: Pilgrim Press, 2004
- Bailey, Marcia Barnes. *Choosing Partnership, Sharing Ministry: A Vision for New Spiritual Community*. Herndon VA: The Alban Institute, 2007
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- Palmer, Parker J. *A Hidden Wholeness: The Journey Toward and Undivided Life*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2004.
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