

International Council of Community Churches **MINISTRY AND ORDINATION**

The Nature of Ministry

Ministry comes from the Christ, and every Christian by her/his baptism is commissioned to ministry in the name of the Christ. Ministry takes many forms. The apostle Paul identified some forms of ministry, but in no way claimed that his was an exhaustive list. Some forms of ministry that have found new emphasis in today's society include:

- A. Care-giver. Some professions are oriented to care-giving. Parenting is a care-giving process. Many find themselves caring for elderly relatives as those family members' health declines. Medical professionals devote entire careers to care-giving. While care-giving has always been a part of the church's ministry, the forms of care-giving are changing as medical advances and societal shifts present new challenges.
- B. Organizational change agent. Without the leavening produced by risk-taking individuals who question policies out of deeply held principles, corporations risk becoming corrupt and venal in their internal workings. This kind of ministry goes beyond personal examples of rectitude to making suggestions, working collaboratively, and using the skills of networking to move a corporation toward righteous behavior.
- C. Mentor. All recognize the role of professional educators in forming the youngest members of church and society. As society becomes increasingly complex and impersonal, the need for mentoring by word and deed increases. A young person whose life is touched by a senior mentor with experience, insight and patience is blessed.

Let these serve as examples for the wide variety of ministries that exist. Ordination, commissioning or other forms of formal recognition are not needed for Christians to engage in these or many other ministries. By circumstance, by opportunity, and by the still small voice of the Spirit, Christians are called to ministries irrespective of their lay or ordained status. Within this understanding, an individual Christian may engage in a variety of ministries throughout her or his life.

Ordained Ministry

One of the varieties of ministry is the ordained ministry. Ordination sets apart an individual to "build up the body" of Christ's church. For this reason, ordained ministry has a unique place in the life of the church.

The ICCC embraces in its fellowship congregations which may be labeled as "free churches." The ICCC also embraces in its fellowship bodies that are labeled "Old Catholic," independent Catholic," and/or belonging to the "independent sacramental movement." These churches view ordination as a sacrament. Though preparation for and some of the liturgies related to ordination are in some ways similar to those found in "free churches," there are significant differences both in theological underpinnings and relational realities.

For those preparing for ordination in Old Catholic, independent Catholic and independent sacramental movement churches, the details of preparation and procedures may vary somewhat from one jurisdiction to another; as established by the presiding

bishop of each jurisdiction. For this reason and because the topic of ordination within a sacramental setting deserves separate and more extended consideration, the balance of this document will deal primarily with preparation for and ordination within the Free Church tradition.

Ordination and Relationship

Ordination has been defined by function. In this view, those who are ordained are set aside to perform certain acts which are not, or in some perspectives cannot be, done by laity. Ordination has also been defined primarily by authority. In this view an ordained person is given through ordination a mandate to direct and grant permission for actions and initiatives within the church. In the majority view of the Community Church movement, ordination is defined primarily by relationship. Individuals are ordained to fulfill relational roles first. All else follows.

Why prioritize relationships in a consideration of ordination? The answer is to be found in the ministry of Jesus the Christ, whose relationships took precedence over assigned function or task, and over direct or imputed authority. The relationship between humanity and Divinity through the Christ is at the heart of the Christian faith. The vertical relationship between humanity and Divinity is expressed and fulfilled through the horizontal relationships between and among humans. In this understanding, the church exists primarily in relationship, which precedes function and authority.

The nature of the relationship to which the ordained are set apart is one of servant leadership within the church, for the benefit of the church's ministries in the world. To be a servant and to be a leader are complementary rather than oppositional.

Preparation for Ordination

Because the International Council of Community Churches is congregational in its polity, and since different congregations have different views, community churches provide a variety of paths to ordination. Most Council congregations require of their candidates for ordination a regimen of educational preparation that includes four years of college and three years of post-college theological education. Some churches require an extended apprenticeship under an experienced pastor. Others have different or additional requirements including internships, training in clinical pastoral education and more. Common to all is the understanding that ordained ministry is not a solitary pursuit. Ordained ministry is by, for and of the church.

All of the paths to ordination focus on two emphases: spiritual formation and intellectual preparation. The first emphasis is based on the recognition that servant leadership in the church requires commitment in the face of disappointment; dedication in spite of grief and setback; and a devotion that can love God's people as they are rather than as one would wish them to be. Intellectual preparation assures that the candidate will have both the theological and practical knowledge needed for servant leadership in the church.

Mentoring

While there is wide variety among community churches in the process that leads to ordination, there is also remarkable similarity. The process begins with the individual's sense of "call" to the ordained ministry. Together with the candidate, those who are responsible for overseeing the process of preparation for ordination undergo a period of discernment to discover if the call appears to be genuine and appropriate.

At some point in relation to this discernment process, the candidate and a mentor begin a period of consultation. Depending on local custom and requirements the mentor may be enlisted by the candidate, or may be appointed by one or more persons within the local church. The mentor provides emotional and spiritual support for the candidate, but also plays the role of “devil’s advocate,” presenting questions that will lead the candidate to explore the implications of her/his theological positions both intellectually and in practical ways.

Sharing Christian Faith and Experience

Before being admitted into the ordained ministry, the candidate presents in a formal way her/his call to the ministry and a personal statement of faith. While some community church bodies prefer a process of interrogatory in reviewing the call and statement of faith, the majority of community churches (those organized as “free churches”) require that the candidate prepare a formal written statement that covers the topics of call and faith statement, and read this document – an ordination paper – to a council of clergy and laity convened for the purpose.

The Interrogatory Process

In some ICCC churches, the candidate for ordination is expected to prepare for an interrogatory session in which those present at an ordination council pose a series of questions to the candidate. The questioners’ intent is to elicit the convictions of the candidate on a variety of theological and practical topics and to assess the candidate’s readiness to take on the role of an ordained minister. Preparation for an interrogatory should include intensive reviews of the candidate’s life and faith with one or more mentors so that the candidate’s intellectual understandings and spiritual convictions become more mature. In all respects other than the reading of an ordination paper, the ordination council proceeds as described in the following sections.

The Ordination Paper

The writing of an ordination paper following the suggestions below allows the ordination candidate to reflect on his or her Christian beliefs and to present them as a coherent whole. The contemplation, prayer and perhaps further study that result will help the candidate’s intellectual understanding and spiritual convictions to become deeper and more mature.

The sharing of an ordination paper with a mentor and then with an ordination council provides the candidate an opportunity to share his/her own Christian faith and experience as a witness to the church that God’s Holy Spirit still moves and acts in the lives of individual Christians. An ordination paper typically contains two major sections:

- A. *Spiritual journey and call to the ministry.* The candidate describes briefly how his/her spiritual journey has brought her/him to this point, answering the following or similar questions. What has emerged? What remains yet unfinished? What is the candidate’s current hope and/or understanding regarding his/her call to ministry? How, and by what spiritual practices, does God continue to speak in the candidate’s life? Why does the candidate feel the need to be ordained to do what she/he is called to do?
- B. *Basic beliefs.* The candidate describes her/his understanding (and struggles with) basic areas of faith – God; the person of Jesus Christ; the person and work of the Holy Spirit; sin and evil; redemption/salvation; atonement; the sacraments or ordinances as she/he understands them; the scriptures; the church. (This list is

neither prescriptive nor exhaustive; the candidate should use those categories that best allow him/her to explicate her/his own faith.) The candidate should try to use her/his own words. For the benefit of those to whom the ordination paper will be presented, if technical theological terms are used, those words should be accompanied by an explanation of their meanings using non-technical language.

An ordination paper should be typed rather than written out in longhand. Scriptural citations may profitably accompany what is shared in the paper, but should be included as footnotes rather than in the text of the paper. Those who are part of the ordination council are there to hear what the candidate believes herself/himself, and not to hear an assemblage of scripture texts placed end to end.

The paper (both sections) will be read aloud to the ordination council. It should not take longer than 25 to 30 minutes for such a reading. Material that is meant to be read as a document may not communicate well when read aloud. For that reason the candidate should “practice” by reading the paper aloud to her/his mentor and others. These persons will advise the candidate if the grammar or wording is awkward, or if the sentence structure leaves listener unsure of what the candidate meant to say.

The candidate should approach the writing of the ordination paper as an opportunity to grow in faith, for that is its highest purpose. Those who hear and/or read the paper will be concerned for the integrity of ministry, and will want to prayerfully discern the candidate’s readiness for the burdens as well as the joys of ordained ministry.

The Formation of An Ordination Council

In convening an ordination council community churches commonly invite clergy and lay representatives from nearby churches to form such a council. Nearly without exception those invited include not only those from churches of similar faith and order, but also those who represent the wider ecumenical community. The invitation describes in brief the process of ordination in a community church, and asks those who attend the council to be prepared to ask clarifying questions of the candidate after the ordination paper is read and to participate in an advisory vote recommending to the inviting church whether to proceed to ordination of the candidate.

The Agenda for an Ordination Council

Typically the agenda for an ordination council contains the following elements.

1. Statement of the Purpose of the Council (*customarily read by a layperson appointed for the purpose by the local church body; includes an introduction of the individual chosen by the local church body to preside at the council.*)
2. Prayer (*customarily led by a representative of the local church body.*)
3. Appointment of a clerk, made by the presiding individual. (*The clerk will keep a record of attendance and proceedings, and at the close of the council present these to the inviting church body for inclusion in its records.*)
4. “Roll call” during which those who are in attendance share their church and denominational affiliation. (*Customarily this is conducted by the presiding individual.*)
5. Introduction of the Candidate (*typically by the candidate’s mentor; the introduction includes an abbreviated “curriculum vitae” of the candidate.*)
6. Reading of the Ordination Paper by the candidate.
7. Questions from the Council; answers from the candidate (*see the section below.*)

8. Dismissal of the candidate so that the Council may deliberate and vote.
9. Deliberation by the Council
10. Vote by the Council on the question: “shall this council recommend to the church body that has convened this council, that the church body proceed to ordain the candidate?”
11. Return of the candidate and reading of the decision of the council to the candidate.
12. Closing prayer and benediction (*customarily by a representative of the wider church.*)

The Conduct of an Ordination Council's Questions

During an ordination council, those present (customarily the clergy and appointed members of the local church hosting the council plus invited clergy and laity from other churches) will have an opportunity to ask questions of the candidate based on what the candidate's ordination paper contains. The purpose of the questions is to give the candidate an opportunity to further elucidate her/his views on a variety of relevant subjects, and for members of the ordination council to further assess the candidate's readiness for ordained ministry.

The person who is chairing the proceedings will need to keep control of the questions and the questioners. Some questioners have been known to expound at length on a theological or Biblical topic, and to do so less to ask a question than to demonstrate their own theological brilliance or extensive Biblical knowledge. Others may ask questions that are “loaded”, so that no matter how the answer is phrased it will appear that the candidate holds unorthodox or heretical opinions.

The chair will need to move the verbose to a conclusion (“Is there a question in there somewhere?”) or force the “gotcha” questioner to rephrase the question (“Do you mean to ask A, or B, because it isn't fair to ask both questions at the same time?”)

The chair of the proceedings will need to end an exchange between a questioner and a candidate in the case that the questioner wants a debate with the candidate about a particular subject. (“This exchange of views is interesting, and you may have a different opinion from the candidate, but this is not the time for debate; instead it is the time to understand what the candidate believes.”)

If the candidate has been vague or incomplete in a statement about a particular point of doctrine or practical application, it is entirely fair for the chair to begin the questioning by saying “Candidate A, your statement about X was interesting, but we'd like to hear your views in more detail. Would you say something more about that?”

One or more questions may concern controversial “current events” issues. To the extent that these impact on the local church and its ministries, and to the extent that these issues are ones that the candidate may confront or be expected to address, questions about these issues are legitimate. The person who is presiding over the proceedings will need to be alert to repetitive questions about a particular issue. If the candidate has explained his or her views, it may be time for the chair to insist that the council ask questions about other issues too. (Repetitive questions can become a disguised form of debate with the candidate.)

Typically, questions asked of the candidate revolve around the following topics:

1. Specific points that the candidate has made in the ordination paper, explaining her/his Christian beliefs.
2. Biblical knowledge. The chair will need to redirect the questions if it appears that the proceedings are being turned into a Biblical trivia exam. (“Does anybody here truly think that the candidate’s ministry depends on whether or not he/she remembers the name of Moses’ father-in-law?”)
3. Current social issues that are drawing the attention of the church, either locally or nationally.
4. Hypothetical questions about how the candidate might deal with particular pastoral issues.
5. Less commonly, issues suggested by the portion of the ordination paper dealing with the candidate’s Christian experience and call to ordained ministry.

The question period should not be extended unreasonably. A period of 45 minutes to an hour is usually more than sufficient for clarification of a candidate’s views.

What if the Ordination Council Says “Yes”?

Following a positive vote by the ordination council, the church should proceed to ordain the candidate at the earliest convenient date. Since the candidate may have family and friends who live at a distance but still wish to attend the ordination, there may be a delay of a few weeks between the decision of the council and the act of ordination. Realistically, most churches and candidates assume that the ordination council will grant a positive advisory vote, and will have made tentative plans for an ordination service.

What If the Ordination Council Says “No”?

The vote of the ordination council is advisory. Since each community church is self-governing, the church may decide to proceed with ordination despite a negative recommendation. However, the church needs to be attentive to what the council recommends, and the reasons for that recommendation. It may be that the candidate is in need of further study or spiritual formation. If this is the case, the ordination should be postponed. A new council can be convened at a later date, after the additional preparation has been completed. The move toward ordination should never be rushed or carried forward without deep thought and prayer on the part of all involved.

The Service of Ordination

Each community church determines its own order of worship for an ordination. Typically the person to be ordained participates in or takes the lead in inviting those who will take responsibility for different parts of the liturgy. It is highly recommended that a representative of the International Council of Community Churches be invited to take leadership in some part of the liturgy.

One element that often appears in a service of ordination is a “charge to the candidate,” in which the individual who is being ordained is reminded of some of the challenges, joys, and trials an ordained person may anticipate. Another is a “charge to the church,” reminding those present of the supportive, cooperative and critical role of laity in relationship to the ordained. Typically these are separate from the sermon or homily.

An element that is always included in the service of ordination is the “laying on of hands,” during which one or more ordained persons place hands on the head of the person being ordained and offer prayer asking for God’s Holy Spirit to imbue the ordinand with gifts appropriate to her/his role within the church. As an ecumenical witness, in many

churches all ordained persons present, no matter what their denominational affiliation, are invited to participate in the laying on of hands.

The service of worship may or may not include the celebration of Holy Communion presided over by the new ordinand. There may be a time during the liturgy when the person being ordained is presented with vestments or other items related to ministry. The tone of an ordination service appropriately combines joy and solemnity, for it is at this point that the ordinand begins a new role in the life of Christ's church.

It's not a part of the process of ordination, but to some clergy and laity, no church activity seems complete unless food is served. Typically in ICCC congregations a reception or meal is prepared and all who attend a service of ordination are invited to the event immediately following worship.

Help!

Some churches have taken the step of enlisting one or more persons to accompany the individual being ordained during the day of the ordination service. These can steer away those individuals who wish to regale the ordinand with endless "war stories" about church life and others who want to monopolize the ordinand's time and attention. They can provide a glass of water to the newly ordained during a reception line, or assemble the ordinand's meal from a buffet line. They can be the people to whom the ordinand can entrust greeting cards, etc. which are thrust upon the ordinand during moments when and where there is no easily accessible location for storing such gifts. And they can make sure that the ordinand's family members and other guests (such as aged grandparents) are aided in appropriate ways.

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