

The Ministry of the Church

Presbyterian & Reformed-Roman Catholic Dialogue

1968

The agreements which follow have been reached by the undersigned members of the theological commission of the bilateral consultation appointed by the Catholic Bishops' Committee for Ecumenical and Interreligious Affairs and the North American Area Council of the World Alliance of Reformed Churches, and represent their present assessment of the question of the ministry of the Church.

1. Summary of Discussions So Far Held

For varying periods of time members of our commission have discussed ways and means by which our ministries could be united and each of us led to a deeper knowledge and love of the other. Our concern in the early meetings was to see how the road lay to full intercommunion. But it soon became clear that this end lay far beyond us, because the traditions of which we are a part have been separated for centuries and because there was not full acceptance amongst us of each other's ministries. At this point, therefore, in our discussion we moved away from churchly questions and asked, instead, particular and practical questions about the Church's ministry to the world. But this in turn forced us to inquire why in fact we remain separated from one another when the world's needs are so great, and to see if there may be a way of reconciliation. One inescapable fact of our present situation is the division of the church, a division which is a symbol of but also a scandal in an alienated and divided world. We know that we are charged with the responsibility of bringing healing to the broken human family, but we also know that in its own life the Church has contradicted and frustrated its purpose.

In the later meetings of the group, therefore, we turned to the needs of the world, hurt as it is by war, hungry and torn by riots, for it is this world and no other that provides us with the reason for our ministry and suggests to us new forms in which to express that ministry. Manifold opportunities for bearing effective Christian witness and service in the human family not only offer extraordinary possibilities for cooperative Christian living and ministry, cooperation in dealing with the urban crisis, the issues of war and peace, racial unrest, family life, and all matters involving human dignity. We think also, for example, of collaboration in the joint continuing education of all those who serve the church.

2. Norms By Which Our Ministry Is Shaped

Any form of ministry by the church is a participation in Christ's own ministry and servanthood. Those who would serve men must serve as their Master served. They must love and serve the actual world in which they live. But their ministry to this world is not a lordship, but a bond-service. It is not imposed as a rigid pattern, but undertaken willingly in new ways which express and fulfill the command of our Lord to go and teach and celebrate his sacraments.

Hence, the most decisive norm for contemporary forms of Christian ministry should be whether or not they enable men to understand, articulate and begin to realize their deepest needs – worship, love, justice, reconciliation and community, to name some of the most important. Any structures which effectively hinder the achievement of those needs do not witness to the primary ministry of Christ must yield to other forms of ministry which do. In this context we acknowledge as an undiscussed problem the consequences and analogies which are to be drawn from the Lordship of Christ.

3. *The Common Priesthood*

Within the Christian community all the faithful are called and empowered by the Holy Spirit to enter into and express the ministry of Christ. There is a whole range of gifts of the Spirit – gifts of service and love, rich in their diversity, not limited to the few, but possessed by men and women, young and old alike. All baptized and believing Christians share the grace of God's Spirit, the freedom of the gospel, and the basic equality of the priestly people of God. It is our conviction that this doctrine of the common priesthood of the faithful needs to be magnified and lived out more within both our traditions. The Holy Spirit works where he wills and as he wills through all the people of God, calling them to their ministry. All Christians alike participate in the ministry of Christ to the world, serving, nourishing, healing and building up.

4. *Special Ministries*

Within this community, where there is such diversity of gifts, some are also called by the Holy Spirit and ordained by the Church to undertake special ministries on behalf of the servants of Christ and through them on behalf of the world. This calling of some to nourish, heal and build up the household of faith in the ministry of word and sacraments is a particular gift of the Holy Spirit. Ordination to this ministry is therefore also a gift of the Spirit to empower them for their ministry. This empowering comes both from the Spirit and from the Church; the power given, however, is not power to dominate but to serve in Christ's stead and to do what he wills to be done for his world through his Church.

In this whole context we acknowledge as an undiscussed subject the ordination of women. In some Reformed Churches women are already ordained to the ministry of word and sacrament.

5. *Ordination and the Indelible Character*

The Christian community prays at each ordination with the laying on of hands for the gift of the Spirit. To assert or to deny an ontic change at ordination can lead to a misunderstanding of its effect. Yet the new purpose toward which this person's life is directed through this commission to ministry does truly and radically change the individual concerned, in the sense that he now bears and is implicated in a nexus of new relationships in the church and receives and exercises a new responsibility within its life.

There is a particular commission and charism in ordination to the special ministry of word and sacraments. The conceptions of ministerial order held by our respective traditions appear to be significantly different. In the Catholic tradition the priest in a particular way represents Christ to the people, but he himself is also a representative of the people before Christ. In the Reformed tradition ministerial order is not generally conceived of apart from pastoral functioning. When Roman Catholics speak of indelible character conferred in ordination, their meaning is that the person who has been commissioned by the Church for this ministry retains during his life radical empowering to serve as priest, even though he ceases to exercise his priesthood. His ordination cannot be repeated any more than can his baptism. Reformed churchmen, while unwilling to speak of a conferring of an indelible character, do not deny the necessity of ordination in principle as long as the church continues on its pilgrimage, nor is reordination practiced among them. Both alike agree that the ordination is a gift by which the pilgrim church is enabled to serve the world until the Kingdom of God is fully present.

6. *Varied Historical Forms of Rule in the Church*

In all ministries of the pilgrim church there are some permanent elements. There are also however, some historically conditioned elements – naturally enough, since every ministry is a ministry incarnate at a particular place and time. The intense historical consciousness and research of our time and the study of the origins of our ministries show us clearly that many elements in them are historically conditioned. Thus, it is useful for Catholics to know that what is usually called monarchical episcopate (found, for example, in St. Ignatius of Antioch in the second century) can be seen to be preceded by earlier and different forms, for instance, a collegial episcopate or government of presbyters, and so on. Presbyterian polity, on the other hand, though it is in intention an attempt to recover an early scheme of ministry, has also been historically conditioned. Recent historical studies indicate that there was a great variety of forms of ministry in the early church, and it seems clear that later patterns of ministry and priesthood were preceded by highly flexible and charismatic ministries. Modern patterns of ministry and priesthood can themselves be both flexible and charismatic, and we do not think that it is our task to reconstitute ancient forms in our day, though restoration of the married diaconate within the Roman Catholic church illustrates how earlier forms of ministry can be creatively reinterpreted in our day. But we can learn enough from the past to know that neither the monarchical episcopate nor any corporate polity have been the only legitimate forms of rule within the church.

7. *The Idea of the Pilgrim Church*

Certain older ideas that equated the church with the Kingdom of God have to be corrected by modern theological and exegetical studies which have recovered for us an eschatological dimension in our thinking about church and ministry. Our whole thinking about the church has now a less absolute character than it had. The church's ministry at the present must be open to all the diverse ways by which the pilgrim church seeks to achieve its goal. This means that we must be ready for change and not confuse permanent elements in the ministry with passing ones. The paradigm of the Kingdom of God is of

use to us here because it serves to draw us on in the hope that God's purposes will be fulfilled and indeed are beginning to be fulfilled through our existing ministries. But it also reminds us that we go, seeking a city. The Church is on the way, but it has not arrived. Our future hope and present limitation do something more for us: they help to shape our present ministries, adapting them for the future.

8. *Intercommunion*

No renunciation of the episcopate by the Roman Catholics is here proposed nor of their ministries by the representatives of the Reformed Churches. What we do offer is a genuine statement of intention to move together to the future God will give us in the hope that the knowledge and love which have grown amongst us may encourage the appropriate authorities to help us both to move together toward this future.

If such an intention is given by us and a firm commitment given to each other, both the demands we face and the hopes we have confront us directly with the problem and the need of intercommunion. We recognize that theological convictions and pastoral sensitivity on both sides prevent us from acting without due care. At the same time we feel pain when we realize that, though we are one in many ways, at this central point we remain divided. It may yet be possible for us to penetrate the theological principles governing intercommunion in the hope of laying open the significance of the eucharist as the divinely given sacrament of unity and the medicine of our divisions. We, therefore, hope that God will soon give us the time and opportunity to take into our hands this means which has given for repentances, reconciliation, and unity.

The question of ultimate reconciliation and mutual acceptance can no longer be evaded and we know for certain that we shall return to it. In a broke world this reconciliation would be a sign of hope. In a world which has been drawn closer than ever together, but is faced with the possibility of deeper division caused by war or other human tragedy, such a daring step would point men, we believe, to Christ, the Hope of the World.

9. *Questions Still At Issue*

Many questions still need to be discussed by us, for instance, the primacy of the Bishop of Rome, sacerdotal priesthood, the apostolic succession. To exclude these questions from our report may make a common statement on ministry seem artificial, and we do not seek to awaken expectations which may be disappointed by further clarification when we face in future discussions the crucial issue of orders. Yet it has been possible for us to indicate at least these preliminary agreements and disagreements. The heavy emphases made in this paper and the lengthy discussions of problems of the ordained ministry may well appear to be a distortion, but they may also point out the way which leads us to full communion and liberate us for our ministry to the world.