

CHURCH OF THE BRETHREN

CALLING AND ORDINATION ¹

I. INTRODUCTION ²

II. AN UNDERSTANDING OF THE CHURCH ³

The church understands itself as the people of God, the body of Christ, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit. As the people of God, the church is rooted in the purposes of God as the Creator and Lord of all history. As the body of Christ, the church looks to Jesus Christ as the source and norm of its life and as the definitive expression of God's purposes for all of life. As the fellowship of the Holy Spirit, the church experiences God's presence in power to lead the church into the future, to equip it for its mission, and to evoke praise of the One who has called it into being.

The church is both a people of God and a people of a history, a divine community and a human community. Because the church's identity is rooted in God's presence and purposes, it looks first to God's revelation in Christ, scripture, and tradition for the decisive clues to what it is and what it is about. As a human community, however, the church can learn from such disciplines as psychology, sociology, cultural anthropology, economics, and political science, which shed light on the way all social groups function, and from such creative activities as literature, art, and music, which enhance our understanding of the way humans express themselves symbolically.

The church is one. It is present in each gathered, worshiping, and serving congregation. Many different denominational traditions exist within the one body of Christ. The tradition of the Brethren reflects the distinctive stamp of Pietist and Anabaptist movements in the church's story. It is valid and helpful to nurture this tradition, both as a way of affirming our own history and as a way of enriching the larger body of Christ. At the same time, we open ourselves to the gifts of other traditions, seeking with all Christians the unity of faith and practice which Christ wills for the church.

The church is both called out of the world and sent into the world. God's people are to be holy as God is holy, committed to a special identity and calling. To be called out or set apart, however, does not mean cut off, whether geographically or socially. The church lives in an interdependent relationship with many other human communities, political and financial, secular and religious,

1. Approved by 1985 Annual Conference.

2. This section was eliminated as directed by the 1999 Annual Conference paper on "Ministerial Leadership."

3. In slightly edited form, the sections on the church, the congregation, and leadership needs are from a "Philosophy Statement" of the Parish Ministries Commission, General Board, used here with permission.

national and international. Moreover, the world in which the church lives remains the object of God's love. It is the world, therefore, that is the arena of the church's mission.

The church's mission is to create new communities of faith and life that embody God's shalom and through which Christ works to bring renewal to both people and society. Such an understanding of mission is deeply rooted in our Pietist/Anabaptist heritage, and it differs both from the understanding of those who limit mission to the evangelization of individuals and from the understanding of others who limit mission to the secular transformation of corporate structures.

The church is a sign and instrument of God's kingdom but is not itself identical with that kingdom. Christ calls us to participate in the coming of God's reign, embodying that reign in our life together and witnessing to that reign in our life in the world. The new creation, which is the final goal of God's reign, however, is broader than the church and must not be equated with any particular ecclesiastical structures. Such a reminder is necessary to guard us from succumbing to institutional self-preservation as an end in itself or to a self-righteous approach to our mission in the world.

The church as a community of saints exists in the form of congregations bound to particular places, but it also has a global identity, which is fuller than (and sometimes challenges) the identity of any local community. It exists here and now but also reaches out across all ages. It is earthly and transcendent, visible and invisible. The articulation of the church's mission must be attentive to all of these dimensions of its character.

III. AN UNDERSTANDING OF THE CONGREGATION

The congregation, a community of believers sharing life in day-to-day and face-to-face relationships, is the basic unit of the church's life. In shared life and faith, the power of God transforms life most directly.

The congregation is a voluntary community, a community of people who have freely chosen to participate in a common life in and through Jesus Christ. Neither geographical proximity, family ties, nor cultural homogeneity dictates the basis or boundary of a congregation's life. Though any or all of these factors may influence the membership of a congregation, the basis of membership is voluntary commitment to a covenant with Christ and with one another.

The congregation consists of diverse types of people living in a variety of relationships and circumstances. Unlike those groups whose membership is restricted to a certain segment of the population, the congregation appropriately includes people who differ in racial and ethnic backgrounds, economic status, sex, age, and physical and mental abilities. If a congregation becomes exclusive rather than inclusive, it denies its God-given heritage.

The congregation may exist in a variety of shapes and forms, from the small house church fellowship to the large congregation containing multiple cells or communities within a community. The criterion for validity is neither size nor the model of organization, but whether the congregation in its own way realizes the intimacy and commitment of a covenant community.

The congregation is both a charismatic fellowship and a social or political institution. It is charismatic in the biblical sense that it derives its life from the gifts of the Spirit bestowed in and

through its members. Like other human communities, however, it must structure its life in some concrete form of organization.

The congregation is a body, an organic system of interrelated parts and functions. What affects the parts affects the whole and vice versa. This understanding of its essential nature calls for a wholistic approach to congregational life. It also calls for mutual accountability as a style of relating to one another.

The congregation is related to other social bodies around it. Although the congregation is not necessarily co-extensive with a particular neighborhood or parish, it neither exists in isolation from nor escapes responsibility for the well-being of the community in which it finds its environment.

The congregation is a community with a calling and purpose. Intentionality is implicit in its biblical self-understanding. Thus, it is important for the congregation regularly to set specific goals and objectives for its life and to nurture its members to enable them to carry out the church's calling.

The congregation is called for the sake of others. It is a caravan of pilgrims on a mission, not a commissary dispensing goods and services to its own clientele. At the same time, the congregation cannot neglect the needs of its members without destroying its vitality. It must seek ways to provide for fulfillment of individual needs and goals within its corporate calling.

The congregation is both a worshiping community and a witnessing community. The two are closely interdependent. When the congregation gathers to worship, it celebrates and reenacts Christ's victory over all the powers of sin and destruction in the world. When the congregation witnesses to the world, it attests that same victory energized by God's presence in worship.

The congregation is both a carrier of traditions and a center for change and renewal. Only the community that lives out of a rich heritage of tradition has a vital and common basis for facing new challenges and new issues. At the same time, only when traditions are interpreted afresh to meet new challenges can renewal happen.

The congregation is not sufficient to itself. It is interdependent with other congregations and the larger church. This calls for patterns that allow the congregation to participate in a network of district, national, and ecumenical relationships. By this interaction, both the congregation and the larger church are enriched.

The congregation is a community in ministry, not a community served by a minister. From its beginnings, the church has understood that all members are ministers, but it has also called forth individuals in its midst for particular service.

IV. AN UNDERSTANDING OF CALLING

In the Old Testament, the people of God were frequently described as a *gahal*, a word whose meaning derives from the word for voice (*gol*). So Israel understood itself as the people called out by God's voice from amongst other peoples as servants of God's purpose.

A key New Testament word for call is *klesis*, taken from *ekklesia*, one of the words we translate as church. When understood this way, church, or *ekklesia*, refers to the ones “called out,” like those who are summoned by a herald to become part of a special assembly or gathering.

So call, or *klesis*, in its foundational New Testament usage, is the call to discipleship, the call to follow after Jesus (*Nachfolge*), the call to the ministry of all believers. Its first and most general expression is baptism by which we become members in Christ’s crucified-risen body, the newly constituted people of God or corporate humanity. This call not only precedes but also empowers our response, for it is based on the objective work of salvation accomplished in Jesus Christ.

Occasionally, in the New Testament, *klesis* is used as the personal, individual call to particular services. Examples are Romans 1:1 and 1 Corinthians 1:1, in which Paul refers to himself as having been called to the work of an apostle. But, even there, the thought is both objective and corporate and presupposes an understanding of the way the “Body of Christ” differentiates into its parts, with each part being essential for the well-being and the effective functioning of the total organism.

From such references we are assured that there is New Testament warrant for speaking of call in a personal, individual sense, as when we currently feature one’s call to a particular form of the set-apart ministry. It is important, though, to keep before us the wider range of scriptural meanings.

The call to set-apart ministry is of God. It is mediated through people who represent the community of faith. It is deeply personal, but it is not a private affair. It is both a profound inner conviction and the testing of the conviction by the church. It is, therefore, both the call of God and the call of the church.

V. AN UNDERSTANDING OF ORDINATION

A. Biblical Perspective

Since very early in the church, it has been understood that being baptized in Jesus Christ means that God’s Spirit and life call all those who are baptized to be Jesus’ disciples. All who belong to God in Christ are priests, participating through baptism in Jesus’ calling to be God’s very life in the world. This priesthood of all believers is basic to our understanding of ministry. Membership in Jesus Christ is enrollment into the ministry of the priesthood of all disciples.

What we know today as ordained or set-apart ministry is not directly called for, although it may be implicitly presupposed in the scriptures, which present us with a great range of leaders called into God’s service on behalf of God’s people.

It is evident in the Old Testament that Israel sometimes relied upon people chosen by God’s direct call, sometimes those chosen through lineage (especially the Davidic line), and sometimes chosen through still other patterns, such as the kings of the Northern Kingdom, judges, the court prophets and prophetesses, and the scribes.

We see in the New Testament that the church very early participated even more directly in naming and calling forth under God’s guidance leaders for its particular needs. For example, in Acts 6:1-4, we read of the appointment of seven people “of good repute, full of the Spirit

and of wisdom” to help the church respond equitably to the needs of widows in the daily distribution of food. In Acts 13:1-3, we catch glimpses of the church, which included prophets and teachers, also commissioning Paul and Silas for their evangelistic mission. In Romans 16, we note that women as well as men actively participated in the leadership of the church.

Guided by the scriptures, the various church families through the centuries have recognized the need for leaders whose commissioning for particular ministries is at the same time the recommissioning of the *laos*, the people of God, for its ministry and mission. Ordination into set-apart ministry is understood as enrollment into service for the church of Jesus Christ. Accountability is to Christ’s whole body, expressed on earth as “one, holy, catholic, apostolic church.” In the Church of the Brethren, stewardship of that accountability is entrusted to the district, which examines, commissions, and reviews persons as ordained ministers of God’s universal church.

The church needs leaders, persons ordained or set-apart by their ministry, to remind us that our life, as theirs, comes from God. Yet we know, as Israel learned under the kingship, that even a God-initiated office tempts the people and office-holder alike to behave as if the one holding office were “over” those among whom he or she holds leadership. Jesus’ death, relinquishing control over even those he came to save, defies that interpretation of ordination. But subject to misinterpretation as ordination is, the people of God do need such leaders as set-apart ministers who are able to serve God and God’s people so that the whole church ministers as Christ’s living presence to and for all creation. As God became human in Jesus Christ, thus voluntarily becoming vulnerable to our misunderstandings, so God becomes human in the lives of persons today, remaining vulnerable to human perception and passion, yet appropriating such “treasures in earthen vessels to show that the transcendent power belongs to God and not to us” (2 Cor. 4:7b).

B. Historical Perspective

The words *function* and *office*, used throughout earlier papers on ordination, are inadequate terms for discussing ordination. On one hand they are confusing because the two words are often interchangeable in current secular usage. On the other hand, in discussions about ordination, the words have often implied a more distinct separation of two aspects of ministry than historical facts warrant. What an ordained minister does and what he or she symbolizes, or represents, in and for the community cannot and should not be sharply differentiated.

In the eighteenth century, Brethren often spoke of ministry in terms that described what a person did. Those we know today as deacons were often called simply “visiting Brethren,” since one of their primary responsibilities was the annual visit to every home in the congregation.

Congregational practice during this earlier time gave considerable freedom for anyone to stand and speak. From those who spoke, the congregation discerned who should be chosen for a ministerial service. They were affectionately referred to as Brethren “set forward,” which literally described what happened: namely, those chosen to preach were set forward to sit behind the table with other ministers and elders, often facing the deacons on the opposite side of the table. Those who advanced to these degrees in the ministry were frequently referred to as housekeepers, householders, or housefathers to describe their disciplinary and overseer role in the life of the meeting.

These words that described what leaders did arose predictably among the Brethren during the informal, less structured type of organization often characteristic of a new movement. Flexible titles and views came comfortably to a group in which those called out, or set forward, were little different in overall vocation, education, and status from all the members. Also operative was the conviction that gifts of the Spirit embodied in individuals are representative of and, thus, are fittingly named and recognized by the total body. Special callings in ministry were regarded not as something forever given by God, but as a particular discernment and designation by the church. Ordination, therefore, was not seen as a right as much as a gift and a naming of gifts and, as such, could be designated not to exist any longer when the relationship was perceived to no longer to be the same between the community of faith and the person.

It is also clear that from the earliest Brethren beginnings there were those who emerged as corporate leaders or representatives of the community, then known as “weighty” members. These were seen as individuals who, in their very persons as well as in what they did and what they said, conveyed the spirit of the Brethren in ways that winsomely and powerfully expressed what the community wanted to convey to the world. Alexander Mack, Sr., was referred to as “servant of the Word.” Later, Peter Becker, Sarah Righter Major, and others were called “ministers of the Word.”

In the nineteenth century, there evolved, in addition to the deacon body, a threefold ministry: (1) ministers on trial (first degree, currently known as licensed ministers); (2) speakers and exhorters called ministers (second degree, currently known as ordained ministers); and (3) elders, who were so designated because of special maturity and standing in the life of the community (third degree). From those chosen to the third degree of ministry, congregations often named one as presiding elder or bishop. Neighboring congregations would call upon these highly trusted elders or bishops to advise them on matters of faith and practice and to give counsel in times of special need. Before later structures, such as the General Board, district organizations, colleges, and seminary, the Brethren looked to John Kline, Peter Nead, Henry Kurtz, Mary Geiger, George Wolfe, Mary Stover, and others deemed “weighty” among them, to symbolize and to fulfill, to be and to serve in a corporate leadership role within and in behalf of the total body. To mention still another example, Enoch Eby, who served as Annual Conference moderator nearly a dozen times in the late nineteenth century, was serving as more than just the foreman or moderator (both words that described what he did) of the Big Meeting. He embodied something of what might be described as the sacramental or representative nature of ministerial leadership.

There has been a persistent effort to hold together what a person does and what a person symbolizes, or represents, in reference to ministry. Achieving integration between these often rival views has been difficult and seldom achieved by Brethren or by other church families. Ministry is not simply a task or job narrowly defined in current organizational terms. Involved is the call rightly to divide the word of truth, to provide pastoral care, to proclaim the gospel, to be engaged in church discipline and administration, and, by one’s being as well as one’s doing, to represent the corporate heritage, identity, and witness of the faith community to the world for which Christ died. These aspects of ministry involve embodiment as well as deeds. They combine in an integral and inseparable way what one does and what one represents in the faith community.

VI. AN UNDERSTANDING OF CURRENT LEADERSHIP NEEDS

Supported by these foundational understandings of church, of congregation, of calling, and of ordination, we make the following affirmations about current leadership needs:

- A.** We affirm the need for inclusive leadership, drawn from the full gamut of the church's life. In faithfulness to the pentecostal vision of the outpouring of God's prophetic Spirit on all flesh, the church is called to affirmative action in broadening the makeup of its leadership. Both women and men, the young and the old alike, and people from diverse racial, ethnic, and economic backgrounds have essential gifts to contribute to the leading of God's people.
- B.** We affirm the need for leadership that takes strong and fitting initiatives in the life of the church, without being authoritarian or overly nondirective.
- C.** We affirm the need for competent pastoral leadership at the congregational level. As noted above, ministry is the work of the whole congregation. Without the vision and support of those serving in pastoral roles, however, the ministry of the congregation will flounder. The vitality of the congregation is in direct proportion to the quality of its leadership.
- D.** We affirm the need for a circular flow of the gifts of leadership, reflecting our commitment to partnership and mutuality. The strength we seek must include the strength of all. We must find ways for congregational, district, denominational, and ecumenical leaders continually to energize each other.
- E.** We affirm the need for coordination of approaches on the part of leaders in various structures. This coordination must take place at several different levels: (1) between boards and the staff they employ in various structures of the church's life; (2) between General Board staff members themselves and within and across various General Board leadership groups and task forces; (3) between General Board staff and the staff of Bethany Seminary, both of which have national leadership responsibilities; (4) between national leadership of the Church of the Brethren and our counterparts in various ecumenical agencies; (5) between national, district, and congregational leaders.
- F.** We affirm the need for relating the leadership of special interest groups to mainstream structures of the church in an appropriate way. It is important that those who speak for such groups have a visible forum to share their concerns so that the church may learn and grow from their witness. It is equally important that such groups do not become competitive with the mainstream mission of the church as structured through Annual Conference, the district, and the congregation.
- G.** We affirm the need for continuing nurture of leaders. The gifts of the Spirit are already richly present in our midst at all levels of the church's life. But these gifts need to be nurtured in deliberate ways through ongoing support systems and through specific training experiences. Only in this way will leaders be able to guide the church effectively as we individually and corporately seek renewal of our life and mission through Jesus Christ.

VII. IMPLICATIONS FOR CURRENT FAITH AND PRACTICE

A. Calling

Brethren historically have taken strong initiatives in discerning the ministerial gifts of people and in inviting those people, prayerfully and thoughtfully, to consider the call to set-apart ministry, making an earnest corporate and individual assessment of their interests and abilities and of their overall personal and family needs, responsibilities, and circumstances.

It is urgent that the church today reclaim these strong initiatives in extending the call. Currently, we are relying too heavily upon people to volunteer. The tendency is to wait for people to express interest in set-apart ministry rather than assertively to seek them out. Individuals may continue to volunteer their services. When they have the qualities, including readiness to seek appropriate means of being equipped through personal study and programs of training, we may rejoice when they do so volunteer. But, new initiatives are also required if we are to meet the leadership needs of diverse congregations and of districts and other denominationally related institutions. In this manner, the call of the church serves fittingly as a means as well as a confirmation of the call of God.

B. Ordination⁴

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Revised as directed by the 1999 Annual Conference paper on "Ministerial Leadership."

4. This section was eliminated as directed by the 1999 Annual conference paper on "Ministerial Leadership."