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William H. Harrison

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Theological Education in a Diaconal Church

William H. Harrison¹

The Evangelical Lutheran Church in Canada (ELCIC) is called to reimagine its structures as it finds its way into being the less “pastor-centric” and more diaconal church that *Reimagining Our Church: Public Ministry in the ELCIC* – or, more precisely, that God, through this document – calls us to be.² How, then, are we to think about order in the coming church? This is an important challenge for everyone in the ELCIC, and it is particularly immediate for seminaries as we rethink the formation that we provide for present and future leaders in God’s church.

Church Realities

As the ELCIC finds its way into the future, three characteristics will be central to shifts in ministerial organization: size, internal needs, and external purpose.

That ELCIC membership is shrinking is not a secret. At its 1986 founding, the ELCIC had 202,465 members in 665 congregations.³ In 2015, 114,592 baptized members belonged to 525 congregations⁴ – a 43% decline in total membership and a 21% decline in the number of congregations from the 1986 start. In 2019, there were approximately 95,000 baptized members⁵ in 519 congregations⁶ – a 17% decline in total membership and a negligible decline in the number of congregations in only four years. Note that these are baptized members as distinct from attendees. In 2015, attendees were about 20% of the total membership. If numbers were similar in 2019, then 19,000 attendees were present in 519 congregations – an average of fewer than 37 per congregation. Currently, we have no way of measuring the impact of COVID-19; however, we can be certain that physical attendance has fallen dramatically (anecdotally, I am hearing that many congregations are currently seeing in-person attendance levels at 25–40% of pre-pandemic levels). Virtual attendance clearly means something; what it means we do not know, though the nature of online participation is such as to suggest that commitment levels are unlikely to match those of in-person congregants from prior generations. In other words, we have shrinking attendance and corresponding increases in the responsibilities of high-commitment participants, who will inevitably burn out at a greater rate. The ELCIC of today and tomorrow will be small, in both comparative and absolute terms.

¹ The Reverend Dr. William Harrison is President of the Lutheran Theological Seminary, Saskatoon.

² Evangelical Lutheran Church in Canada, *Reimagining Our Church: Public Ministry in the ELCIC* (Winnipeg: ELCIC, 2019), 12, <https://elcic.ca/Documents/documents/ReimaginingOurChurch-PublicMinistryintheELCIC-Oct2019.pdf>.

³ John Longhurst, “500 Years After the Reformation, How Is the Lutheran Church Doing?” *On Faith Canada* (blog), April 2, 2017, <https://onfaithcanada.blogspot.com/2017/04/500-years-after-reformation-how-is.html>.

⁴ Evangelical Lutheran Church in Canada, *All Synods Annual Summary: Summary of the ELCIC Congregation Report for the Year Ending December 31, 2015*, (Winnipeg: ELCIC, 2015), <https://elcic.ca/Parochial-Reports/documents/2015-ELCICAnnualSummary.pdf>.

⁵ Lutheran World Federation, *LWF Statistics 2019*, (Geneva: LWF, 2019), 9.

⁶ As of December 10, 2021, the most recent statistics on the ELCIC website are from 2015; 519 is the number cited on Wikipedia as of the same date. The decrease in membership numbers suggests that 519 may be optimistic. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Evangelical_Lutheran_Church_in_Canada#cite_note-1.

Leadership Challenges in a Diaconal Church

One consequence of this size reality is that the ELCIC will, perforce, minimalize and distribute its internal structure while simultaneously seeking to provide high-level support resources. Minimalization is visible everywhere, as fewer congregations are able to support full-time paid leadership; church institutions – including my own context, Lutheran Theological Seminary, Saskatoon – are much smaller than they were even a decade ago. Nonetheless, the world grows more complex, with increasing legal, moral, and technical expectations for leaders. The contemporary environment is an important factor in assessing church polity. Previous (including pre-modern) examples are of limited utility as we think about this question; they cannot keep pace with developments in societal demands. Internal structures must, therefore, be both smaller and stronger, involving fewer paid staff who are more highly trained. Structures must also be more distributed; we cannot reasonably expect people to concentrate themselves in a few places in order to sustain the ELCIC. Access to the high-calibre leadership necessary to support the church's ministry will depend upon networks of capable leaders across Canada and in other parts of the world.

When we are small we must be focused, because we are still invited by God to proclaim God's love in Christ Jesus and to participate, through the power of the Holy Spirit, in God's transformative work in the world. We are called to mission, even as we are pressed by necessity. The diaconal church will have increased focus on externally directed service. The term "diaconal" speaks to a church built on the principle of service to the surrounding world, instead of focusing upon those who come through our doors. This is a shift from the church of the post-World War II era, which was designed in response to growing internal populations: people who came into congregations because of international movement in church-related communities or because of growth in church-attending families. We can no longer depend upon immigration or procreation to foster the life in God toward which the church is, at its best, directed. Instead, we must turn to that which we ought to have emphasized all along: proclamation.

The Mission of a Diaconal Church

Proclamation, the product of God's love toward us, requires that we share love of God and love of neighbour, in word and deed. The love of God comes first, because God is the power who calls, justifies, and constitutes the church. Our only reason to be, that which differentiates us from any service club or activist group, is our story of encounter with the transforming touch of Divine love. Consequently, a diaconal church will have two priorities in its engagement with the larger world: supporting entry into the knowledge of God's love, commonly through grateful celebration, and supporting entry into God's transformative work of peace and justice in the world. A diaconal church is, by definition, predominantly outward-focused. We continue to care for the formal membership in the Christian community. The faithful need support. However, as fewer people automatically develop into church members and the number of active participants declines, we are reminded that the church exists primarily to share the good news of Christ Jesus with the world.

Leaders in Partnership

A diaconal church, therefore, is built upon a partnership of lay, diaconal, and presbyteral leadership, in a kind of progression from more external/less internal to more

internal/less external. Lay leaders are largely focused on being the church in daily life, while also being called upon to provide congregational leadership. Deacons are focused on extending the church's participation in God's work of social transformation with a view to world changing; thus, they function extensively outside formal church structures and extensively within them. Presbyters serve predominantly as interior leadership: presiding, forming, directing, teaching, training, managing, and in other ways supporting the church in its mission of engagement with God and the world.

Laypeople

Laypeople will provide leadership in the whole range of externally directed service and in local internal organization. Laypeople have relinquished much of the religious life that once occurred in familial and communal contexts to professional pastors, even as pastors have focused on serving congregations. This is already changing, and will continue to shift. Laypeople are being called upon to renew spiritual life in their homes, workplaces, and social contexts in new and different ways. This movement will continue to grow. The change is not limited to these locations, however. Congregations, especially in areas with low population density, are becoming dependent on lay leaders for the kind of support that, in the past 60-70 years, pastors have often provided. More and more often, laypeople find themselves proclaiming the gospel and leading worship. This trend will continue, especially in low-population and remote areas where resources for support of full-time paid leadership are insufficient, even were potential candidates available.

However, the church, by definition, is the laity, a community of God's people. The organization, including its deacons, pastors, and bishops, exists to support the ministry of those who are not ordained. The church has generally known this to be true, and it is one of the touchstones of Martin Luther's thinking. A diaconal church that is focused on outreach and emphasizing God's reign of peace and justice in the world will depend upon the participation of laypeople. Their training must be a core priority.

Laypeople bring extensive practical skills. In many of the realms of gospel action, the laity are – collectively – better equipped than clergy. Taking leadership in these areas, both within church organization and beyond, is not difficult for the larger body of the church. Considerations of time and energy are of more immediate importance than skill development. Laypeople can undertake many of the basics of pastoral care, community engagement, and worship leadership.

The challenge for laypeople is in understanding and communicating the good news of Christ Jesus. This is an immense and complex task, requiring substantial skills and knowledge related to engaging the biblical story and the church's history of interpretation, then linking these understandings to questions of right speech and action in the world today. Only long and continued formation in these things, a deep and ongoing process of religious, intellectual, moral, and psychic conversion in all of us, can prevent our portrayal of the gospel from becoming an oversimplified caricature. Too easily, the good news falls into mere parroting of the meanings of contemporary power structures or, as dangerously, the instant social media reflexes of today's critics. The church is not the establishment. The church is not the mob.

Theological education for laypeople is now the first concern of the church. This is true for all aspects of the Christian community and for all its institutions. Seminaries, therefore, must redesign their programs to serve laypeople. In addition, seminaries must train deacons

and presbyters with an emphasis on their roles as educators. The therapeutic model of church leadership has outlived its usefulness. Today, we are reminded that all members of the church are called to comfort the grieving and afflicted, care for the poor and needy, and support the sick.

Redesigned programs will need to be local, engaged (with a decolonized curriculum and classroom), and both deep and accessible. Local can be partly accomplished through digital means; the electronic classroom can include many people from many places, connecting different voices while fitting into very different lives. The Zoom class is not the whole answer, however. The virtual room limits personal contact and therefore social formation. At least as importantly, it is disconnected from the physical realities of our world. This is a serious failure in a world in which engaging with Indigenous people and caring for the environment are priorities. A truly decolonized classroom must also be truly local in a physical sense, engaging with the land and people at a personal level, and welcoming the voices of the land and the people as having real authority in the class. Therefore, a distributed seminary will also have distributed classes, inviting leadership from the people (notably, but not only, Indigenous people) and the land in as many physical locations as possible.

Programs must be profound; information is always available on the Internet, but depth of attentiveness, thoroughness of understanding, and care in judgement are not so evident. Laypeople must be welcomed into a serious effort to understand and grow in Christian heritage and life. The focus of our teaching must be to enable deep conversion of the kind that Robert M. Doran, following Bernard Lonergan, calls: religious (encounter with love), intellectual (discovery of knowing as asking and answering questions), moral (making the other the priority in our decisions and actions), and psychic (understanding and engaging our emotional selves).⁷ At the same time, we must continue to strive for accessibility in communications, ensuring that we use language that genuinely fosters understanding. In an important sense, these realities are not new; thoughtful Christians have always sought to accomplish this. However, the changing context means that older verities are true in a new sense: neither the traditional language of Christian faith nor the newer language of social transformation are as broadly accessible today as we remember from days gone by and tend to expect today. Fewer and fewer people come from church backgrounds, so that the basic grammar of Christian conversation that is so familiar to us is unhelpful to many. Moreover, the vocabulary central to contemporary discussions of diversity, equity, and inclusion develops at a rapid pace, so that even those who follow this area closely are not always current; much of the larger community is simply left out. Depth and accessibility grow more challenging by the day.

Deacons

Deacons have a central role in this diaconal church. To deacons belongs the task of leading the church in service in the world,⁸ providing structure and direction in the church's external focus. Deacons are therefore, by definition, engaged with ministry to the larger community. Their role within the church is to communicate about the nature of, and the call to, world-focused mission, while providing structure and training for that mission. Deacons,

⁷ Robert M. Doran, "What Does Bernard Lonergan Mean by 'Conversion'?" (lecture, 2011), <https://lonerganresource.com/lectures.php?21>

⁸ *To Love and Serve the Lord: Diakonia in the Life of the Church; The Jerusalem Report of the Anglican-Lutheran Commission (ALIC III)* (Geneva: Lutheran World Federation, 2012), 38.

therefore, bring a combination of the practical skills of laypeople and the formal theological training of pastors. When deacons preach, their preaching has an intentional focus: the call to right action for justice in the world.

Theological education for deacons, therefore, must foster both a sense of the richness of Christian meanings and a priority of linking these meanings to participation in God's work of transformation in the world. Such education, therefore, must carry forward the prophetic tradition of the church in biblical and theological areas, and must include introduction to ethics as that branch of theological/philosophical inquiry especially concerned with questions of the good in contemporary society. Skills in moral reasoning are central to Christian Ethics as a discipline and are deeply necessary for deacons, as they are called to a major role in leading the church in action. If the church is to be diaconal, then so must the diaconate.

Here a caution emerges: too often, justice is conceived as the latest cause trending on social media. The diaconal church cannot be led by the impulsive press of 24/7/365 media. We must be prepared to assemble the relevant data, ask and answer the relevant questions, submit our answers to careful judgement on the grounds that we may be wrong, and act responsibly in a manner consistent with as thorough and accurate an understanding as we can manage. Christ is not well-served by the haste to be the one to cast the first stone. There is a significant role for deacons in these judgements: often deacons bring the experience and understanding necessary to enable wise and practical decisions on the church's part. Seminaries and other institutions of theological formation have important responsibilities toward deacons: we must commit to ensuring that deacons receive formation appropriate to the depth and complexity of their call.

The ELCIC struggles with imagining places for the diaconate, seeking to be open to the Spirit's leading while taking seriously the need for sufficient institutional clarity to make feasible appropriate kinds and levels of institutional support. Consequently, beyond the specifics named above, diaconal preparation remains fluid and may need to do so. Flexibility must be matched with careful consideration. One of the great challenges of the contemporary seminary is ensuring appropriate formation and examination for deacons. Deacons serve both practical and symbolic functions in a diaconal church. They help us to see what we are called to be. As the church listens to the Spirit's voice and imagines new possibilities for service, new ways to follow the call to proclaim the good news of Christ Jesus, deacons will find new ways to be. In this, those invited by the Holy Spirit to serve as deacons break open the seminary, requiring that it continually seek to understand what God is doing and how the educational institution can participate. In a diaconal church, deacons bring change.

Presbyters (Pastors/Priests)

Presbyters are especially focused on the internal life of the church community. Their roles are most vividly seen in the Eucharistic context, where the church-constituting acts of preaching and teaching are linked with the church-constituting acts of receiving and eating. Presbyters have been central to the life of the church for many centuries because the church has, in varying ways, been at the heart of social and political community in some countries since as early as the fourth century, when ecclesiastical authorities gained responsibility for common life in the crumbling Roman Empire. As commercial and technological life has grown in its capacity to fulfill this role, churches have been moved to the periphery. Thus,

the presbyterate recedes as the dominant symbol of church presence, and the laity and diaconate find their place in the public eye.

Yet, the role of presbyters is indispensable. It changes; it does not disappear. The church has tremendous need for internal ordering. The central reality of internal church leadership for the foreseeable future is that it will involve serving multiple communities, supporting lay and diaconal leadership in those contexts. Presbyters will no longer function largely within one congregation, covering all the bases, as it were. Instead, they must take on management and training roles for multiple congregations, providing support for lay leaders and deacons in areas that would traditionally have been defined as multiple parishes. This is, of course, the reality for many today – and not only in rural areas.

Consequently, the priorities in theological education for presbyters today and into the future focus upon three areas: 1) deep formation in the Christian tradition and the ability to teach it; 2) understanding of, and skill in, liturgical presidency; and 3) development in leadership capacity, fitting candidates for managerial and administrative work with a variety of congregations and their local leaders. The presbyterate, especially in its most highly trained forms, will carry forward the complexities of Christian meanings, with an understanding of the historical development and contemporary expressions of Christian theology. Presbyters will be called to teach, helping to form lay and diaconal leaders and their congregations, equipping them for the gospel.

Liturgical leadership will continue to be central to the presbyteral role, even as portions of this work are shared with laypeople and deacons. If love of God is to be the heart of the church's meaning, then we must persevere in the ongoing work of public worship – finding forms that sustain the gospel, form the Christian community, and preserve appropriate levels of accessibility for those less deeply prepared than our long-time members. In the greatest shift in the presbyteral role, these people will be less directly engaged with most laypeople. The days when presbyters could see their place as being at the side of the dying for long days and nights is ending. Presbyters will be responsible to too many people, over too large an area. Laypeople and deacons will carry much of the local load. Presbyters will serve as trainers, organizers, and supporters for multiple ministries in multiple locations. This may disappoint some, for whom the priorities of ministry arrangements, especially as fostered in a Clinical Pastoral Education (often hospital) setting have become very personally pastoral.

As a consequence of this shift in the role, presbyteral formation must move from its focus upon congregational leadership to communal leadership. Historically, the focus of presbyteral training has been on preparation for longstanding service in one place, serving a single congregation or group of congregations, providing them with pastoral and liturgical leadership. Until recently, the seminary where I lead and teach had a course called "Leadership in the Parish," with a set of goals well-matched to its title. We were training parish clergy. That course has a new title, reflecting the shift in emphasis: it is now "Leadership in the Church." This is exactly the change that presbyters are called to make: the move from an emphasis upon the parish to a focus upon serving the whole church. Concretely, this is coming to mean – and will grow to mean – providing overall leadership for multiple areas that have traditionally been parishes.

For seminaries, this means that leadership, management, and educational skills must take priority in the training of presbyters. Training them in the traditional way means failure in the diaconal church and increases the likelihood of disgruntled and burnt-out presbyters.

Trying to serve multiple parishes and large areas as if they were simply a larger version of a single parish is simply an untenable goal. Instead, laypeople and deacons will provide various kinds of local leadership. In some ecclesiastical contexts and places, these leaders will be supported by locally trained and/or bi-vocational presbyters. Seminary trained (MDiv or equivalent) presbyters will be educators, managers, administrators, and supporters, enabling various ministries in larger areas. This shift is already underway in many rural areas and is likely to take hold in urban areas also, especially as ministries diversify and urban ministries assist associated rural ministries.

Conclusion

The role of seminaries is shifting. More than ever before, seminaries will be called to prepare people for diverse ministries, both lay and ordained. This is happening in a world of changing needs and developing technologies. Seminaries, therefore, will need to be simultaneously connected to Christian tradition and flexible in form. Faculty are likely to be more distributed as they prepare people in local contexts, in-person and electronically. Faculty will need to develop new focus and skills, while working with teachers from outside the seminary who bring specializations (such as leadership and management) that have developed in different ways in other academic contexts. At the centre of this is a vision of a diaconal church, placing external proclamation in service at the heart of church life and supporting this with a strong internal core.