ABSTRACT

This article examines the historical and theological foundations of Lutheran doctrines of the ministry of word and sacrament in the Reformation and the Confessional documents and how this inheritance was transposed to the American context. Against this background, it considers the debates on ministerial issues that surrounded the founding of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America and the challenges with regard to ministry and mission that face Lutherans in America today as a result of fresh immigration and tensions between the local and the wider church.

Leaders of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ECLA) have been engaged in studies of ministry on multiple fronts in the last decade. Upon completing the merger that formed the ELCA in 1988, American Lutherans immediately set about the task of completing a study of ministry in order to attend to sticky theological and ecclesial issues that the merger committee found irresolvable. It is itself revealing that the separate Lutheran churches could agree to complete their merger without having a clear grasp on the new church’s understanding of ministry, and it demonstrates that, for Lutherans, the ordering of ministry does not constitute the ordering of their church. Nevertheless, the topic was the first order of theological business for the new ELCA. With the ministry study completed in 1993, and the decision made to define ministry as consisting of one office, rather than three, the church was conceivably ready to respond to a number of ecumenical agreements pending in the summer of 1997. The Concordat described the full communion relationship with the Episcopal Church USA, while the Formula of Agreement outlined the full communion arrangement that would commence with three churches in the Reformed tradition. The full communion agreement with the Episcopal Church, USA, however, seemed to stir up the not-quite-settled dust around the question of one, rather than two or three, offices of ministry.

The argumentation and controversy that attended the narrow defeat in 1997 and the narrow victory in 1999 for the ecumenical agreement with the ECUSA (Concordat in 1997, and Called to Common Mission in 1999) did more to reveal
still-active divisions in the newly merged ELCA than it provided guidance on the vexing practical issues of who might conduct an ordination, or the still more perplexing issue related to ordination of openly gay and lesbian persons. American Lutherans in the ELCA have not finished arguing about their understanding of ministry and ordination. Other Lutherans in America, most significantly the Lutheran Church Missouri Synod (LCMS), do not yet accept the ordination of women and have other distinctive emphases in structuring the way that the church itself is governed. My description of the American Lutheran debate is limited to those traditions that have joined together in the ELCA, a church that represents about two-thirds of American Lutheranism.

The process of merger leading up to the formation of the ELCA in 1988 consumed considerable energy, and many decisions relating to ecumenical and cultural developments that the three merging churches may have negotiated more easily on their own have been made in the more murky context of the ongoing political, social and cultural integration of the merging parties. The ecumenical invitations have, however, presented the clearest ‘call’ to Lutherans to do the work of stating our understanding of leadership and authority in our time and place. The full communion relationships that we have entered now ask us to better define who we are, in non-parochial language. Despite the turmoil these controversies have caused our church, the dispute has helped us not only to explain ourselves, but also to better understand ourselves.

I will argue that conversation, argument, and even dispute, build the dialogical relationships of church. Through the actions of speaking and persuading, of listening and reframing, the church gives voice to its experience and hope. This work of the word is a gathering as well as a sending activity; it invites relationships and accompanies fellowship. Ministry provides stewardship for this important spirit-driven work, and the practice of ordination, I will propose, identifies, readies, and undergirds those responsible for these relationships in the body of Christ.

Lutherans understand ordination directly in relationship to the administration of the word and sacrament with the stipulation that a person entering ministry must be duly called. A reading of the confessions, particularly the Augsburg, or Augustana Confession of 1530 states that they did not intend to restructure the church, or reorganize its orders; the interest instead focused on reforming the ways in which people came to faith. Since the reformers concluded that the problem of the church they intended to remedy concerned the way that people came to a saving faith, the remedy given was to concentrate particularly on ordinary people in congregations. As a result, it seems that Lutherans almost exclusively understand the ordained ministry as functioning in a congregational context.

The historical record of Lutheran practice underscores this orientation. Several centuries of development and ongoing reformation have repeatedly focused on ways to deepen and renew Christian life in a congregation. Lutherans see their
ministry and their vocation as local and particular in character, but the clear focus on the work of the congregation unfortunately does not guarantee Lutherans the same sharpness of vision when it comes to seeing the world around the parish.

A rather humdrum example of what I mean occurs at the seminary where I teach, in which the curriculum gives ample opportunity for students to focus on scriptural interpretation, church history, theology and practical ministry, but leaves the very important education in contemporary cultural, political or economic issues to the individual’s free time. A concerted attention to the way that government policies restricting immigration, for instance, may affect our international church relationships is not factored into anyone’s teaching load, but these developments will have a significant bearing on how future ministers will understand the mission of their church body. 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 gives us a cadre of ministers who practice efficient pastoral care and who manage a congregation’s program. What is missing is an understanding of ministry in its public and collegial context. Ordination, for Lutherans, may be an event that happens to an individual, but it is also an action that links congregations and a particular person in ministry, a ministry that in turn links them to a wider church, and to God’s mission through Christ and the Holy Spirit. It is not possible to conceive of ordination and ministry outside of this relational and mission-oriented process, for ordination does not order a person to God only, but defines also the ways that that person will be held accountable in the church and in the world.

**Foundations**

In the Lutheran Augsburg Confession, written to articulate and defend 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.” The structure for ordering such ministry, and the practices and relationships used to install a person into such an office are not spelled out in this primary and foundational confession of the Lutheran communion. Refer to Robert Kolb and Timothy J. Wengert (eds.), *The Book of Concord* (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Fortress, 2000).

---

1 Philip Melanchthon wrote the confession to outline the catholicity and orthodoxy of the Lutheran reformers. The confession was presented to Emperor Charles V at Augsburg, 25 June 1530, and subscribed by seven Lutheran Princes and two municipal governments. It remains the foundational confession of the Lutheran communion. Refer to Robert Kolb and Timothy J. Wengert (eds.), *The Book of Concord* (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Fortress, 2000).

foundational text. Later in the Confession, in Article XIV, the relationship of this office to the structure of the church is mentioned, but again this is done only briefly. Philip Melanchthon writes that no one should teach, preach/teach publicly (the German and Latin versions have slight differences in the confession) or administer the sacraments without a proper call.

The office of ministry is centered on the functions of preaching, teaching and administering the sacraments. These functions themselves, Lutherans have argued, are the actions by which the church is built, since the word and sacraments provide the medium through which the Holy Spirit can create faith. There would be no church were it not for faith. In other places in the confession these two functions – word preaching and administering the sacrament – again take central place: The famous *satis est* of the seventh article states that *it is enough* for the unity of the church that the word be preached and the sacraments administered in a right way. The passive construction of this seventh article causes varying types of frustration for Lutherans engaged in ecumenical discussions because of the indirect way in which the structures of church governance are either assumed or, according to others, subtly wished away.

Lutheran understandings of the office of ministry assume that the work of ministry is divinely instituted, and do not speculate or advance any new proposals about the inner character of the person of the minister nor demand any particular rituals beyond the recognized need for a public or proper accountability. The functions of preaching and sacramental ministry that are delegated to this office define the role of the minister. He or she is to preach the word that, through the Holy Spirit, brings faith, creates, and recreates the church. He or she is to gather the faithful to hear and receive the word and means of grace.

Further elaboration of the reformers’ explicit understanding of the way that the office of the ministry should be structured can be inferred from Melanchthon’s written response to the Roman Catholic Confutation that was written as a response to the Augsburg Confession. This second round of the reformers’ confession is called the *Apology to the Augsburg Confession*. The briefly stated understanding of ministry enunciated in Article V of the Augsburg Confession did not elicit a separate confutation from the Roman Catholic readers. That article was presumably acceptable. The understanding of church governance and the language of proper call in Article XIV, however, did elicit a response. Roman Catholic responders indicated that the word ‘proper’ was not clear enough. They insisted instead on the word ‘canonical’, to which Melanchthon wrote his well-known and hotly debated rejoinder that the Lutheran movement desired greatly to retain all the orders and various ranks in the church (he did not explicitly mention the papacy here) if only the bishops would be less cruel. Other than this brief exchange in the *Apology* there were no additional remarks about the office of the ministry. In the context of the worldwide expansion of Lutheran churches, and
ecumenical work of the last half century, however, Lutherans have since that time taken up the topic in earnest.

Since explicit instructions to dictate the structure of a properly reformed ministry did not appear in the Augsburg Confession, the most widely accepted of the confessional documents, different church structures emerged in the various, mostly Northern European, lands that signed on to the confessions. These national churches developed varied forms of ministry that corresponded to the political, economic and social patterns developing in a rapidly modernizing Europe. As immigrants from these lands migrated to North and South America, and Australia and as mission efforts developed, these varied forms were exported abroad.

Melanchthon’s spare treatment of this important topic in the Augsburg Confession has left plenty of room for later elaboration and dispute. Lutherans agree that 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. The mutual recognition of ministries among Lutheran churches is an aspect of the ongoing work of building a communion of Lutheran churches, but varying practices in relationship to the ordination of women, or to the development of the deaconate or the episcopate have not in themselves become barriers or bridges to fellowship, with the exception of relationships with the American Lutheran Church Missouri Synod (LCMS), which is not in fellowship with member churches of the Lutheran World Federation.

The lack of specific instructions regarding the structure of ministry in the confessions allowed Lutheran churches around the world to pioneer church structures and forms of ministry adapted to the exigencies of various cultures and times. Theologically, specific structures and practices of ministry belong in the category of ‘adiaphora’ – those things deemed instrumental and not necessary in themselves. Structures of ministry such as the deaconate or the episcopate have not been universally adopted by Lutheran churches, and are not understood in the same way by those churches that have adopted them; at the same time some Lutheran churches such as the ELCA have introduced practices through which their church will gradually maintain a form of the historic episcopate. The Called to Common Mission agreement with the Episcopal Church, USA, adopted by the ELCA in 1999 provides for the installation of all newly elected bishops into the ‘historic episcopate’ through the participation of three bishops who already stand in the tradition, one of them being from the Episcopal Church, USA. The adoption of this agreement was very controversial and narrowly failed to gain a two-thirds majority on the first attempt in 1997, when it was called the Concordat of Agreement. After a team of three Lutheran writers worked on the document it was narrowly passed. There is continuing resistance especially to the provision that all ordinations be performed by bishops and at the 2001 voting assembly the ELCA passed a provision allowing for exceptions to this rule. So far there have only been a handful of these. Much
of the ferocity of the opposition is based on a firm conviction that Lutheranism is best served by a continuing adherence to minimalist, egalitarian structures. The Lutheran concept *adiaphora*, which was translated into English as ‘indifferent’, connotes a negative meaning to the term, which supports their argument that adding unnecessary things will only impede the work of the church. Those who have argued for the adoption of new practices have instead understood the term *adiaphora* in a more permissive way, in the sense of the German translation of the term – *mittelting* – or the Swedish *medelting* – which underscores the more fluid character of the Greek word. Ministry structures are *adiaphora* in that they function not as an end in themselves but in an instrumental way. Ministry becomes a vehicle for something else, a means to an end. This word would then precisely fit the Lutheran understanding of ministry and provide a control for judging all forms and structures – they should be accepted or rejected insofar as they function as a vehicle for the Gospel and the means of grace.

The testing of traditions and structures that is part and parcel of the argument and debate in contemporary Lutheranism in the United States has been an ongoing and persistent feature of Lutheran church history. Various forms of ministry emerged in the countries where Lutheran teachings took hold, and the emergent organization – whether episcopally ordered or presbyteral – were adaptations to specific legal and political and cultural contexts. The reformation movement that gave rise to a rethinking and reorganization of ecclesial structures was also word-centered, in that any change had to be thought out and determined through process of argumentation and persuasion, in which the practical questions of message and audience, and of congregational involvement were necessarily involved. It is theologically important to recognize that the process of forming Lutheran churches and the structures of ministry and leadership that would guide them were forged in a confessional, persuasive, participatory and argumentative context. This does not mean that Lutheran leaders, political or ecclesiastical, have not resorted at times to coercive processes through which orders and practices have been imposed or enacted arbitrarily. The Lutheran movement has not proceeded through consensual means only, but has struggled with power and authority as any other human institution. Nevertheless, and I think the historical record will also reveal this, there is a common understanding among Lutherans that the way forward with any idea or message is to tell it, to argue it, to make the case, and to let the community discern, ultimately, the Gospel in that word.

**The American Context**

Perhaps the process of message, reception and adaptation was 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 own life span and the time of the Counter-
reformation, and the adaptation of the reformation movement in Northern Europe
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 too.

Many of the early settlers in America came for religious reasons. Dissenting
groups had the opportunity to establish their own religiously intolerant domains.
But there was too much land to settle, and dissenters, who usually had their own
supply of ministers, soon became minor segments of a much more eclectic mix of
settlers. Ordinary farmers, merchants and craftspeople usually required some kind
of religious ministry, but these settlers had a much harder time finding appropriate
ministers. Lutherans provided a ready supply of settlers to the large territory of
William Penn, and began arriving on the scene late in the seventeenth century. In
Philadelphia, where many settled, several decades passed before a settled ministry
emerged for the many Germans living there. Nearby, in Delaware and along the
Chesapeake there was a rather small Swedish colony, with alternatively three or four
Swedish priests in place, 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 more
properly groups of German settlers, realized that they couldn’t wait for a pastor to
perhaps arrive from one of the universities in Germany. Given the great distances
and the scattered nature of settlement in America, it was difficult to recruit able
candidates even where there was some interest in Germany. It was eventually
necessary to generate suitable candidates for ministry from among the settlers
themselves. The first ordination of a Lutheran pastor in America took place on 25
November 1703, and it was conducted by three priests from the Swedish Delaware
settlement who together ordained a German, Justus Falckner, so that he could
provide ministry to German settlers in Pennsylvania. The certificate, or prästbrev,
attested that Justus Falckner was a properly ordained minister of the Gospel.

The original document contains fold markings indicating that Falckner carried
this certificate, or prästbrev, on his person as a legitimating credential. The ample
text contained an argument for ordination and for the office of ministry and did a
necessary work of making a theological and scriptural argument for the ordained
ministry. The signs of pocket wear suggest that Falckner had to present his
credentials in many different places as he ministered to widely scattered groups of
new American settlers who evidently did not automatically accept the authority of
a preacher. Numerous stories from colonial settlements about unruly, undisciplined
and con-artist priests who foisted themselves on unsuspecting congregations

explain Falckner’s prudence. A potential congregation would have had to be convinced of their need for a duly ordained person by a persuasive argument or at least an important-looking document. Latin provided the 'lingua ecclesia' that could address a varied population of Dutch, Swedish, German and English-speaking Lutherans.

The text of the certificate proclaims that the office of ministry is based on the word, and is necessary for the preservation of faith. The argument connects ministry with the gift of the word with creation: ‘God Himself, the Establisher and Preserver of holy ministry, first discharged the office [munere] of preaching in Paradise and raised the first parents, deceived by the devil in disguise, for the hope of salvation by the promised seed of the woman, that he would tread upon the head of the serpent.’ Right from the beginning, the certificate introduces the possibility of deception, a problem that presents itself again at the end of the certificate when mention is made of all those who have entered the office of preacher under false pretenses. Throughout the text of this certificate, however, there is the repeated assurance that even in a wilderness, or time of uncertainty, God provided for the proper office of ministry: ‘Nor is there any doubt that Adam had instructed his children as to how they ought to preserve their faith in the promised seed. Before and after the flood, there existed lamps of the restored church and heralds of righteousness, Noah, Abraham, and other ministers of the Divine Word.’ The certificate traces salvation history through Moses, and the exemplary life of the levitical priests and through to the time of the New Covenant, when, ‘by His own ordination God distinguished between the teachers and those who heard, and guarded his order against the rank of the devil and the malice of the world’. Again, the dangers to proper ministry present themselves, yet God has always provided the word, even in wilderness settings, and so also here in America.

Significantly, the argument does not align the ministry with the apostolic witness alone, or derive its authority and sanction from it 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. 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.

The collegial context within which ministry is generated and recognized created a recognizable history for Lutherans churches and ministry in America.

---

3 All citations that follow in this paragraph are from the Falckner Ordination certificate, housed in the archives of the Lutheran Theological Seminary at Gettysburg, translated by Mimi Ruth, with the assistance of Maria Erling and Timothy Wengert. The full text and the translation are in an appendix.
Henry Melchior Muhlenberg, a minister who came to the colonies from Halle, near Wittenberg in Germany, in the middle of the eighteenth century, is widely recognized for his work in organizing the first ministerium and providing for a standard worship service and the regular organization of parishes. His career spanned the important transition years of revolution and independence when established church structures in some of the colonies in America were dismantled. His organizing ability and ecclesial leadership was so well known, apparently, that he was 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 Lutheran Pennsylvania ministerium was asked to ordain an Episcopal candidate.

Muhlenberg’s response to the request suggested first that the congregation temporarily authorize a ministry among them that would provide for the preaching of the word while they waited for an episcopally ordained priest. His suggestion that the congregation could itself authorize a form of ministry did not suit the Episcopal congregation’s 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. 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. They took the time to deliberate over the course of four meetings on whether or not they had the authority to ordain a person for another tradition, and how they might determine what kind of theological examination to administer to the candidate.

Throughout the history of Lutheran adaptation in America, the leaders who emerge and the decisions they make depend on this process of mutual deliberation, 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 particularly among the laity, was the form of Lutheran practice that made the largest impact on the developing American church.

4 Muhlenberg’s diary entry on 11 June 1783 stated 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: Concordia, 1983), p. 118.
It was an activist movement, and it was portable. The concept of the ‘priesthood of all believers’ gained a renewed emphasis through the writings of Pietist authors such as Philip Jakob Spener, and the voluntary nature of American church life allowed for 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 nineteenth century introduced an entirely new agenda to Lutheran churches on the Continent, in America, and eventually around the world. Alongside the ongoing migrations of peoples from rural settings to cities, and to other lands, came significant disruptions to churchly sensibilities and expectations. In Scandinavia a neo-pietist renewal among laypeople awakened many to a powerful sense of an individual Christian calling even as they contemplated leaving home and becoming landholders or businessmen in far-away America. Communicating across the ocean, immigrants, in their letters home, encouraged cousins and nieces to follow them not only to a new land but also to a new social reality: ‘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.’ In developing their own understanding of ministry, immigrant church bodies in America assumed that leadership would center on ordained pastors, but established structures in which laypeople would have significant input. At early meetings of ministers and at the conference gatherings of congregations, considerable time was spent debating the propriety of lay preaching, and discussing the relative authority of congregations and synods in the calling of pastors.

These 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 ministry divinely instituted and the minister a representative of Christ? These arguments between function and character and the diverse positions 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.’

---

4 Guidelines and Principles for the Lutheran Free Church, pamphlet printed in 1938, Archives of the ELCA.

The diversity of positions on ministry implied in the many structures persists within the American church. The fact that the important nineteenth-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 twentieth century contributes to the levels of confusion and political complexity in current theological and mission debates within the ELCA.⁷

**Theologians Desire Statements, But Historians Look For Patterns**

Identifying the Lutheran understanding on ministry, and on the meaning of ordination, cannot be gleaned from explicit statements in official documents alone. The variety of parent bodies and the diverse historical contexts in which positions on the question develop complicate any attempt to arrive at a definitive position. The Lutheran theological faculty at Philadelphia Seminary responded to the ELCA’s latest study on ministry when it was in draft stage by saying that the many patterns that ministry assumed in the Lutheran church bodies in America showed, in their pluralism, that ministry was, as they termed it, of a secondary character. Otherwise, they implied, the Lutheran churches would not have been able to accomplish their merger.⁸

In the early twentieth 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. A rather triumphal refutation of this view appears in the Augustana Synod’s serial *My Church* where the Illinois conference President, the Rev. Peter Peterson, expresses his understanding of that Swedish Synod’s role in the wider scheme of things. After noting that the Augustana Synod was after seventy-five years an established church and now ready for its real work, he identified the role it played in its time: ‘The Augustana Synod has a special contribution to make to the Lutheran Church of America. The Lutheran Church of America has a special contribution to make to the Lutheran Church of the world. The Lutheran Church of the world must save Protestant Christianity.’⁹ The illustrated annual that these words introduced was

---


addressed to a broad lay readership. It contained sketches of the work of that synod, maps of the mission fields occupied by the various Lutheran churches around the world, statistics on the property holdings and wealth of the various conferences, and reports on significant events in the world of Lutheranism. The volume ended with a short article on Ecumenical Lutheranism, a new idea presented to Lutherans around the world in the wake of the world war. John A. Morehead’s plea for a united Lutheranism ended with his vision of an ‘orderly advance of the Church in the conquest of the world for Christ.’

Clearly the work of these Lutheran churches did not end at the chancel, but focused on service and ministry extending in wider and wider circles. The agents of this grand vision, of course, were not explicitly named. Who was to take on the role of conquering the world for Christ? How would the church advance in an orderly way? It would be safe to assume that the readers of this volume knew who was responsible for leading this advance. Each issue of My Church and the older Swedish version of the annual entitled Korsbaneret contained pictures of all newly ordained pastors. Ordination marked the identification of these men as leaders in the whole churches’ program, a ministry that extended far beyond the confines of a congregation. The churches’ pastors had been leaders in the development of the immigrant church body, and had been agents in the gradual transition from a Swedish-centered piety and language to a new, hyphenated Swedish-American church life.

**Gospel Ministry is Dialogical**

What we can learn from this history of pragmatic adaptation is the dialogical character of an authentic Gospel ministry. This transition from older, European forms of Lutheran practice to an American adaptation of these inherited forms brought 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, but 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 occur, across generations, and across cultural barriers as well.

I am of course identifying the work of preaching as the key function of ministry, and this preaching has to bring the church into a living engagement through the

---

10 John A. Morehead, ‘Ecumenical Lutheranism’, in My Church, p. 119.
Spirit's work with the world. 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 stated that it is the Lutheran position that the word and sacraments build the church. Here I wish to describe more carefully, and delineate more clearly the way in which the transactions of word speaking and administering of the sacrament do not turn into some kind of static, essential building-blocks when making the church, but retain, and pass on to the church their fluid, dialogical activity/nature. Thus the church, constituted by speaking, engaging, hearing and receiving, is necessarily formed by these acts which can be known also as the church’s mission. In being itself the church crosses boundaries carrying words from one to another, taking part in actions that bear traditions from one time and place and culture to another.

The future dimension of the church, its apostolic character, is also this same mission activity and identity. The church must keep speaking, in new languages and time, in order both to be itself and to live. This ongoing speaking and translation activity, however, ceases to be of an apostolic character if each separate group of Christians goes its own way. In order to keep together a dimension of apostolicity, congregations must share what they have done in their own vernacular, in their own local speaking, with other congregations of Christians. 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. When we examine the way in which this process works, we see that the ordained cannot bring this to pass without the participation of the congregation. Congregations, by themselves, cannot be the whole church. The building of the church as a wider fellowship – as synod, diocese or conference, or more widely as a denomination or communion – also depends on these functions of word speaking and administering the sacraments. The church is built as the koinonia of the congregations develops. The structure that American Lutherans borrowed and adapted for this developing koinonia, this developing fellowship, was the synodical meeting. In these gatherings, the local translations, or adaptations in preaching and teaching the Gospel made in congregations, were tested by the wisdom of the gathered pastors and lay leaders. The kind of translation or mission work done at the synod and conference meetings related directly to the work of the ordained ministers – those responsible for the local mission, the local translation, of the Gospel. These individuals, sometimes accompanied by lay leaders, who had dual identities as pastors/local preachers and leaders and as ministerial colleagues, fashioned the developing communion among the congregations.
At these synod or district meetings, pastors examined candidates for ministry and approved them for ordination. This process has since been organized on a national level, but retains a strong synodical component, in that candidacy committees on the synod level examine and approve candidates for ordination. Throughout American Lutheran history, 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, now 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 at these gatherings reminded the participants that they were a gathered church, but the very processes of speaking the word to each other, and together asking new questions of the Gospel, 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.

**Deliberative Structures are Mission Structures**

As American Lutherans developed their distinctive forms of church life, they were at the same time structuring a church in order not only to educate ministers and leaders, but also to 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 that enjoyed various degrees of mutual recognition and fellowship. 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 forced Lutherans out of isolation and into communion. When American Lutheran communities made their transition into English-speaking churches during the beginning years of the twentieth century, a new challenge faced them: now they needed to find new justification for remaining separate. As they began to articulate in English their several understandings of the Lutheran tradition, a
greater Lutheran unity began to emerge, again dependent upon the process of speaking, interpreting, listening, arguing, judging and discerning.

Serious efforts to create inter-Lutheran unity began in the period between the world wars, building on earlier co-operation in mission work and military chaplaincy. Theological foundations for unity existed, but disagreements about the extent and manner of subscription to the Lutheran confessional documents (sometimes called symbols) emerged as the most significant of the many disagreements among the Lutheran bodies. Some Lutheran churches expected others to subscribe to additional theological statements or theses before there could be any kind of mutual recognition. Typically these included a statement indicating acceptance of the infallibility or inerrancy of scripture. These unity processes were largely conducted and argued by clergy. Conditions for fellowship were issued by one church to another and these often included the acceptance of specific statements on biblical inerrancy and disavowal and even disciplinary measures against clergy who may have participated in any kind of co-operation with other Christians.11

Given the nature of the disagreements over doctrine and polity, it is understandable that laypeople 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, for separate understandings of scripture, the role of the congregation and the shape of the clergy kept the Lutheran Church Missouri Synod (LCMS) out of the broader, more ecumenically oriented American Lutheranism characterized by the ELCA.

The ordination of women, in particular, signaled the biggest divide within American Lutheranism. The decision to go ahead with this step was made by two-thirds of American Lutherans who were members of the Lutheran Church in America (LCA) and the American Lutheran Church (ALC) in the early 1970s, but their decision initiated a reaction within the more conservative LCMS. Conservative forces mustered the support for the election of a president who would adamantly oppose this development within their ranks. Seminary professors in the LCMS Concordia Seminary system who taught in such a way as to possibly suggest some kind of openness to newer interpretations of the historic male-only pattern for ministry were dismissed from their posts. A student walkout supported the exiled faculty at Concordia and a new seminary in exile, seminex, provided the catalyst for the eventual formation of the ELCA. The women’s issue was not the only issue prompting the split within Missouri, but I think it demonstrates for us a

11 An exchange between writers for the General Council and the Iowa Synod papers in 1909 brought to light the fact that Lutheran groups were carefully reading each other’s papers, and reacting strongly to any slight or mischaracterization. The Lutheran Review (ed. Theodore Schmauk; Philadelphia, 1908), vol. 27, pp. 361ff.
significant shift in the way that Lutherans had begun to think about the authority of the ordained in the congregation.

The shift in understanding authority represented by this internal struggle 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 decision to ordain 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.

An African proverb sums up my own experience as well as that of many other women in this way: ‘Walking makes the road.’ 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 how important it is for ministry to build trusting relationships has helped me read American Lutheran history in such a way to notice that Muhlenberg, and the many immigrant pastors who followed him, had also to negotiate their way into a kind of authority 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. 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 naively expects that the community should recognize this in some kind of automatic way and respond accordingly. The classic Lutheran understanding of the operation of the word – that when preached the Holy Spirit will be carried along with it, and trigger a faith response – can also be faulted for assuming a unilateral, or univocal, understanding of the way that the word, and faith, is communicated, elevating the role of the ordained as the dispenser of all good. 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 with western ideas, and Christian communities could be formed, 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 the completion of the action of speaking and telling. There is no word shared unless there is an assembly to hear and respond. In order for the word to truly be heard, and not just tolerated, moreover, there must be a relationship of mutual influence and trust. For that reason I contend that ordination is itself an ordering of the relationship between the assembly, or congregation and the minister. It is very much a community affair; it is very much the inauguration of this mission work, a relationship of local speaking and receiving, and the relationship of pastor and people is formed as this is organized and set in motion. The pastor, in turn, along with lay leaders, can represent this local congregation in the wider sphere or koinonia of congregations. Another level of mutual trust and influence is possible around the ministry of bishops and further in the ecumenical relationships of churches. Everywhere the Christian way is the way of speaking and hearing the Gospel, and this is how the church is built.

In developing this mission perspective, I recognize that in focusing on the word-centered, mission-oriented understanding of the role of the ordained, I have not written specifically about other essential aspects of the ministry of the ordained – 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 also by practices of hospitality, and ministry focused only on deliberative structures will never achieve the fullness of koinonia. Another essay could well be written on this aspect of the mechanics of ecclesial relationships, but a brief mention will have to suffice here.

The largest numbers of immigrants to America today come from the South – from Latin America, Africa and Asia. Since the Immigration Act of 1965, which opened the doors again to migration, the preponderance of new Americans are no longer former Europeans, and one might think that fewer and fewer Lutherans would be among them. New arrivals are Lutheran, however, from Sudan, Ethiopia, Liberia and Tanzania, together with Palestinians, Philipino and El Salvadorans, who occasionally show up in unsuspecting Lutheran congregations. They have brought us a new missionary moment. 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. Coming to the North these new immigrants bring with them their own variety of Christianity, and many come from Lutheran

churches. Ethiopian Christians from the Mekane Jesus Church have formed congregations in the north-eastern part of the United States, and their internal development shows all the signs of repeating many of the internal devotional and ecclesial disputes that shaped Lutheran communities in the seventeenth, eighteenth, nineteenth and twentieth 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. They are guiding the process of local translation and are the stewards of that effort to maintain the faith once and for all delivered to the saints.

Lutherans founded agencies for the resettlement of refugees after the world wars in the twentieth century, mostly for Lutheran people fleeing from lands that had become communist. Now these institutions provide hospitality and legal advice for refugees from many lands, who have a very difficult time negotiating with ever more stringent immigration laws. Many of these refugees are actually from Lutheran churches in their homeland. The political dimensions to welcoming refugees have changed, and an easy anti-communism cannot be invoked as a rationale for an automatic American welcome. 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. Briefly 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.

The ELCA’s constitution describes the nature of the church in terms of congregations and their role in relationship to the wider community of the faithful:

The church exists both as an inclusive fellowship and as local congregations gathered for worship and Christian service. Congregations find their fulfillment in the universal community of the Church, and the universal Church exists in and through congregations. This church, therefore, derives its character and powers both from the sanction and representation of its congregations and from its inherent nature as an expression of the broader fellowship of the faithful. In length, it acknowledges itself to be in the historic continuity of the communion of saints; in breadth, it expresses the fellowship of believers and congregations in our day.12

By linking the local and universal dimensions of the church, the constitution provides its answer to the perennial question of where the church is essentially located, and how the ministry, the ordained, should see their role. There is a mission dimension, a universal aspect, to the work of speaking the word, and the actions that assemble the

12 Chapter 3, ‘Nature of the Church’, paragraph 2, ELCA Constitution.

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, a world in need of relationships that transcend race, nation, class and tribe, needs us Christians to bring with us 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 a witness that will need to be heard in wider and wider circles. More recently, the recent advancement in the United States of an openly gay bishop for the Episcopal diocese of New Hampshire will test the fabric of relationships the Anglican Communion.

The integrity of local decision-making, as churches discern how to speak the Gospel in their own particular place, is an important mission principle. 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.
Copyright of Ecclesiology is the property of Continuum International Publishing Group Ltd and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.