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# Response to Ministry in the Evangelical Lutheran Church: Its Forms and Practices

## The Faculties of:

*Lutheran Theological Seminary, Saskatoon, and  
Waterloo Lutheran Seminary, Waterloo*

At the request of the Division for Theological Education and Leadership (DTEL) of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Canada, the faculties of the Lutheran Theological Seminary and Waterloo Lutheran Seminary met in Waterloo from 25–28 April, 1992, to evaluate sections 3–5 of the document *Ministry in the Evangelical Lutheran Church In Canada: Its Forms and Practices*. The aim of this consultation was to study “how pastors, bishops, and diaconal ministers are to be set apart in the ELCIC” To this end, biblical, historical, confessional, and contextual research was undertaken by both faculties. Each faculty discussed the results and shared its discussion with the other faculty. The Rev. Donna Herzfeld-Kamprath was most helpful to this process by providing reports and study papers from other sources as they became available to her.

The 25–28 April consultation included both plenary sessions and smaller working-group sessions. At an initial plenary to look over the entire task, three working groups were formed. Each working group included members of both faculties and prepared a report on one facet of the whole. Group one studied the whole of sections 3–5 of *Ministry*, group two studied the report of the DTEL subcommittee on diaconal ministry, and group three looked at the issue of forms of ministry in the context of contemporary Canadian society. The reports of these working groups were affirmed by the faculties as reflecting a consensus of the group and are the bases for the three parts of this report. The Rev. Dr. Robert Binhammer attended the consultation as DTEL observer and took a constructive part in our discussions.

Each member of both faculties expresses deep appreciation for the opportunity to work and be a resource for DTEL and

the ELCIC. This consultation has highlighted for the seminaries the important relation that exists between DTEL and the seminaries. The faculties sincerely hope that the ELCIC would continue to use the seminaries, jointly and individually, as resources for the mission of the Gospel. The faculties believe that their ability to serve the church would be greatly enhanced by regular opportunities to meet and work together. Both LTS and WLS would be pleased to work with DTEL to develop structures for regular gatherings of the two faculties in service of the theological needs of the church.

It is our intent in the statement that follows to show our appreciation for the work that has gone into the development of forms of ministry in the ELCIC. The efforts of DTEL and the task force have opened discussion among us of important issues that must be addressed as the church attempts to carry out the mission of the Gospel in contemporary Canada. This discussion has provided the possibility for creative renewal in the church and among those who serve in the ministries of the church. The conclusion which we express in what follows is that this discussion and renewal are new enough and the issues important enough that the ELCIC is not yet ready for closure of the discussion or institutionalization of forms. We are encouraged by what has gone on up to now, and we encourage the continuation of the process into new areas of mission and ministry.

## Part One

### General Remarks

The question of forms and practices of ministry, as raised in the document *Ministry in the Evangelical Lutheran Church In Canada: Its Forms and Practices*, is a most important concern. How this question is decided and our attentiveness to the ways our forms and practices do or do not facilitate the work of the Gospel will be critical to the future of the church in Canada. What is decided on this matter will have a profound impact on the full life of the ELCIC for years to come, and so the care

exercised in this task ought to be equal to the magnitude of its impact.

We find ambiguity in the document regarding the nature and practice of the forms of ministry. We believe that this ambiguity needs to be addressed before further implementation proceeds. More specifically, the laudable intent of the writers for equality and egalitarian concerns is not sufficiently realized in what is written. The wording of the text permits it to be read and affirmed both from a thoroughly Lutheran point of view, and from a more non-Lutheran perspective which would promote a more medieval and hierarchical view of the church. As a consequence this ambiguity needs to be clarified in the document in general and the sections on forms of ministry in particular (sections 3,4,5) before its affirmations regarding the forms and practice of ministry in the Lutheran church can become normative for the life of the ELCIC. This point can be illustrated by but is not limited to the following examples:

Section 4.2.7 "Background" declares that the "office of the bishop is a symbol of the unity and continuity of the Church which exists from apostolic times in and through the Gospel." This could be understood to refer properly to the possibility that the bishop as a minister of Word and Sacrament symbolizes the continuity of the Gospel through history. However, it could also be construed to imply that the office of bishop in succession with the "historic episcopacy" is necessary for unity and continuity.

Section 5.1.6 "Background" declares that "All ministers are equal with other ministers, though differing in areas of responsibility. Any distinctions among public ministers are only distinctions of function..." However, 5.1.1 "Background" states that diaconal ministers are to... "exercise their responsibility to Word and Sacraments primarily by assisting the witness and service of the Christian community, and also by assisting in public worship." Again, 5.1.5 "Background" states, "Diaconal ministers stand with the whole Church because all share in the one ministry of Christ," while 5.1.1 "Background" says that "the office of deacon became a distinct office serving together with, and under the supervision of a bishop or pastor..." Thus the document is unclear whether the call to "assisting" is in the service of equality of status and distinction of function or primarily in the service of subordination of one office to another.

Section 4.1.6 "Background" speaks of "ordained" ministry, "public" ministers and "All ministers." Section 4.1.6 "Statement" says, "A

pastor serves in collegiality with other ordained ministers and the community of believers as together they carry out the one ministry of Christ." In so far as "all ministers" would normally include all persons in the one ministry of Christ, it is unclear what the relation is between "public" ministers and "ordained" ministers.

We find that the meaning of the term "ordination" is unclear in the document. Does or does not ordination include some infusion of the Holy Spirit which is not present with Baptism? Since neither Scripture nor the Lutheran Confessions provide a conclusive unitary definition, an in-depth study of the concept and practice of ordination would be needed to provide a proper grounding for decisions about whether there should be one or more ordinations.

We find insufficient definition of what constitutes the nature of the diaconal ministry vis-à-vis what has historically been identified as either ordained ministry of Word and Sacrament or as ministry of the laity. In *Ministry in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Canada: Its Forms and Practices*, the definitions provided for "Diaconal" ministry are for the most part expressed in terms which contrast it with the work of Word and Sacrament and lay ministry rather than identify and demarcate hitherto unaddressed work. Diaconal ministry, if affirmed, should be a ministry in its own right with its own focus in the mission of the church. In support of this concern a question arises about the meaning of section 5.1.1, which declares that a diaconal minister has the "... primary responsibility for proclaiming the Gospel through a ministry of service related to Word and Sacraments which enables and equips the people of God to do their ministry." It is unclear what it means for the diaconal ministry to be "related" to Word and Sacraments. This could be seen to be a description of an assistant ordained ministry of Word and Sacraments or a lay ministry which is sustained as all ministries are by regular worship. This ambiguity is compounded by the observation that in the New Testament what we call a pastor is often designated by the word *diakonos* rather than *presbyteros*, thus not singling out *diakonos* as a separate office of ministry. [This topic will be treated in more detail in Part Two below.] Similar observations could be made about ambiguity in the use of the word *episcopos*.

Any delineation of the forms of ministry in the ELCIC needs to include close attention to both tradition and contemporary

historical context (present and future). These two elements stand in dialectical tension with one another and each needs to be fully addressed. The Foreword to the document properly affirms this fact when it observes that a proper understanding of ministry must be "... connected to biblical and confessional roots, and be flexible in meeting contemporary needs." While the document dedicates a fair amount of energy to addressing the biblical, confessional and historical roots, it does not commit equal attention to an in-depth assessment of the mission needs of the ELCIC as it seeks to do the work of the Gospel in the Canadian context (present and future). Such an assessment needs to be done to address adequately the matter of forms and practices of ministry. [This topic will be treated in Part Three below.]

While our primary focus is on the mission of the Gospel in our time and place, there is need to give close attention to our sister churches as they also attempt to address this question of forms and practices of ministry. We must remain attentive to the fact that the context of the ELCIC is at least fourfold: Canadian, North American, global, and ecumenical. We observe that the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA) is proceeding at a more deliberate pace on this matter.<sup>1</sup> While this fact should not dictate what we in Canada do, our close relationship with the ELCA might give us reason to take a more studied pace and not feel unduly rushed to finish the task. In addition, we would be well advised to find out what wisdom can be gained from the experience of other member churches of the Lutheran World Federation, Canadian Council of Churches, and World Council of Churches.

As a result of our observations and concerns, we recommend that *Ministry in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Canada: Its Forms and Practices* not be adopted at this time or at the 1993 ELCIC convention. Recognizing that this leaves important questions unanswered in the interim, we further recommend:

1. That concerns of lay professionals and the deaconess community be addressed through the practices employed for such ministers in our predecessor bodies.
2. That consideration be given by DTEL to sponsor changes in policy which will create a roster of lay professionals and

deaconesses with appropriate recognition. This might include consideration of benefits and privileges equivalent to those pertaining to pastors in the ELCIC.

3. That consideration be given by DTEL to establish church-wide, national standards of preparation and practice for those who are included on this roster.

## Part Two:

### Diaconal Ministry in the ELCIC

In relation to the document "Diaconal Ministry in the ELCIC" (March 1992), the faculties decided to respond by both raising questions and offering responses to the document. We appreciate the work that has gone into the document and thank the subcommittee for its work and concern.

There was support for an office of deacon among some faculty members, but some believe that it may be premature to institute a new order of ordained ministry. As a result we sense the need for more extensive consideration of the Lutheran understanding of ordination and the relationship of ordination to baptism and the ministry of the baptized. We believe that there are ambiguities in the document *Ministry in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Canada: Its Forms and Practices* that need to be considered before instituting any new order of ordained ministry. These ambiguities are not yet solved in "Diaconal Ministry in the ELCIC," so **we recommend that the ELCIC not proceed to establish an ordained ministry of "deacon" at this time.** We observe the following from our study.

Traditionally within Lutheranism ordination has been understood as ordination to service of the people of God through preaching and teaching the Word and administering the Sacraments. Ordination to a ministry other than to Word and Sacrament involves a different definition of ordination than that which has traditionally been used within Lutheranism in North America. We are not opposed in principle to exploring more than one ordination if, in fact, multiple forms of ordained ministry will serve the proclamation of the Gospel and the needs of the church in this time. Since this redefinition of ordination

would have broad implications for ministry and mission, prudence suggests that we undertake this study with considerable care and without undue haste.

The definition of diaconal ministry given in "Diaconal Ministry in the ELCIC" is ambiguous, specifically because diaconal ministry was defined, on the one hand, in relation to the pastoral ministry of Word and Sacrament—public proclamation of the Gospel—and, on the other hand, in relation to the calling and ministry of the laity—the ministry of the whole people of God.<sup>2</sup> Thus, the definition of the diaconate seems to be drawn partly from the pastoral ministry and partly from the ministry of the laity.

To have validity the diaconal ministry must be defined uniquely. Therefore we ask: How can this ministry be conceived so that a unique identity of the office of deacon would be understood in its own right as distinct from the pastoral office and the ministry of the laity?

We must also ask whether formulation of national policies for lay professionals and deaconesses (e.g., placement on a roster, granting of voting rights at synod conventions, providing coverage by the ELCIC pension plan, determining salary scales, defining preparation and qualifications) by DTEL could achieve the same goals more effectively than creating a new order of ministry at this time?

In the section on Candidacy Process, we note that an examining committee would be established for diaconal ministry candidates. Would this committee be different from the current examining committee? If so, is this necessary? Why would one examining committee not suffice? On the other hand, if this is a unique order of ministry, then a different examining procedure and composition of the committee may be warranted. We also raise a question about the composition of an examining committee for diaconal ministers. Specifically, the document calls for a diaconal minister to be part of the committee. What adjustments would be made if there were no diaconal minister in the synod who could serve in this capacity?

The faculties raised serious questions about the academic criteria for diaconal ministers indicated in the document. The document specified a core theological curriculum which could be taken in a university, seminary, bible school, or combination thereof. We believe that neither the content of this core nor



the context for obtaining preparation is adequately specified. There are differences in education in seminary, university and bible school contexts. If a diversity of contexts is allowed, who will be accountable for the maintenance of academic standards and appropriate content? It is our belief that the responsibility for the establishment of uniform preparation as well as policy, criteria, and procedures for evaluating B.A. equivalencies should be church-wide and rest with DTEL rather than with synodical CTEs. As well as biblical, historical, and doctrinal studies, the academic core should include work in human development and faith development, as well as Supervised Pastoral Education or appropriate training in human relations which focuses on self and self-functioning. The criteria for continuing education should read: "Continuing education should include time for spiritual formation and time for academic studies and/or occupational development." The implementation of policies and procedures should be monitored by DTEL to provide congruency and consistency across the church.

Should the ELCIC establish the office of diaconal minister, we urge that DTEL consider the possibility of providing a yearly national gathering of diaconal ministers. We believe that such a meeting would provide support and nurture for a diaconal community, and establish a clear identity and status for the diaconal ministry. We urge that such a gathering be considered for current lay professionals and deaconesses.

### **Part Three:**

#### **A Call to Reflect on the Mission of the Church**

As a result of our study as individual faculties and our joint dialogue, we believe that the ELCIC should undertake a study of the nature of its mission in contemporary Canadian society in more detail prior to establishing its forms of ministry. Canada is just completing a century of tremendous cultural, social, technological, economic, and political change. Rather than now entering a period of stability it appears to us that the rate of change in Canadian society is accelerating. At this time it is impossible to predict what changes are coming, but certain

dimensions that will no doubt affect our forms and practice of ministry can be identified. For example:

- Deterioration of the earth's environment;
- Development of more ecological consciousness;
- Restructuring of world and Canadian economy;
- Pressures on rural areas and small towns due to changes in farm economy;
- Attacks on social programs and institutions;
- Global political changes leading to end the Cold War;
- Tension between wealthy "North" and poor "South";
- National political changes leading to a new definition of Canada;
- Changes in patterns of family units and growth of alternatives to the nuclear family;
- Strong individualistic bent and devaluation of political processes;
- Increasing value of personal authenticity;
- Changes in teaching of values in public education;
- Emphasis on materialism, competitiveness, expectations linked to productivity with resulting loss of the value of personhood;
- Changing patterns of immigration;
- Increasing ethnic, cultural, social, and religious diversity;
- Ideological conflicts among generations and social groups;
- Increasing secularization and marginalization of religious bodies/groups.

We believe these changes in global culture and Canadian society have left Canada's churches unsure of the precise nature of the mission and ministry of the church and the nature of Christian identity. Some of the factors that lead us to this conclusion are the decline in worship attendance, membership, and stewardship in our churches. Behind these statistical indicators is a change of the place and role of the church in Canada and changes in the way that religious and moral values are transmitted. Congregations feeling a growing sense of isolation from their communities, congregations finding themselves in conflict, and clergy questioning their purpose and role in church and society show the effects of these social changes.

In addition to these identity questions which plague all of Canada's churches, the creation in 1986 of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Canada has forced Lutherans of a variety of pieties and polities to learn to live together in one church. Thus factors which gave identity to various groups of Lutherans before 1986 now need to be re-examined in a context of diversity.

For these reasons and more, the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Canada is presently only beginning to develop a clear sense of the mission and ministry of the church into the 21st century. To decide what particular forms of ministry will most effectively enable the church to carry out its task is not a responsible decision without further study and definition of the church's mission. Serious work on the content of ministry must precede settling the forms of ministry. Until our vision for mission as the ELCIC becomes clearer, it is premature to institutionalize new forms of ministry.

While some would call us to adopt various historic forms of ministry, we believe that a study of the history of the church is a study of the church adapting its forms to carry out the mission of the Gospel in changing cultural and historical contexts. The Hebrew Scriptures indicate that the people of Israel were served by a variety of forms in various eras. The New Testament shows a great diversity of forms. In early centuries, while the Roman church tended to develop around bishops understood in the model of Roman familial and imperial authority, the Celtic church tended to centre on forms that more closely approximated Irish clan structures. While Benedictine forms based on monastery communities were appropriate to mission in the earlier Middle Ages, the high and late Medieval eras found Franciscan and Dominican forms based on itinerant ministry to be more effective.

The Reformation held that it is essential and necessary that the church call persons to be responsible for seeing that the Gospel is communicated in Word and Sacrament. At the same time the Reformation held that no specific form of this responsibility could ever be necessary or essential—variety of form was affirmed. This affirmation of variety of forms has been lived out in the history of Lutheranism at diverse times and places. In North America this variety was based on the diversity of national, ethnic and linguistic traditions in piety and polity as well as on the conditions of the frontier.

As a result, it is not possible to discover historical precedent for any one definitive form for ministry. Rather, the precedent of church history is that the church has always adapted forms of ministry, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, within specific cultural and historical contexts.

The church exists as the community which carries out the mission of the Gospel in the world. In this mission the church is called to articulate the Gospel in its proclamation and teaching, to live the Gospel in community, and to enact the Gospel in loving justice. As the Body of Christ, the church is called to serve and care for the world. All forms of ministry in the church are to be evaluated by how effectively they contribute to the accomplishing of the church's mission.

The faculty of the Lutheran Theological Seminary and the faculty of Waterloo Lutheran Seminary call upon the Evangelical Lutheran Church In Canada to undertake a study process which will help this church to define further the nature of its mission so as to stimulate the evolution of a variety of new and traditional forms of ministry.

In order better to prepare our church to evolve creative and effective forms of ministry for the coming century, we recommend:

1. That the ELCIC engage in ongoing social analysis, biblical study, and theological reflection; facilitate study and conversation about its mission in light of this analysis, study, and reflection; and give utmost attention to a clear articulation of our mission in light of our changing Canadian context;
2. That the ELCIC develop national, synodical, and congregational vehicles for sharing its vision and concern for mission and ministry;
3. That the ELCIC enable congregations to seek out and affirm the individual gifts of the people of God, and validate their ministries as they see them being lived out both individually and corporately within the local community and beyond;
4. That the ELCIC support and validate current specialized ministries and at the same time encourage and develop a wider variety of forms of ministry in keeping with our definition of mission;

## Conclusion

It is our intent through this recommendation to request DTEL and the ELCIC not to move too quickly to close discussion of the forms and practice of ministry necessary for the mission of the Gospel in 21st century Canada. Specifically we recommend:

1. That the document *Ministry in the Evangelical Church in Canada: Its Forms and Practices* not be adopted in its present form at the present time;
2. That the ELCIC not institute an ordained office of deacon until such a time as a rationale for such an office can be developed which does not make "deacon" an assistant pastor or detract from the ministry of all the baptized;
3. That the ELCIC undertake a study of the mission of the Gospel in the current and future Canadian context which can give guidance and inspiration to the development of forms of ministry;
4. That DTEL sponsor an annual consultation of the faculties of LTS and WLS for the purpose of deliberation on important issues facing the ELCIC and of mutual support in the ministry of theological education.

We thank the Division for Theological Education and Leadership for the opportunity to gather together as theological faculties. We hope that this will be the first of many such gatherings.

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> ELCA Division for Ministry, Task Force on the Study of Ministry, "Report to 1992 Synod Assemblies", 8.
- <sup>2</sup> For example, there appears to be a similarity in the terms used to define the ministry of a diaconal order and the ministry of the laity.