

# Church, Ministry and Ordination: what Relation?

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## [A] Introduction

It is arguable that, after the doctrines of the Incarnation and the Trinity, the doctrine of the church is a major doctrine of the Christian faith. How we think of the church, empirically as the community of faith, hope and love, on the one hand, and as the mystical body of Christ, on the other, seems to me to matter a great deal. The estimate we have of the church as a servant community – in the service of the Gospel and, precisely as embodying and proclaiming this Gospel, in the service of the world – belongs somewhere near the centre of Christian faith. In its communal life the church is called to echo the life of the Trinity; ontologically it must be grounded in the being of God.<sup>1</sup> Missiologically, the church exists in and for the mission of the triune God in the world; this is nearer to the truth than the proposition that the church *has* a mission.<sup>2</sup> If we consider the doctrine of election, part of the theology of history, it is again the church that has a key role in the purpose of God in the world.<sup>3</sup> If our concern is with eschatology we will have to speak of the church as an eschatological community, anticipating the reality of the coming reign of God.<sup>4</sup>

The title of this essay begins with the concept of the church, but it quickly moves on to the concept of ministry and asks about their relation. The church does not exist merely for its own sake, its own *koinonia*, but for the sake of the world. It is by its nature a ministering community, a community of *diakonia*, particularly inasmuch as it is a *kerygmatic* community, a community with something of supreme importance to proclaim. Echoing the words of St Paul, it might well say, ‘Woe to me if I do not proclaim the Gospel!’ (1 Cor. 9:16b) The church is a ministering community essentially because God is a ministering God. According to a Uniting Church in Australia report on ministry, the Bible tells ‘the one story of God’s persistent ministry to human-kind’, a ministry which ‘begins within the very heart of the trinitarian community of love.’<sup>5</sup> This is a divine ministry which Christians articulate trinitarianly; it is the ministry of the Father, through the Son, in the power of the Holy Spirit. The ministry of the Son, who lived among us as one of us and who ministered in word and deed to people whose paths he crossed, is very often identified as the ground and basis for Christian ministry. Christian ministry *is*, of course, christologically grounded and shaped, but it is no less a pneumatologically constituted reality. Christians cannot minister except in the power of the Holy Spirit, who is, in any case, the Spirit of Christ. There is every reason to speak of the ground and energy of Christian ministry in trinitarian terms.

It is of considerable interest to ask the question of the relation between the church and the ministry of the church. In this context, a specifically religious one, ‘ministry’ can refer both to the activity of ministering and, especially when preceded by the definite article, to a ministerial

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<sup>1</sup> C. Gunton, ‘The Church on Earth: The Roots of Community,’ in *On Being the Church: Essays on the Christian Community*, ed. C.E. Gunton & D.W. Hardy (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1989), 74f.

<sup>2</sup> J. Moltmann, *The Church in the Power of the Spirit* (London: SCM, 1977), 64f.

<sup>3</sup> W. Pannenberg, *Systematic Theology*, Vol. 3 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993), ch. 14, §4.

<sup>4</sup> WCC/Faith & Order, *The Nature and Purpose of the Church*, Faith & Order Paper No. 181 (Geneva: WCC, 1998), §§35-36. See also C. Mostert, ‘Implications of an Eschatological View of the Church’, *Pacifica*, Vol. 13, No. 1, 2000, 11-24.

<sup>5</sup> UCA, *Ordination and Ministry in the Uniting Church* (Sydney: Uniting Church in Australia National Assembly, 1994), Part 2, §6.

office, e.g. the office of bishop, presbyter or deacon. In this latter sense, these being offices to which people are ordained by an ecclesiastical authority, it has become common to speak of the ‘ordained ministry’.<sup>6</sup> The answer to the question of the relation between church and ministry may differ, depending on whether ‘ministry’ is taken as referring to an activity of the church or an office in the church. In the sense of ‘ministry as activity’, ministry is predicated of the church; it is the *church’s* activity, its life. The community (or the institution) comes first; it expresses its nature in ministry of various kinds. (This point is not a chronological one; it is not the case that first there was a church which did not engage in ministry, followed subsequently by a church which *did* engage in ministry.) However, in the sense of ‘ministry as office’, the relation is less clear, certainly more controversial. That is why it is of interest to think about this relation. It is particularly interesting to consider this matter at a time when pragmatic factors, determined in part by economics and social change, are influential in determining new patterns of ministry in some churches.

The question of the relation between church and ministry is not an abstract one. This essay is written from a sharp awareness of differences in understanding ministry between three churches in Australia which have been engaged for some years in dialogues aimed at the mutual recognition of their (ordained) ministries: the Anglican Church, the Lutheran Church and the Uniting Church.<sup>7</sup> Differences over ministerial orders or ministerial office do not so much reflect differences in ecclesiology as create these differences. The differences are at their sharpest between episcopal and non-episcopal churches. A church with bishops typically has a different sense of the nature of the church, a different understanding of ecclesiastical authority, a differently structured ministerial order and (usually) a distinctive understanding of ordination as the transmission of ministerial authority. The differences between the Anglican and the Uniting Churches in Australia illustrate the point well. However, the differences do not run neatly along predictable lines. On some of the points referred to, Australian Lutherans are much closer to Anglicans than to their Uniting Church dialogue partners, despite the fact that the Lutheran Church of Australia is not an episcopal church.<sup>8</sup> The reasons for this lie in the theology of ministry, including the understanding of the relation between the church and the ministry. This question forms the substance of this essay.

## [B] Ministry in the church

As noted above, the church is a ministering community; the idea of a church in which there is no ministry, either within the community or beyond it, makes no theological sense. The ‘Ministry’ section of *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry*, the landmark ecumenical document of the 1980s, makes the following statement:

The Holy Spirit bestows on the community diverse and complementary gifts. These are for the common good of the whole people and are manifested in acts of service within the community and to the world.... All members are called to discover, with the help of

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<sup>6</sup> It is even common to speak of ‘ordained ministry’ (i.e. without the definite article) as the *activity* of ministry, exercised by an ordained person, as distinct from ‘lay ministry’, which denotes ministerial activity carried by a lay person. At best, this can serve as a convenient shorthand, but it is preferable to use adjectives which indicate the nature and substance of a particular ministry rather than adjectives which indicate whether those who exercise it are ordained or ‘lay’.

<sup>7</sup> The documents that mark important stages in agreement between these three churches are *Common Ground: Covenanting for Mutual Recognition between The Anglican Church of Australia and The Lutheran Church of Australia* (2001) followed by a ‘Second Report’ (2002), *Declaration of Mutual Recognition by The Uniting Church in Australia and The Lutheran Church of Australia* (2000) and *For the Sake of the Gospel: Mutual Recognition of Ordained Ministries in the Anglican and Uniting Churches in Australia* (2001).

<sup>8</sup> It could be argued that the system of State Presidents of the Lutheran Church gives Lutherans a quasi-episcopal church in Australia. For a discussion on bishops see Sections 22-24 of *Common Ground*. There is a significant overlap between the episcopal authority of an Anglican bishop and the *episkopé* of a Lutheran President.

the community, the gifts they have received and to use them for the building up of the Church and for the service of the world to which the Church is sent.<sup>9</sup>

This note has been sounded in the Western part of the church so strongly for some decades that one easily forgets how comparatively recent the shift to this emphasis was. Four or five decades ago young men – for at that time few churches ordained women – would speak of going ‘into the ministry’. These days it is much rarer to hear references to *the* ministry’. Instead, *everyone* has a ministry. A particularly frequently-quoted statement from the Uniting Church’s *Basis of Union* (1977) says that ‘the one Spirit has endowed the members of Christ’s Church with a diversity of gifts and that there is no gift without its corresponding service: all ministries have a part in the ministry of Christ.’<sup>10</sup> The theology would be difficult to quarrel with, except that not everyone would equate ‘services’ and ‘ministry’, but it represents a substantial swing of the pendulum.

The responses to the Ministry section of *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry (BEM)* welcome the emphasis on the calling of the whole people of God.<sup>11</sup> The calling of the whole people of God (Part 1 of the Ministry statement) is ‘the context for reflection on the ministry’. This is satisfactory as far as it goes, but it does not settle the further question, to be considered below, of the relation between ministerial office in the church and the ministry of all Christian people. The service or ministry (*diakonia*) of every Christian has its basis in the call of Jesus Christ to faith and discipleship and the gifts of the Holy Spirit, which are sacramentally focussed in a person’s baptism. Every Christian is called into the service of Christ (John 12:26), a service which can take many forms but which must include the ‘least’ of his brothers and sisters (Matt. 25:40,45).

The whole of the Christian life, a life of faith, hope and love, a life of discipleship in a relationship of ‘friendship’ to Christ (John 15:15), is properly to be thought of as baptismal life. It is life shaped by one’s baptism, a life of dying to the ‘old’ and being raised to the ‘new’ that has come in Christ (Rom. 6:1-11). In a lecture entitled ‘Sacramental Living: living baptismally’ Rowan Williams speaks of the sacraments as ‘manifestations of [the] contours of the life of discipleship’.<sup>12</sup> Living baptismally is living ‘in the proximity of chaos,’ the same chaos into which Jesus descends in his baptism, and emerging with a new identity.<sup>13</sup> Baptism, unites us with Christ in his death and resurrection (Rom. 6:3-5). But ‘baptism, if it is an entry into the identity of Jesus Christ, who is the identity of God entering into chaos, is an entry into the profoundest solidarity with human experience that we could imagine.’<sup>14</sup> Baptism also incorporates a person into the community of faith and discipleship, a ministering community. As the 1994 Uniting Church Report on Ordination and Ministry puts it, ‘baptism ... should be regarded as a kind of commissioning of each Christian for a particular ministry within the life and mission of the church, marking the beginning of a life of loving service (ministry) in the world.’<sup>15</sup> This is not to argue for the idea that baptism is every Christian’s ‘ordination’ to ministry. Ordination presupposes baptism, which is the fundamental sacrament of Christian identity. Ordination is a

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<sup>9</sup> WCC/Faith & Order, *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry*, Faith & Order Paper No. 111 (Geneva: WCC, 1982), M§5. This idea is echoed in the 1998 Faith and Order statement on the Church: ‘The Holy Spirit bestows gifts on every member of the Body of Christ for the building up of the fellowship of the Church and for the faithful fulfilling of the mission of Christ. All have received gifts and all are responsible. This service is offered by the whole people of God whether as individuals or as local communities or by the Church at every level of its life.’ WCC/Faith & Order, *The Nature and Purpose of the Church*, §82.

<sup>10</sup> UCA, *The Basis of Union* (Melbourne: Uniting Church Press, 1992). For a different view, the view that not all Christians are ministers, see John N. Collins, *Are All Christians Ministers?* (Sydney: E.J. Dwyer Pty Ltd, 1992). In part, the difference rests on a different use of terms related to ‘ministry’.

<sup>11</sup> WCC/Faith & Order, *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry 1982-1990*, Faith & Order Paper No. 149 (Geneva: WCC Publications, 1990), 75.

<sup>12</sup> *Australian Journal of Liturgy*, Vol. 9, No 1, 2003, 3. Some of the ideas and phrases that follow come from this lecture, given in Trinity College, Melbourne, May 2002.

<sup>13</sup> ‘Sacramental Living: living baptismally’, 5-6.

<sup>14</sup> ‘Sacramental Living: living baptismally’, 7.

<sup>15</sup> UCA, *Ordination and Ministry in the Uniting Church*, Part 2, §21.

further and more particular expression of the general commissioning to ministry which baptism implies.<sup>16</sup>

### [C] Ministerial office or order

Having considered the church as a ministering community, in which every member has a service or ministry (*diakonia*), we now focus on ministry as office or ministerial order, often described as ‘ordained ministry’. The main question to be considered is that of the relation of ministerial office to the ministerial service of every Christian. Underlying this question is the issue of the relation of ministerial office to the church. It is appropriate to find the starting-point for this discussion in the Ministry statement of *BEM*, since this is a widely recognised ecumenical consensus text.<sup>17</sup> The document states some important things about the ordained ministry. **(1)** In order to fulfil its mission, the church needs people who are responsible for pointing to its fundamental dependence on Jesus Christ (§8). **(2)** From the beginning of the church there were differentiated responsibilities and authority (§9). **(3)** Jesus Christ continues, through the Holy Spirit, to call people into the ordained ministry; they represent him, they assemble and guide the church community, and they call it to submit to his authority (§11). **(4)** An ordained ministry exists in and for the community of the church; it has no existence apart from the community (§12). **(5)** The main responsibilities of the ministerial office are to assemble and build up the church, to proclaim and teach the Word of God, to celebrate the sacraments and to guide the community in its worship, its mission and its caring ministry (§13). Statements such as these, commanding wide if not universal and unqualified acceptance, form a backdrop for the question under consideration.

The Ministry document goes on to make some statements about authority in relation to ministerial office. Three things are particularly worthy of note: **(1)** The authority of ordained ministers is ‘rooted in Jesus Christ’ (§15). **(2)** This authority is not the ‘possession’ of the ordained minister but is a gift to be used for building up the church. Ministerial authority must not be used autocratically (§§15-16). **(3)** Ordained ministers are authorised to give leadership in the church, but they are ‘bound to the faithful in inter-dependence and reciprocity’ (§16). It may be thought that there is a degree of tension between the first and last of these three statements, but they are not inconsistent with each other. Each of them states an important truth about ministerial office: it is grounded in Jesus Christ and it is bound to the community of the church. However, the connection and the distinction between these two aspects requires more nuanced statement. The matter is most sharply focussed in the question of ministerial authority: does it derive from Christ – and if so, how? – or does it derive from the church? This way of putting the matter presupposes that ministerial office carries with it an authority of some kind. This authority is not uniformly understood across the Christian spectrum, but it would minimally include the authority to lead and guide the Christian community in its life, worship and doctrine, in its interpretation of the canonical Scriptures and in its determination of what belongs to the Gospel and the mission of God and what does not. The ordination of ministers is, among other things, the transmission of such ministerial authority.

The question about the source of ministerial authority is not susceptible of an either/or answer. Jesus Christ and the Church should not be set over against each other in this way, though clearly they cannot be simply equated. There is an authorisation for ministerial office given by the church through its councils and other structures of authority. But this does not exhaust the source of authority for ministerial office. Ultimately, this authority has its ground in Jesus Christ, who is the Lord of the church. Like all Christians, ordained ministers live and work

<sup>16</sup> See *Ordination and Ministry in the Uniting Church*, Part 2, §24.

<sup>17</sup> WCC/Faith & Order, *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry*. The Ministry statement, like the other two, has been widely welcomed, although many of the churches’ responses expressed reservations about particular parts of the statement; see WCC/Faith & Order, *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry 1982-1990*, 74-88.

under the authority of the church and receive their authority from the church. They are accountable to those who exercise oversight (*episkopé*) over them, whether the oversight is exercised by episcopal persons (e.g. bishops) or by councils of oversight (e.g. presbyteries). But at the same time they know a higher authority, that of the Lord of the church.<sup>18</sup> His authority, while normally exercised through the structures of the church, cannot be unconditionally bound to these. The authority of ministerial office is received *in* the church and *through* the church, but not finally *from* the church. ‘The authority of the ordained minister’, as *BEM* puts it, ‘is rooted in Jesus Christ, who has received it from the Father (Matt. 28:18), and who confers it by the Holy Spirit through the act of ordination.’<sup>19</sup>

This point receives much greater emphasis in Anglican and Lutheran theology than in that of the Uniting Church, although it was a strong element in Presbyterian (and perhaps also Methodist<sup>20</sup>) theology. The ARCIC statement on Ministry and Ordination (Canterbury 1973) says of Christians ministers that they ‘share through baptism in the priesthood of the people of God’ and that, particularly in eucharistic presidency, they are ‘representative of the whole Church in the fulfilment of its priestly vocation of self-offering to God as a living sacrifice (Rom. 12:1).’<sup>21</sup> However, this is not to be misunderstood; the ministry of ordained ministers is ‘not an extension of the common Christian priesthood but belongs to another realm of the gifts of the Spirit.’ This ‘other realm’ in which ministerial priesthood – or ministerial office – is said to be grounded is the call of Christ and the gift of the Spirit. In a recent, widely circulated paper the Primate of the Anglican Church of Australia, the Most Reverend Peter Carnley, speaks of a difference in kind between the priesthood of all faithful people and the ministry of those who have been ordained.<sup>22</sup> The shepherding ministry of presbyters ‘comes not from the community but from Christ ...’ To quote Carnley at some length, the ordained ministry

is not to be assimilated to and defined by the ministry of the whole Church, and is not a focusing of the ministry of the Church in its leadership, but is a gift *to* the Church.

Those who are ordained are separated by the outward ordering of the laying on of hands from the Church *for* the Church, so to speak. This clinches the truth that the ministry of those ordained to ministerial priesthood is not just a kind of intensification, focused in its leadership, of the priesthood of the whole people of God. Nor is it a ministry that is derived from the community by a kind of social contract: ‘do this for us’ or ‘enable us to minister by equipping us.’<sup>23</sup>

The ARCIC *Elucidation* (Salisbury 1979), describes the relationship between the ministerial priesthood and the priesthood of the people of God as analogical. ‘These are two distinct realities which relate, each in its own way, to the high priesthood of Christ, the unique priesthood of the new covenant, which is their source and model.’<sup>24</sup> The relationship between Christ, the High Priest, and the ordained ministry is said to be sacramental, but the point is not explained. It may be concluded that Anglicans, while insisting that ministerial orders are not derived from the ministry or priesthood of the church, do not find it easy to say exactly how their orders are grounded in Jesus Christ. Australian Anglicans and Lutherans agree that, although there are ministries for which people are gifted and empowered by the Holy Spirit, and which are exer

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<sup>18</sup> It is not essentially different for any member of the church, whose ultimate loyalty must be to Christ, not ecclesiastical authority.

<sup>19</sup> WCC/Faith & Order, *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry*, M§15.

<sup>20</sup> Knowing Methodist theology and connexional practice less well, I make this suggestion tentatively. However, the practice of ministerial sessions of the Conference and ordination by the President of Conference inclines me to this view.

<sup>21</sup> ARCIC, *The Final Report* (London: CTS/SPCK. 1982), 36.

<sup>22</sup> ‘A Paper by the Most Reverend Dr Peter Carnley AO, Anglican Archbishop of Perth and Primate of Australia, prepared for the assistance of the Anglican members of the Anglican-Uniting Church Ecumenical Conversations’, 7.

<sup>23</sup> Peter Carnley, ‘Paper’, 8f.

<sup>24</sup> ARCIC, *The Final Report*, 41.

cised without specific authorisation, ‘the essential ministry of word and sacrament (essential in that it is the ministry by which the church lives) receives its authority from the Lord of the church.’<sup>25</sup>

On this point, then, the position of Lutherans is close to that of Anglicans. In an earlier statement on ministry, Anglicans and Lutherans affirm in common that ‘the New Testament Ministry is instituted by Christ for the public administration of the means of grace, that is, for the preaching of the gospel and the administering of the sacraments. The ministry is therefore instituted not by human beings, but by God.’<sup>26</sup> Later in this Statement three important points are made. (1) Ministry (*diakonia*), being committed to the whole church, is the task of every Christian. This is the common *diakonia* of the body of Christ. (2) Yet there is a special ministry, given by God for the building up of the church. (3) This ministry (of word and sacraments) is related to the very basis of the church. ‘Thus Ministry and church belong inseparably together.’<sup>27</sup> On this view, it is not simply the case that the church is a ministering church, but there cannot be a church without a ‘ministry’. Church and ministry are given in and with each other.

It is clear that Lutherans do not derive ministerial office – the pastoral ministry, the ministry of Word and Sacrament – from the general ministry of all baptised Christians. William Lazareth, a North American Evangelical Lutheran bishop and theologian, discusses the ordained ministry in the light of the Augsburg Confession (1530) and concludes that ‘nowhere in the Augsburg Confession, to say nothing of the entire *Book of Concord*, is there ever any attempt to derive the power of the ordained ministry from any purported delegation of powers” of the universal priesthood of baptised believers.’<sup>28</sup> This is an ‘unbiblical teaching’ which was prompted by some offhand comments by Luther which he later corrected and which were first formulated in Germany in the 18th century. A Joint Ecumenical Commission set up in Germany in the 1980s between Roman Catholics and Protestants (mainly Lutherans) produced a series of statements on hitherto divisive theological issues, including the ministry.<sup>29</sup> Because it clarifies a number of matters, a lengthy quotation is warranted.

The Protestant churches should also be able to affirm that the difference between the ordained ministry and the general priesthood of all the baptised is a difference of kind, not a difference of degree of participation in Christ’s priesthood .... For the Reformation’s criticism was directed precisely against the assumption of a difference of *degree*, an increase in the priest’s personal state of grace through ordination, compared with the rest of the baptised. But according to the Protestant view also, the ordained ministry is different in *kind* from other ministries, and also from the individual testimony of faith to which every Christian is empowered and which is every Christian’s duty; for it is a ministry (*ministerium*) which serves the Word of the gospel and the administration of the sacraments, and which has been instituted by God for the whole church. The ordained ministry cannot be traced back to the congregation. It has its origin in a divine commission and institution .... So – according to the Protestant view also – in performing their charge, the holders of the office do not act in their own name but represent the person of Christ, according to the promise: ‘Whoever hears you, hears me.’ The one

<sup>25</sup> *Common Ground: Covenanting for Mutual Recognition and Reconciliation*, 2001, §21.5 (Appendix 2).

<sup>26</sup> Statement on ‘Ministry’, 1975 (revised 1984), §3, in *Common Ground*, 22. The previous paragraph of the Statement explains that ‘ministry’ is used to denote the task of the whole church, while ‘Ministry’ is used to denote ‘the special office of God’s chosen servants who are called and commissioned to speak and act on behalf of the Lord for his church.’

<sup>27</sup> Statement on ‘Ministry’, §8.

<sup>28</sup> W.H. Lazareth, *Two Forms of Ordained Ministry: A Proposal for Mission in Light of the Augsburg Confession* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1991), 31.

<sup>29</sup> K. Lehmann & W. Pannenberg (eds), *The Condemnations of the Reformation Era: Do they still Divide?* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1990). The text on the Ministry is the fourth, 147-159.

who really acts in Word and Sacrament is Jesus Christ himself, through the power of the Holy Spirit.<sup>30</sup>

Two preliminary points can be made: the first, that this statement, albeit about Protestant belief and theology, is made in the context of a Catholic-Lutheran discussion; this is significant in the formulation of the last two sentences of the quotation. The second observation is that the work published in this volume is the product of a Joint Ecumenical Commission, reinforced by the work of the Ecumenical Study Group of Protestant and Catholic Theologians (which began in 1946); it does not claim to carry the authority of an official Lutheran body.<sup>31</sup> Nevertheless, it is legitimate to hear in this work an authentic Lutheran voice. The quotation makes four points that are important for our discussion. (1) While affirming the importance of the *diakonia* of all Christians, it asserts that the ministerial office is not derived from the church (congregation). It has been instituted by God *for* the church. (This does not mean, of course, that this office is not also located *in* the church.) (2) There is a difference between ministerial office (the ordained ministry) and ‘the general priesthood of all the baptised, and this difference is not one of *degree* but of *kind*. The explanation given in this statement subverts the usual Protestant preference for a difference in *degree*. (3) The ministerial office has its ground in ‘a divine commission and institution’. (4) Those who hold ministerial office in the church do not speak or act in their own name; they ‘represent the person of Christ’. This is implied in the belief that it is Christ who speaks and acts in Word and Sacrament.

Of these four points, only the final one might meet with difficulty from some Lutherans, and certainly from some ‘evangelical’ Protestants, including some Anglicans.<sup>32</sup> On the whole, however, it might be expected that Anglicans and Lutherans would be in close agreement, certainly on the first three propositions. Lutherans hold that Christ calls and empowers people to hold ministerial office in the church, and that this office is God’s gift to the church. Without it the church cannot be the church.<sup>33</sup> An international Lutheran statement of 2002 expresses the point as follows: ‘Through baptism persons are initiated into the priesthood of Christ and thus into the mission of the whole church .... Baptism itself, however, does not confer office in the church, the ordained ministry .... The ordained ministry belongs to God’s gift to the church, essential and necessary for the church to fulfil its mission .... The special ministry conferred by ordination is constitutive for the church. It is a service necessary in order for the church to be what God calls it to be.’<sup>34</sup>

When it comes to the Uniting Church’s view of ministerial office the position is a little more ambiguous. In the context of ecumenical dialogue, we find the following statement in the *Declaration of Mutual Recognition* by the Lutheran and Uniting Churches in Australia:

We believe that all members of the Church are called to participate in its apostolic mission. For this they are given various gifts of service by the Holy Spirit. Within the community of the Church the ordained ministry exists to serve the ministry and mission

<sup>30</sup> *The Condemnations of the Reformation Era*, 148f.

<sup>31</sup> The Joint Ecumenical Commission was set up jointly by the Council of the Evangelical Church in Germany and the German Episcopal Conference, and reported to the public in October 1985; see *Condemnations*, 178-187.

<sup>32</sup> On this see *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry 1982-1990*, 122f.

<sup>33</sup> Thus the ministry belongs to the *esse* of the church, not merely its *bene esse*. Perhaps a distinction should be made between ministerial office (or orders), which belongs to the *esse* of the church, and a particular form or structure of this, of which it might merely be claimed that it belongs to the *bene esse* of the church.

<sup>34</sup> ‘The Episcopal Ministry within the Apostolicity of the Church: A Lutheran Statement 2002’, issued by a consultation of Lutheran members of international ecumenical dialogues, held in Malta, §§13-14. See also the Ministry statement of *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry*, §8. Some churches, including the Uniting Church in Australia, hold that only Jesus Christ (and his word and sacraments) are ‘constitutive’ of the church. See *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry 1982-1990*, 121, and the Uniting Church Response to *BEM*, M. Thurian (ed), *Churches Respond to BEM*, Vol. 4, Faith and Order Paper No. 137 (Geneva: WCC Publications, 1987), 154-165, esp. 161f.

of the whole people of God.. We hold the ordained ministry of word and sacrament to be a gift of God to his Church, and so an office of divine institution.<sup>35</sup>

There is, of course, a basis for such a view in the *Basis of Union*, which is, in effect, the confessional basis of the Uniting Church. The Uniting Church seeks to recognise from among its members people ‘called of God to preach the Gospel, to lead the people in worship, to care for the flock, to share in government and to serve those in need in the world’.<sup>36</sup> However, this provides a basis not only for the ministry of the Word and the diaconate, but also for such ‘lay’ ministries as elders and lay preachers.<sup>37</sup> The ambiguity of the Uniting Church’s view of ministerial office is indicated by the following quotations from the same paragraph of the *Basis of Union* (14). ‘Since the Church lives by the power of the Word, it is assured that God, who has never failed to provide witness to that Word, will, through Christ and in the power of the Holy Spirit, call and set apart members of the church to be ministers of the Word.’ It is clear from this that people are called to this ministry and set apart for it by God; this ‘setting apart’ is called ‘ordination’. What is less clear is whether ministerial office *per se* is understood as a God-given provision for the life and work of the church. At the end of this long paragraph we find the following statement:

The Uniting Church recognises that the type and duration of ministries to which women and men are called vary from time to time and place to place, and that in particular it comes into being in a period of reconsideration of traditional forms of the ministry, and of renewed participation of all the people of God in the preaching of the Word, the administration of the sacraments, the building up of the fellowship in mutual love, in commitment to Christ’s mission, and in service of the world for which he died.

The *Basis of Union*, it must be said, fails to state explicitly that ministerial office is God’s provision for the church. This is surprising. A little over a decade before the formation of the Uniting Church, a report from the then Joint Commission on Church Union was very clear about the ‘God-given character of the Ministry’, notwithstanding its recognition that ‘the whole Body of Christ participates in [Christ’s] threefold ministry as Prophet, Priest and King.’<sup>38</sup> This ministry – ‘God’s gift to his Church’ – is exercised ‘within the corporate priesthood of the whole Church, but is set apart by Christ’ for the building up of the Church. The failure to repeat such a conviction explicitly, together with an emphasis on the participation of ‘all the people of God’ in the preaching of the Word and the administration of the sacraments, has resulted in a certain blurring of distinctions between the ministry of the whole church and ministerial office, especially under the pressure of diminishing numbers and finances. In fact, in the adoption of rather pragmatic solutions to these problems – lay people forming ‘ministry teams’ and receiving authority to preside at the eucharist – one might wonder whether an eclipse of ministerial office has begun.

However, there is more to be said on the matter of ministerial office. The first point to be made is that the notion of ministerial ‘office’, while not mentioned in *The Basis of Union*, appears in the liturgy of ordination. The candidate is asked, ‘Do you believe that you are truly called by God and the church to the office and work of a minister of the Word/Deacon?’ Again, in the ordination prayer, while hands are laid upon the candidate the Chairperson of the Presbytery prays *inter alia* that the candidate may be empowered ‘for the office and work of a minister of the Word/Deacon.’ It cannot be said that the Uniting Church knows nothing of the idea of

<sup>35</sup> *The Declaration of Mutual Recognition - Lutheran and Uniting Churches*, §3.5.

<sup>36</sup> *The Basis of Union*, §14.

<sup>37</sup> *The Basis of Union*, §14 (a) – (d). Strictly speaking, the *Basis* recognised the ministry of diaconess, but fore-saw the renewal of a diaconate open to men and women. A renewed diaconate was established by the 6th Assembly (Brisbane, 1991).

<sup>38</sup> *The Church: Its Nature, Function and Ordering* (Melbourne: The Board of Christian Education, 1964), 22.

ministerial office, but it is not a term in common use. It is significant that this term, which has a solid place in theological and liturgical tradition, should be retained in the liturgy of ordination. In 1982 the third Assembly adopted a statement on ordination. It does not speak of a ministerial 'office', but it does speak of the responsibility of ministers to Christ 'by representing Christ to the people and the people to Christ', and they do this 'through word and sacrament, and by pastoral care including praying for those in their charge.'<sup>39</sup> The 1991 Report, *Ministry in the Uniting Church in Australia*, was so committed to the principles of the ministry of the whole people of God, the variety of ministries in the church, and the renewed diaconate, that it does not make use of the concept of ministerial 'office'. Generally in the Uniting Church the phrase, 'the *ministry* of ...', is used where once 'the *office* of ...' is more likely to have been used. Likewise, the 1994 Report, *Ordination and Ministry in the Uniting Church*, does not take up the concept of ministerial office, despite the fact that it has a very strong theology of ordination. It appears, then, that the Uniting Church is reticent about the concept of ministerial office in its doctrinal statements. The 1994 report advocates the use of the term 'presbyter' as the simple, traditional counterpart to the noun 'deacon' – a suggestion which was rejected – and speaks of 'presbyteral and diaconal *ministry*' where it could appropriately have used the concept of *office*.

However, not too much should be read into this silence about 'office'. It is used, after all, in the ordination liturgy, both for ministers of the Word (presbyters) and deacons. As noted earlier, it is also used in the *Declaration of Mutual Recognition ...* between the Uniting and Lutheran churches (2000), though it does not appear in the joint statement on 'The Ministry', received in 1986. In the Anglican-Uniting report, *For the Sake of the Gospel*, the concept of ministerial office does not occur, but there is reference to 'orders' of ministry: three orders (or a threefold order) in the Anglican Church and two orders (or a twofold order) in the Uniting Church. More important than the prominence or absence of particular terms, it is significant that in both the Lutheran-Uniting and Anglican-Uniting statements there is a recognition that the ordained ministry is a gift of God to the Church (Lutheran-Uniting, §3.5) or God's provision for the Church (Anglican-Uniting, §4.10).

It may be instructive to look briefly at the practice of ordination in the three churches which came together to form the Uniting Church in 1977. In the Congregational Church ministers were ordained by the congregation. This reinforced the idea that ministerial office is derived from, and determined by, the congregation. In the Methodist Church ministers were ordained by the Conference, and generally only the President of the Conference and a small number of other ministers laid hands on the candidate. In the Presbyterian Church ministers were ordained by the Presbytery, with only the Moderator and other ministers laying on hands. Presbyterians had the most strongly developed theology of ordination, as well as a strong sense of a ministry that is Christ's gift to the church. We find again that this ministry has its place within the ministry of the whole church, but that the consecration of this ministry has a special relation to the self-consecration of Christ himself. One of the tasks of this ministry is to link others with itself and with the self-consecration of Christ through the laying on of hands.<sup>40</sup> Fundamentally, the source of ordination is Jesus Christ; 'ordination is His act,' says Torrance.<sup>41</sup> Yet Christ acts in and through his church. Spiritually, ordination is based on the authority of Christ, the Lord and head of the church, who has established this ministry in his church and sets people apart for it. Juridically, ordination is based on the authority of a council (or person) of oversight in the church. The two come together in the act of the laying on of hands and prayer. Every ordination is authorised by a competent authority in the church. However, this is not a sufficient source of authority. Above all ecclesial authority is the authority of Christ, whose action it essentially is, just as it is *his* church and *his* ministry. T.F. Torrance writes, 'it is Christ the living Lord who is

<sup>39</sup> 'The 1982 Assembly statement on ordination', Question 19. See Assembly minute 82.53 (4).

<sup>40</sup> See T.F. Torrance, *Conflict and Agreement in the Church*, Vol. 2 (London: Lutterworth, 1960), 38ff.

<sup>41</sup> T.F. Torrance, *Conflict and Agreement in the Church*, Vol. 2, 46.

the actual Ordainer in ordination, although he makes use of the ministers who have been sent by him already to carry out the ordinance within the Church on earth.’<sup>42</sup>

### [D] The church and the ministry

Having looked in some detail at the idea of an order of ministry, a ministerial office or an ordained ministry, and especially at the question of its relation to the ministry of the whole people of God, we must now look specifically at the question of the relation between the church and the ministry. In short, church and ministry are inseparable; they stand in a reciprocal relation, neither existing independently of the other. This is the position to which a good many observations in this essay have led us. To the right, it might be argued by some that there is an ontological priority of the ministry over the church. The idea that ‘where the bishop is, there is the church’ would express this view, regardless of whether that was what Cyprian really meant. Any version of the view that the church is essentially the clerical hierarchy, with the laity having some lesser part in the being and working of the church, would place it at this end of the spectrum. To the left, prominence is given to the church as the people of God, with those holding ministerial office being seen more or less as the functionaries of the community. Any authority which they have is seen as delegated to them by the whole body. When changing times and circumstances call for new models of ministry or structures of authority, the church is free to invent them. The church is the constant; the ministry is the variable. This view is just as problematic as the opposite view.

Neither the church nor the ministry is the ‘creature’ of the other. There is no historical evidence that one existed before the other. In fact, from the beginning neither existed without the other. What has emerged in different ways throughout the preceding discussion is that both church and ministry are the creation of a third and prior reality. The church and ministerial office both have their source in Jesus Christ, or in the triune God, or in the saving, judging Word of God. It is the mission of the triune God that both the church and the ordained ministry serve; both have their being only within the ‘economy’ of salvation. The Anglican-Uniting report, *For the Sake of the Gospel*, says, ‘We are agreed that there is a reciprocal relationship between the Church and the ordained ministry. Church and ministry are given in and with each other; neither has an ontological priority over the other and neither exists apart from the other.’<sup>43</sup> To use the model of an isosceles triangle, the top angle would represent the triune God, Jesus Christ or the Gospel; the bottom two (equal) angles would represent the church and the ministerial office (or orders). Each is equally related to the top; church and ministry are equally the creation of Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit. As the Reformers emphasised, the church is the creature of the Word (*creatura Verbi*). This must also be said of the ministry, which has been called into being for the service of the Word. Both church and ministry are created by the Gospel (*creatura Evangelii*). What then is their relation to each other? The language of reciprocity expresses it best. Ministerial office and authority do not stand over or apart from the church, but exist in and for it. On the other hand, the church does not have the power of disposal<sup>44</sup> over the ministerial office, as if it is free to have it or not. Church and ministry both stand under the living Word of God. Neither is derived from the other; neither stands apart from the other; and neither is free in relation to the other.

The church’s freedom to make provision for the ministry of word and sacrament in every place – geographically or culturally understood – is a limited one. It is, needless to say, limited by what is practicable and affordable. It may have considerable freedom in the provision of

<sup>42</sup> T.F. Torrance, *Conflict and Agreement in the Church*, Vol. 2, 48.

<sup>43</sup> *For the Sake of the Gospel*, §5.1.

<sup>44</sup> There is a sense in which the church has the freedom of deployment of its ministers, though this is not an absolute freedom. It is interesting to note that in the Methodist Church it was a ministerial session of the Conference which determined where ministers would be stationed.

ordained ministers in particular places and in withdrawing them from their appointments. But it is not free to determine that it will do without ministerial office. The churches do not agree at present about the essential form of such office, though they agree about the need for a ministerial oversight (*episkopé*) which has communal, collegial and personal dimensions. If the ministry is God's gift to the church or God's provision for it, the church's freedom to determine the form or forms of it is limited. Ministry is fundamentally related to the proclamation of the Word and the administration of the sacraments, the shaping of the church's life in accordance with these, and the meeting of human need, both within and beyond the *koinonia* of the church. The church is free to determine what ministries, old or new, may be required in new times and circumstances and to make provision for these as it can. There have been ministries in the past for which the church no longer sees particular need. But the church is not free in relation to the ministry of Word and sacrament; it is not free to dispense with such a ministry, since it recognises this ministry as part of God's provision for the church. Its freedom here is a limited one. The limits of this freedom are differently drawn by different churches. It is still by no means universally agreed that women may be admitted to ministerial office, not even among the three churches that have been in focus in this essay. It has been even more difficult and divisive to ask the question whether people in same-sex relationships may be ordained to ministerial office. The church is free to determine many aspects of ministerial office, but it is not free to determine whether or not it has need of such office. The ordering of the church's ministry can never be simply a matter of local need and calculated strategy but of obedience to the will of God and reception of God's provision for the church 'in every generation'.<sup>45</sup>

### [E] The transmission of ministerial authority: ordination

In the final part of this essay we consider some implications of what has been discussed above for the practice of ministerial ordination. Our concern will be with the ordination of presbyters (priests, pastors, ministers of the Word). Broadly speaking, ordination is the 'setting apart' of persons for the office and work of the ministry to which they have been called by God.<sup>46</sup> Having been educated and formed for this ministry, they are examined for their fitness and readiness for this office, and then 'set apart' for it by ordination. By the act of ordination, they are placed in an 'order' of ministry or in ministerial office; they are given authority to hold that office and to exercise the particular ministry. Ordination is thus the transmission of ministerial authority to a person by those who are competent to do so.<sup>47</sup> In mainstream churches ordination is always set in a broader liturgical framework, *viz.* that of the proclamation of the Word and the celebration of the sacrament of Holy Communion. The essential thing in ordination, however, is 'the laying on of hands' upon the ordinand and the prayer of ordination.<sup>48</sup> Whose hands are laid on the ordinand? Who is 'competent' to transmit ministerial authority to the ordinand?

The key question is: who ordains a person as a presbyter? Most obviously, it is the *church* that ordains a minister. It is also possible to argue that ordination is received from *those who already hold ministerial office* in the church: from the bishop, together with other presbyters, in

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<sup>45</sup> In the Uniting Church ordination liturgy the following sentence forms part of the prayer before the reading of the Scriptures: 'We praise you that in every generation you have given ordained ministers to your church that your people may be nourished in faith and equipped for service.'

<sup>46</sup> In every church in which ministers are ordained both a person's own sense of a call from God to a particular ministry and the church's endorsement or confirmation of such a call are essential before a person can be ordained.

<sup>47</sup> The term 'transmission of ministerial authority' is more at home in the Anglican and Lutheran Churches. It does not occur in traditional Reformed theology of ministry, nor in the Uniting Church. However, the idea of the transmission of authority for ministerial office, if not the term, is at the core of the meaning of ordination in the Uniting Church also.

<sup>48</sup> L.W. Countryman speaks of four significant things: (1) the emphasis on the Gospel as the source of ministry; (2) the consent of the people of God; (3) the explicit relating of this ecclesial act with the one holy catholic and apostolic church; and (4) The laying on of hands upon the ordinand, while prayers are said. L.W. Countryman, *The Language of Ordination: Ministry in an Ecumenical Context* (Philadelphia: Trinity Press International, 1992), 48.

an episcopal church, or from the presbyterate, represented by a number of ministers, in non-episcopal churches. It was argued above that it is *God* who established a ministerial office for the church and that in a deeper sense a minister receives ordination from *God* (or – essentially the same thing – from *Jesus Christ*). Clearly, all three agents – God, the ministry and the church – have a stake in ordination. (1) If it is *God* who calls a person to ministerial office, God must be said to ordain a person into that office. It is the divine Word that needs to be given utterance and taught in every generation; it is the sacraments in which Christ binds people to himself, feeds them (with himself) and equips them (with his Spirit) that have to be administered in every new situation. (2) The *church* also has a big stake in the transmission of ministerial authority. The church confirms a person's sense of call to the ministry, provides formation and education for that ministry, tests a person for readiness to take up ministerial office, and establishes a structure of oversight and accountability for its ministers. (3) *Those who have already been ordained* to ministerial office also have a large stake in the transmission of ministerial authority. It is they who are especially responsible for succession in the presbyteral ministry, the ministry of Word and sacrament, and of pastoral care. The matter of ministerial succession is especially their business. T.F. Torrance argues that ordination is properly carried out by those who have themselves been ordained, though, of course, only with the concurrence of the church. They alone are 'the proper instruments for "regular" association of others with the commission they have received and which they in obedience to the apostolic ordinance devolve upon others.'<sup>49</sup> It is they who, in so doing, attest that the real ordaining agent is Jesus Christ.

In the Anglican Church of Australia – but everywhere in the Anglican communion – priests are ordained by a bishop, but other priests join with the bishop in the laying on of hands on the ordinand. In the Lutheran Church of Australia pastors are ordained by the president, in association with other pastors.<sup>50</sup> In the Presbyterian Church – not only in Australia – the Moderator prays the ordination prayer and is then joined in the laying on of hands by other ministers. This has been the standard practice, on the basis that only those who have received the commission to ministerial office may associate others with them in this commission.<sup>51</sup> The practice of the Uniting Church is at variance with this 'standard practice'. At least two ministers and two lay people must take part in an ordination, which is understood as taking part in the laying on of hands.<sup>52</sup> This is a practice for which there appears to be no written theological rationale.<sup>53</sup> The Assembly Doctrine Commission in 1982 spoke of 'the laying on of hands by those already holding this ministry,'<sup>54</sup> which conflicts with the practice of the Uniting Church since its inception in 1977. One can only assume that the (unexpressed) basis of the Uniting church practice is the view that it is the *church* that ordains and that the Holy Spirit's gifts to the ordinand can be symbolically attested to in the laying on of hands by both ordained and lay members of the church. It does not emphasise the fact that it is primarily *Jesus Christ* who ordains, and it takes no account of the conviction of other churches – including at least one (but more likely two) of the uniting churches before church union – that it is through the agency of those whom he has already commissioned into the ministry of his Word and sacraments that *Christ* is the primary agent in ordination. What is of concern to the two churches with which the Uniting Church is in discussion on the mutual recognition of ministries is not simply divergent ordination practice but the fact that this implies a different view of the place of ministerial office – ordained ministry – within the Uniting Church.

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<sup>49</sup> T.F. Torrance, *Conflict and Agreement in the Church*, Vol. 2, 53

<sup>50</sup> See *Common Ground*, Appendix 2, 22.9.

<sup>51</sup> Archbishop Peter Carnley describes as standard practice the ordination of persons 'effected at the hands of predecessors in the same office.' See his 'Paper', 8.

<sup>52</sup> See Reg. 2.3.4 of the Regulations of the Uniting Church in Australia and the Notes preceding the form of service for the ordination of a Minister of the Word, Note xi.

<sup>53</sup> At least, the writer has never seen any theological justification for this practice.

<sup>54</sup> See the answer to Question 22: 'What does this ordination signify?'

At its core, the difference between the Uniting Church and its two dialogue partners is a difference in their understandings of the relationship between the ministry and the church. The question is whether or not the ministry and the church stand in a reciprocal relation to each other or whether the church is understood as having an ontological priority. The difference is in their greater or lesser differentiation between the ministry of all Christians and ministerial office, bearing in mind, of course, that all the ministries of the church have a place in the ministry of Christ. In defence of the theology of Uniting Church, it cannot be said that the convictions of the other two churches in the matter of ordination do not have a place in Uniting Church thinking. But it must be said that the ideas that are at the centre of Anglican and Lutheran thinking about ordination do not appear in the most important Uniting Church documents, principally *The Basis of Union*. There can be no doubt that this was of considerable significance for the shaping of the rite of ordination in the Uniting Church. It is also true that the terms ‘ministerial *orders*’ (which could not really have been expected) or ‘ministerial *office*’ (which could have been expected) would have given the discussion in the Uniting Church greater clarity and possibly a different direction. The result of these two factors has made the Uniting Church more susceptible than the other two churches to the pragmatic approach to problems of ministerial placement in this country. What we see here is not simply a clash of theological principle and pragmatism, although the latter is an element. It is also a clash of theological convictions, resulting from a failure to see clearly both the relation and the difference between the ministry of each Christian and ministerial office and, behind this, the relation between the church and the ministry.

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