

Identity Crisis: Our Quest for an Ecclesiology

Jerome King Del Pino

Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it.” So goes the famous aphorism coined by literary philosopher George Santayana. Even though self-evident, it bears repeating as the report of the Commission to Study Ministry is sent to the 2008 General Conference. An informed awareness of the past carries great relevance for the present and future. Just as the amnesiac has lost not only memory but also identity, so a church without a vital consciousness of its past—both failures and successes—has forfeited an understanding of who it is. To this end, I will sketch an inherited context within which the commission did its work, with primary focus on what its report has noted and what I have termed as the greatest challenge, if not obstacle, to having more fruitful conversation that can achieve a consensus we currently do not have: namely, as the commission states: “[There is a] lack of coherence in our church’s ecclesiology.”¹ And it is this glaring deficit that has impeded the commission’s ability “to help the church gain clarity about its ministries in relation to each other, particularly to address the standing of local pastors and deacons.”²

With one exception, the UMC (and one of its predecessor bodies—The Methodist Church) has conducted a study of ministry every quadrennium since 1944! Such “quadrennial ministry studies within Methodism during the last two generations,” Richard Heitzenrater has observed, “present an interesting illustration of denominational identity crisis.”³ After critically analyzing each study through 1988, he summarizes his findings with a balcony view of the confusion that has come to characterize the thinking and resulting actions of a church uncertain of its identity, that is, its nature, purpose, form and practice.

On the matter of the number of orders, for the first decade after 1944, the studies maintained and defended the traditional

scheme of two orders, as well as holding the line on the necessary connection between ministry, sacraments, and ordination; . . . The next decade saw a shift toward restructuring ministry on the basis of proposing one order (elder), partly in anticipation of union between the Methodists and The Evangelical United Brethren. The third decade, after 1964, abandoned the idea of one order and moved rapidly toward a democratization of ministry and a [re-]conceptualization of orders within the prevailing temper of non-authoritative and non-hierarchical tendencies of the 1970s. In the 1980s, the reports . . . continued the attempt to unravel the relationship between ordination and sacraments and to suggest that the lay diaconate become an order. [The 1988] study commission . . . considered moving beyond these two orders and was thinking of proposing three orders (including an ordained episcopate [!])⁴

He concludes his summary with a judgment that speaks

directly to the challenge facing the next General Conference as it receives the current commission's report: namely, to determine if there is sufficient consensus about our identity as church to justify enacting any legislation that would change piecemeal rather than comprehensively our current ordering of ministry. He writes:

It is difficult to gain a sense of continuity within our tradition when, on the basic matter of ministerial orders, in a period of twenty years, we move from advocating one order to contemplating three. In spite of much rhetoric to the contrary, some of the emerging views of ministry are often tied more to function and facility than to vision, commitment, or vocation (Emphasis added).⁵

It is within this inherited and larger historical context that the commission has pursued its mission to “explore and articulate scriptural, theological, ecclesial and practical groundings that define our distinct ministries within our common Christian relationship through baptism.”⁶ Even a cursory reading of the mission assignments of prior study commissions will confirm significant similarities with that of the current commission. To a greater or lesser degree, all prior studies of ministry engaged in theological reflection, plumbed scripture, studied the meaning of ordination, the relationship of ordination to the sacraments, the meaning of itineracy and the nature of conference membership, and even surveyed the variety of opinions across the church that would inform a legislative process in which virtually everything is up for grabs every quadrennium. These prior studies, even when no legislative action was taken and another study was authorized for yet another quadrennium, never accomplished the ardent desire of many across the church to have a coherent ordering of ministry that, in turn, coheres with an ecclesiology (identity) that will ground and give focus to our ever-expanding list of things we do (as a movement?—as a church?) and then call it mission.

The current commission's report is distinguished from prior reports in two compelling ways. First, it has endeavored to identify and delineate our history of discontinuity in repeated attempts to order ministry by enacting piecemeal, quadrennially-applied legislative Band-Aids. To this end, for example, the report makes clear that the celebration of the sacraments is not a “right” (a primary argument in studies from the 1970s and 1980s), but is an act authorized by the church through ordination in the annual conference on behalf of the church universal. In spite of all the piecemeal legislation passed by previous General Conferences that gave priority to enfranchisement of leaders, many for assignment to nonviable local churches, over upholding our claim to be a part of the church ecumenical, the commission's call to overcome years of disconnected actions is clear and compelling when it states: “The church cannot go on simply appointing pastors to local ministries, sending them out to act like ordained elders and asking congregations to accept them as pastors with sacramental authority, when in fact they are not ordained. . . [Indeed,] . . . What other church establishes its clergy constitutionally without ordination?”⁷ It is notable that at least one of the prior ministry studies has described as “indefen-

sible” our practice of separating sacraments from ordination.⁸ The current commission has clearly and rightly raised the stakes by linking what we do in our sacramental practice to the validity of our claimed identity of who we are (ecclesiology) as part of the church ecumenical.

The second, and I believe, most compelling distinction of the report is that unlike prior studies that for a variety of reasons, exacerbated the discontinuity of legislative actions recommended by previous studies that proposed more and more piecemeal legislation, the current commission has initiated a deep-running conversation that, given the history noted above, requires continuation. As a delegate to seven consecutive General Conferences, four of which considered and acted on ministry studies, I am strongly persuaded that our church urgently needs, as the “Minutes of [our] Several Conversations” encourage, “to think things through and talk together earnestly, ‘speaking what is in our hearts.’”⁹ We need to speak and listen to each other, not to stake out special interests and to define turf in the cause of

protecting power, place, and status of set-apart leaders, but to build a vital consensus about what the church is and what ordered ministry is before we can know, much less live out with institutional integrity, what the church must do. We need to continue, expand, and intensify the conversation because

achieving clarity about who we are as church (identity/ecclesiology), what God yearns for us to do (mission), and who will focus, organize, and lead our mission (set-apart ministry) is nonnegotiable if our claim to make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world is to be more than mere ecclesiastical jargon. Alas, dare I say, we need to continue the conversation because our task is inalterably theological, not legislative, thus requiring of us that we dare not permit thought, imagination, and reasoned discourse to be replaced by ‘real-politik’¹⁰ and power, even the ‘real-politik’ and power of our holy conferencing in General Conference. □

The current commission has clearly and rightly raised the stakes by linking what we do in our sacramental practice to the validity of our claimed identity of who we are (ecclesiology) as part of the church ecumenical.

1. *Report of the Commission to Study Ministry*, (n.p. [2008]), Question 112, p. 47.
2. *Ibid.*
3. Richard P. Heitzenrater, “A Critical Analysis of the Ministry Studies since 1944,” hereafter cited as *Occasional Papers*, no. 76 (September 1988):1.
4. Heitzenrater, *Occasional Papers*, no. 76 (September 1988):10.
5. *Ibid.*
6. *Report of the Commission to Study Ministry*, (n.p. [2008]), Statement of Mission, 1.
7. *Report of the Commission to Study Ministry*, (n.p. [2008]), Question 96, p. 41.
8. *The Study of Ministry, 1960-1964* (Nashville: Board of Education, 1964), 28.
9. *Report of the Commission to Study Ministry*, (n.p. [2008]), Question 107, p. 44.
10. Practical politics, in the sense that ideas and theories are unimportant or are subordinated to achieving a desired, yet narrow or limited practical outcome.



Jerome King Del Pino is General Secretary of the General Board of Higher Education and Ministry. He is a member of the Ministry Study Commission.