

## CHURCH OF THE BRETHREN

# MINISTERIAL NOMENCLATURE, ROLE, AND MEMBERSHIP <sup>1</sup>

### I. INTRODUCTION

#### A. The First-Century Church and Early Development

The New Testament concept of “the ministry” was broader than the popularly held views of our day. One of the New Testaments terms for “minister” is *diakonos* (from which our term *deacon* is a transliteration). It means, literally, a servant. Anyone who sincerely follows Christ is his *diakonos* (John 12:26). Jesus defined greatness in terms of being a minister or servant (Matt. 2:26).

Nowhere in the New Testament is the word *hierus*, “priest,” employed as the equivalent of the set-apart ministry as we know it today. In the words of 1 Peter 2:9, as God’s people the *entire Christian community* is a “royal priesthood.”

Jesus urged his followers to call no one *rabbi* or *father* or *master* (Matt. 23:8-9). He condemned those who loved the “salutations in the market places, and being called *rabbi* by men” (Matt. 23:7). The early church was a society in which all were called to share in the ministry that Jesus had initiated. They were, as the root word for laity (*laos*) says, “the whole people of God.” In 1 Corinthians 14:26, Paul writes, “When you come together each one has a hymn, a lesson, a revelation, a tongue, or an inspiration.”

In the early church, people were not called to degrees of holiness, but to different tasks. The distinctions were those of function, “. . . to prepare all God’s people for the work of Christian service (ministry) . . .” (Eph. 4:12 TEV). Some were called to the task of teaching (1 Cor. 12:28; 2 Tim. 1:11; James 3:1); others were called to prophesy (1 Cor. 12:28; Acts 13:1); still others to heal or to help (1 Cor. 12:28; Eph. 4:11); and others to other areas of service.

The most customary title in the early church was *brother*, or *brethren*, for all Christians during the early decades (Acts 9:17; 22:13; 1 Cor. 5:11; 61:6; Acts 6:3, etc.). As the church needed more organization, New Testament writings indicate the creation of the office of deacon (Acts 6:1-4; 1 Tim. 3:8-13), elders (presbyters, Acts 11:30), and overseers or administrators (*episkopos*, commonly translated “bishops”). Overseers cannot be easily distinguished from elders (Acts 20:28), and in most cases the terms are easily interchangeable (“bishops and deacons” or “elders and deacons,” Phil. 1:1; 1 Tim. 3:2; Titus 1:7). The earliest known use of the title *bishop* with a personal name is not found until about A.D. 160 in the martyrdom of Polycarp. The title *brother* dropped from use in the fourth and

---

1. Approved by 1969 Annual Conference.

fifth centuries and was reserved for the address of clergy to one another and for life in monastic communities.

Titles such as *brother* or *friend* were revived in sectarian groups such as the Waldensians and the Hussites in the Middle Ages. In the sixteenth-century Anabaptist movement and the seventeenth-century sectarian movement in England, all titles for nobility and ecclesiastical offices were repudiated. The Quakers stressed human equality under God. This was symbolized in their insistence on using *thee* and *thou* in conversation with all people. The Anabaptists did not lower the clergy; they elevated the laity.

### **B. The Church of the Brethren**

The Church of the Brethren was founded by lay people. The evidence is that it was not until well into the nineteenth century that anyone with previous background and training as a minister even joined their movement. Alexander Mack acted in the role of elder, but there is no record of how, when, or whether the church “ordained” him.

Like others of the Anabaptist tradition, the early Brethren viewed the baptismal service and the laying on of hands as the ordination of every member into the work of God.

In the earliest period all members, irrespective of office, were addressed simply as *brother* or *sister*. Brethren leaders would admit to no title but *teacher*.

In time, a three-degree ministry was developed: (1) *deacons*, who were hardly clerical figures at all, their responsibility being to care for the poor, to visit the afflicted, and to share certain responsibility in the worship service, especially in reading scripture and, at times, leading the singing; (2) *exhorters*, e.g., preachers; and (3) *elders* (bishops), who served as overseers of given congregations. All of these were called by the congregation. None was salaried; none was formally educated; none was set apart as different in kind (sacerdotally). Apparently there were not even nominations. All members of the congregation were considered eligible. There is no record of any regular financial support for Brethren ministers until at least the 1860s. The first record of a full-time salaried pastor is in 1891.

### **C. Changing Functions About the Pastor’s Role**

In our day the function of pastors is being reexamined, and the interpretations of that function are widely varied. Some representative models of ways in which the function of the pastor is interpreted in our denomination include the following:

1. *The self-supporting ministry.* The original pattern for ministry in the New Testament Church and in the Church of the Brethren is re-emerging around the world. The World Council of Churches has given special attention to the possibilities for earning one’s own living independently while serving in a set-apart ministry. Using the phrase applied to the Apostle Paul, they have termed it a “tent-making ministry.” French Catholics have experimented with “worker priests.” Some Brethren who are choosing this model compare it to a “working foreman.” They feel it makes them better able to close any clergy-laity gap that may exist, frees them to take a strong stand on unpopular issues, opens the way for a team approach, and makes it easier to recruit laity. Unlike the earlier self-supporting ministry, many today feel that such a person needs full seminary training.

2. *No administrative duties.* A reaction against the estimates that seventy percent of the pastor's time is spent in administration, this model calls for the pastor to devote his/her time to preaching, visiting, counseling, and training. Here lay members assume all organizational duties with the chair of the board becoming the administrative head. The pastor is free to make suggestions, but making and implementing decisions rest with the laity. As being practiced in at least one congregation, the pastor does not attend committee, board, or even council meetings.
3. *The pastor-administrator.* Here the pastor is seen as innovator, enabler, and evaluator of the congregation's life. Once goals and purposes have been agreed upon by the church board or council, it is the responsibility of the pastor to set in motion those administrative devices needed to get the job done. The chief function of the set-apart ministry are seen here as prophet, priest, teacher, and pastor. He/she is not the "church administrator" but is responsible to see that the functions of an administrator are assigned to and carried out by persons who understand their jobs and are qualified to do the work.
4. *Leader in community involvement.* Some in our day see the church as more than a "come and listen" institution. To them, the church is also an instrument to send people to "go, witness, and serve." With this model, the pastor is charged with teaching the members of the congregation to recognize injustice, inequity, and need, and to inspire them to apply Christian concepts and principles of human relationships and community needs. Secondly, the pastor needs to be involved, to set the example, and to lead the way in translating words, concepts, and theories into specific actions and practices.
5. *The role of the rabbi.* One model with increasing appeal is that of the contemporary Reformed Jewish rabbi. Jesus himself chose a similar model. The rabbinate constitutes no special class. All of the functions the rabbi performs may be and are exercised by any other member of the community. If the rabbi is usually the preacher, it is because of academic and professional equipment, not because of belonging to a special caste. The lay president of the congregation is the executive. Although the rabbi visits the sick and counsels the distressed, he is not expected to engage in rounds of "calling." The rabbi's primary function is that of teacher to the congregation and interpreter for the congregation to the wider community.

Part of the tension on today's pastor results from the conflict of these various models of the set-apart ministry. Most pastors embody combinations of various models. Many congregations have individuals who expect their pastors to fulfill more functions than any one person can. A healthy denomination will continue to make room for differing models of the set-apart ministry. A healthy congregation-pastor relationship is one where pastor and church adjust so that the abilities of each are used most fully. The pastor will give leadership in areas of weakness in congregational life; the congregation will be sensitive to the pastor's unique qualities and style of service. Each will help the other grow into a productive working relationship.

#### **D. Nomenclature**

In choosing appropriate terms for those in the set-apart ministry of the church, the experience of both the New Testament church and the early Church of the Brethren would suggest titles that are descriptive of their role.

1. The title *reverend* was first used in England about 1865. It means, literally, “worthy of reverence or fear.” Today, it is the title many church members assume to be expected by those in the set-apart ministry. Although its use is widespread, it is never proper to address a person as *Reverend*.
2. *Doctor* originally was an ecclesiastical title. It meant a teacher of unusual stature. It has become, in common usage, an academic title indicating a high level of scholastic or professional competence.
3. *Minister* is a more comfortable term for many Brethren; however, we need continually to remind ourselves that in the early church every Christian was looked upon as involved in the work of ministry.
4. *Pastor* is a title dignified by New Testament usage. Many in the set-apart ministry prefer it. The title is properly used as Pastor John Jones.

Some feel there is need for new terms that convey the image of the twentieth-century tasks to which the ordained are called: *teacher, enabler, coordinator*.

5. *Mister*, originally a title reserved for persons of high rank (originally *master*), is now considered a courtesy prefixed to names in general conversation. It is a proper title to be used with a proper name when introducing a minister.
6. *Brother* and *Sister* (like Mr. and Miss or Mrs.) are appropriate if applied to all members of the church. Aside from their continued use in religious and monastic communities, they are used in some secular organizations (as in some labor unions) and are increasingly used among those in the freedom and peace movements.

The use of first names may be the modern equivalent to the use of *brother* or *sister*. Many pastors prefer to be called by their first names by their friends in their communities and by those of the congregations of which they are a part.

A value worth preserving is our historic hesitation to appropriate any title that could be used for self-enhancement or ostentation. Whenever titles are used, they should describe the function of the minister and his/her relationship to the rest of the church.

### **E. The Authority of Pastors**

The pastor carries the authority shared by all Christians. Like them, he/she has experienced the ordination of baptism to share in the Christian ministry.

Second, he/she carries the authority of his/her person. That is, he/she has the authority of ability, gifts, and training.

Third, the pastor has an assignment and, therefore, the responsibility and the authority that go with that assignment for leadership within the church. The laying on of hands to that particular form of the ministry signifies confirmation by the church that God has given the necessary gifts and that the pastor has been called to function within the church in a leadership role.

## **F. Some Conclusions About the Pastor's Role**

The pastor shares in the work of ministry with all who are the people of God. God has called him/her to preach or to give administrative guidance or to teach just as God has called others to equally important tasks in our world.

The pastor carries the responsibility and the authority vested in him/her by the congregation and the district. The responsibility and the authority of the office mark a calling to specific tasks, not to special honors.

The pastor is aware that he/she will be looked to as an example. Without minimizing the importance of seeking to be worthy of the office to which he/she is called, the pastor will resist every effort to become the center of the congregation's experience. The pastor knows that if he/she occupies this center, it will not be occupied by Christ. The pastoral role is that of assisting the entire congregation in sharing the ministry of reconciliation, not of attempting to fulfill it for them.

The pastor's responsibility is not to make decisions for the church, but to enable the church corporately to discover God's will. The pastor does not become separate and stand apart from their experience, but seeks to participate with them in the redemptive work of God in the midst of life.

Because a pastor who has been called to serve a congregation lives and works in the congregation, his/her membership should reside in that congregation. As a member of the congregation, he/she shares the privilege of voting in church council. There will be times when his/her vote will be inappropriate, as when the terms of employment are under consideration. In such situations the pastor will be ineligible, as would any other member of the church when a role makes a vote inappropriate. The pastor stands in a different relationship to the church board. He/she is, in a sense, employed by the board to carry out its directives. Therefore, to exercise a vote in the board would be to confuse functions.

Where geographically separated from the Church of the Brethren, but desiring to maintain affiliation, a person in the set-apart ministry may place his/her membership in a congregation of choice.

In every way possible, the pastor should be a part of the witnessing community that he/she has been called to serve.

## **G. The Future**

In these days of rediscovery of the vitality of the New Testament church and renewed focus on the life and message of the "believers' churches," we need to continue to rethink our current use of the terms *ministry* and *ordination*. A denomination that captures the New Testament concept will expand the categories of ministry where laying on of hands is used. It will consciously reappraise the ways in which the ministry of Christ is limited to a small segment of the church. The first-century concept of the ministry (servanthood) of all Christians is equally valid for our day.

Office of Ministry  
Church of the Brethren General Board  
1451 Dundee Avenue  
Elgin, Illinois 60120-1694