

# Ordering Christ's Ministry in a Changed World

by Randall Prior

## Introduction

The National Assembly meeting in 2006 will make significant decisions about how we as the Uniting Church structure specified ministries. In this article I want to respond to the report from the Task Group which sets out three options for the future. In doing so, I explain the background which gave rise to the paper, summarise the content of the paper, and then offer some comments and critique.

## The Background

The Assembly Specified Ministries Task Group was formed following the presentation of several proposals to the 2003 Assembly dealing with various issues concerning ministry in the Uniting Church. The Task Group had the task of reviewing the six specified ministries that were adopted by the Sixth Assembly in 1991 (Minister of Word, Minister of Deacon, Youth Minister, Lay Pastor, Lay Preacher, Community Minister). Broad parameters were given to the Task Group to 'facilitate and analyse conversations about the nature, form and need for specified ministries within the current context of the Uniting Church in Australia' with a view to bringing recommendations to the Eleventh Assembly in July 2006.

The group organized a series of three *conversations* to take place through 2005. The conversations were to take place throughout the Uniting Church and focus on (1) the nature of Church and ministry, (2) issues relating to specified ministry, and (3) proposed ways ahead. For each of these conversations, resource papers were prepared, response guidelines were offered and a timetable was set.

The first of the conversations was on the topic of the Nature of Church and Ministry using a foundational paper developed by the Assembly Doctrine Working Group as the resource.

In this first phase, we will be thinking about the foundations of specified ministries – our call to be involved, the theological underpinnings of what baptism means to ministry in the church, and how this speaks to our views on the specified ministries of the church. (from the Specified Ministries Task Group introduction to this phase).

Responses were sought by 30 April 2005.

In Conversation 2, the focus was on the specified ministries of the Uniting Church as they currently exist. Discussion was encouraged on the practical realities that influence ministry in Australia, ecumenical considerations of how we order our ministry, and the way in which baptism lays the foundation for the ministry of the whole the people of God. A wide range of papers (including one each on the six specified ministries, one on the theology of ordination, plus the reports to previous assemblies in 1991 and 1994) were offered as resources for this second conversation. Responses were invited by 31 July 2005.

The third Conversation, the focus of this paper, centres on 'Proposals for a way forward'. An 'Options Paper' prepared by the Task Group and setting out three options, was made available in October 2005, and responses were sought by the end of January 2006. As a result of the responses received the Task Group will prepare its report to the Assembly and that report will contain a single particular proposal for the way ahead.

## The Options Paper

The Options Paper is helpfully set out. It contains four sections and two appendices. Section 1 describes the process that the Task Group has taken to date; section 2 discusses foundational issues that have informed the conversations; section 3 sets out a summary of the different responses received by the Task Group to conversations 1 and 2; section 4 presents 3 options for the ordering of specified ministries in the Uniting Church; appendix 1 provides a theological rationale for the options presented and appendix 2 lists the resolutions from the Tenth Assembly in 2003 that were referred to the Task Group to consider in its work.

The paper informs us (p.10) that the main principles common to all three options were:

- The options seek to simplify specified ministries in the Uniting Church, allowing flexibility and sustainability
- The ordering of ministries in the Uniting Church is important
- People who serve in the specified ministries of the Uniting Church are accountable to the church through its regulations and Code of Ethics
- People who are called to the specified ministries of the Uniting Church require a high level of appropriate training and formation
- The councils of the Uniting Church responsible for the oversight of the specified ministries of the Uniting Church are the Presbytery and the Synod
- People serving in existing specified ministries can choose to remain in these ministries with existing titles
- While some terminology changes in the three options, it will not necessarily effect (sic) people serving in current specified ministries

In summarizing each option below and noting some distinctive details, it is worth noting that in general, in all three options, the term 'Church Worker' is introduced to describe the particular ministries now exercised by the Lay Pastor, Lay Preacher, Community Worker, non-accredited Youth Worker, lay Chaplain, Christian Educator, Children and Family worker, and Pastoral Assistant. The remaining elements of the three options for the way ahead can be summarized as follows:

### *Option One*

- The term 'Pastor' is introduced to describe someone who is ordained to exercise ministry of Word and Sacrament in a particular local context. (This could include people in the current ministries of Lay Pastor, non-accredited Youth Worker or Community Minister.)
- Ordained Ministers (of the Word and of Deacon) continue to exercise their current ministries but with an increased role in oversight of locally ordained Pastors within a Presbytery.
- Youth Ministers (accredited) become ordained as either a Minister of the Word or Deacon, with a focus on youth work

### *Option Two*

- Ordained Ministers (of the Word and of Deacon) continue to exercise a ministry generally or locally with an increased role in oversight of the various Church Worker ministries

- Youth Ministers (accredited) become ordained as either a Minister of the Word or Deacon, with a focus on youth work

#### *Option Three*

- Church Workers, following appropriate training' may be authorized to preside at sacraments and use the title 'Pastor' for the duration of the placement.
- Ordained Ministers (of the Word and of Deacon) continue to exercise a ministry generally or locally with an increased role in oversight of the various Church Worker ministries
- Youth Ministers (accredited) become ordained as either a Minister of the Word or Deacon, with a focus on youth work

### **A Response – foundational issues**

The Task Group is to be commended in setting out its paper so helpfully and in seeking to address both the foundational aspects of a theology of ministry and the current context in the life of the church. In making my own response to the paper, I want to combine the same considerations.

#### *Contemporary Context for Ministry*

I am very familiar with what is becoming widely recognized as a period of our church history in Australia which is marked by the most profound change and challenge. In fact this is true of both culture and church and it applies to the whole of the western world. Lesslie Newbigin titled a series of lectures given at Princeton Theological Seminary in 1987 '*Can the West be Converted*' observing that within the space of less than one century of church history, the western world had moved from being essentially Christian (with all its citizens identifying themselves with the Christian Faith), to being essentially alienated from the Christian faith (with very much a minority of its citizens now church members). His point was not that we therefore need to re-evangelise the western world, but that, given the firm Christian foundations which had formed the western world and on which the west had now turned its back, is it any longer possible for the western world to hear the Gospel?

My own ministry as an ordained person began when I was 27 years of age in 1975, in the inner city of North Melbourne. In a church which accommodated 900 people, there were 15 regular worship members, and the person who introduced me to the congregation urged me 'to nurse the existing congregation to the grave and explore alternative forms of ministry (!)'.  
 Eight years later I went to Vanuatu in the South Pacific where I was half-time in the parish of Port Vila with a local full-time minister. Between us we looked after nine congregations with a membership of 3000 people, most of whom attended worship every Sunday. It formed something of a contrast to my Australian experience.

I returned to Australia and was minister in an outer Melbourne parish, in a new housing area where a congregation was just being established. The expectation was that this would become a booming congregation over a 3-5 year period (the large numbers of young families moving into the area would flock to the church). At the end of three years there were ninety people who were involved in the congregation in a Knox City community of 134,000 people!

My most recent congregational ministry was at Trinity North Balwyn where the vitality and the strength of membership of the congregation in the 1960s was reflected in the fact that at that time, there were 96 teachers (!) on their Sunday School list. I began in 1997. At that time the Sunday School was almost inactive and there was a likelihood that there would be no children under the age of ten years at worship on any given Sunday.

The experience outlined above is symptomatic of what is now a common experience throughout the life of the Uniting Church (indeed in almost all church traditions) in both urban and rural situations. When I commenced my current ministry at the Theological College, I made a decision to join the Rural Ministries Task Group so that I could be well informed about the challenges facing the church across the whole Synod. It has served to confirm and deepen my insight into what I really already knew. I began working with the committee when it was well on the way to producing its foundational paper on Lay Leadership Congregations. The purpose of the paper was to propose a positive way ahead for rural congregations in response to the fact that increasing numbers of congregations across the whole rural landscape in Victoria were not able to sustain the long tradition of supporting their own local ordained minister, and there was a consequent crisis which had to be addressed. The proposal was that Lay Leadership Teams be endorsed as an official and suitable form of local ministry for the future.

The challenges to the order and function of ministry cannot ignore this dramatically new context in the life of the church. It is now widely attested that the provision of the Ministry of Word and Sacrament for local congregations of the Uniting Church relies heavily on the leadership of people who are not ordained (and who are not trained for this role).

### *The Meaning of Ordination*

It was not new but it was rather sobering and confronting for me to discover in my early meetings with the Rural Ministry Task Group that there were two prominent views about ordination. The first view was that the ministry of an ordained person could be exercised equally well by anyone not ordained and therefore that the ordained minister was dispensable.

In the Uniting Church, the ordained ministry is not dispensable. The ordained ministry is a representative ministry; it re-presents Jesus Christ in and for the sake of the church. According to the widely affirmed ecumenical report on *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry* from the Faith and Order Commission of the World Council of Churches in 1982, the chief responsibility of the ordained ministry is 'to assemble and build up the body of Christ by proclaiming the Word of God, by celebrating the sacraments, and by guiding the life of the community in its worship, its mission and its caring ministry' (para.13, p22). The Uniting Church's own view of ordained ministry, as expressed in the Basis of Union, is consistent with this statement:

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. These will preach the Gospel, administer the sacraments and exercise pastoral care ... Such members will be called Ministers and their setting apart will be known as Ordination (para.14).

The reason why 'ordained ministry' exists in the church is not simply a matter of function – of working out the best way of doing things in the church. It is part of the very faith of the church which believes that the head of the church is Jesus Christ and the church cannot be faithful to its calling and purpose unless Jesus Christ continues to speak the Word of the

Gospel (through preaching, sacraments and pastoral care) to the church. The ordained minister is set apart in order to make sure that the Word of the Gospel is spoken to the church or, in other words, to enable the church to be the church. The two forms of ordained ministry in the Uniting Church are Minister of Word and Minister of Deacon. Each exists mutually as a means of reminding the church that it can be the church only by the Word of the Gospel and that it lives not for its own sake but in order to serve Jesus Christ in the world.

If we follow the logic of this, then it is essential that every Christian community be provided with the one thing necessary for its existence, namely the ministry of the Gospel, and that the provision of this be from the office of ordained ministry.

### *Ordained and Lay Ministries*

The second view expressed in the meetings of the Rural Ministry Task Group was that the ministry of an ordained person often suppresses if not suffocates the ministry of the members of the congregation and that lay ministry blossoms in the absence of an ordained minister. This raises the very important and much misunderstood issue of the relationship between 'ordained ministry' and 'lay ministry'.

The Basis of Union (para. 14) in speaking about ordained Ministers says, notably, that those who are set apart by ordination will 'preach the Gospel, administer the sacraments and exercise pastoral care so that all may be equipped for their particular ministries, thus maintaining the apostolic witness to Christ in the Church' (emphasis mine). In other words, the ministry of the people of God, which belongs to the whole people of God by baptism, cannot in fact be carried out without the ministry of the ordained. The ordained minister preaches the gospel, administers the sacraments and exercises pastoral care, not instead of the people, but the very opposite, in order that the people may then be equipped for ministry.

There is a second sense, then, in which ordained ministry is a representative ministry. It represents to the church what is the common ministry of the whole people of God, and equips them to carry out this ministry. Just as the ordained minister is set apart for the preaching of the gospel in Word and Sacrament, so the ministry of the whole people of God in the world is to share the gospel; just as the ordained minister is set apart to exercise pastoral care, so the ministry of the whole people of God is to care pastorally for others; just as the Minister of Deacon is set apart for diaconal ministry, so the ministry of the whole people of God is diaconal in its character. In other words, the Minister of the Word and the Minister of Deacon uphold for the whole Christian community the very nature of their own common calling in and for the world.

This relationship between the ordained ministry and lay ministry is seriously misunderstood.

Without labouring the point here, it is a great pity that we have adopted, almost without opposition, the terminology of 'lay' and 'ordained' as if the two are divided from each other, or even set over against each other. The terminology itself reinforces the problems we have. The truth is that by our baptism we all belong to the people of God and share in the one ministry of Jesus Christ. That is, we are all lay people. Within this community of the 'laos' of God, certain people are set apart for ordination. Therefore, *ordained ministry is one of the lay ministries* (a distinctive and indispensable one) of the Christian community. In our shared folly, we speak of ordained ministry as if it is more (or less) important than all (other) lay

ministries, as if it has a higher (or lower) status than any other ministry or as if it is set over against (other) lay ministries.

#### *Some Other Comments of Note*

##### (i) Pastor

There seems to me to be a problem in introducing the term 'Pastor' (Option One). While the idea of ordaining people into particular local ministries where the essential responsibility is to preach the gospel in Word and Sacrament and to exercise pastoral care is both wise and helpful, the introduction of a further 'order' of ministry seems to me to be confusing and unhelpful.

##### (ii) Church Worker

I note that the Options Paper proposes a new term 'Church Worker'. It makes sense for there to be a generic term which embraces the wide range of distinctive ministries currently part of the ordering of the Uniting Church's ministries. However, we have a problem with suitable terminology. 'Church Worker' is hardly a term which commends itself. In my view, it is open to a range of misconceptions (the use of the term 'church' may lead us into various unhelpful directions, so also the term 'worker'). I do not have a ready alternative to offer but simply note that this needs further consideration. (It is my view that we have other unresolved terminology problems apart from this, for example the way we use 'Word' and 'Sacrament', and the terms 'Minister of Word' and 'Minister of Deacon'.)

##### (iii) Pragmatic and Doctrinal

Much of the time, we seem to take up the discussion of ministry as if there are two competing perspectives – on the one hand the pragmatic perspective which takes seriously the context in which the church finds itself, and on the other hand the doctrinal or theological perspective which we assume to be an academic or theoretical view and out of touch with the real context. This framework of approaching the discussions leads only to a dead end. If it is true that the purpose of theology is to help the church to know what it is to be the church of Jesus Christ in and for the world, then this surely is utterly pragmatic. In fact, without this pragmatism, the church loses its identity and purpose.

### **Particular Response to the Proposals**

What then might we make of the three options set out by the Task Group? In summary, and arising from my deliberations above, I want to oppose the third of the options on the grounds that it significantly dilutes and confuses the distinctive ministry of the ordained and the purpose of ordination. I want also to oppose the second of the options on the grounds that it fails to address adequately the changing context of the church in ministry. And I want to oppose the first option on the grounds that it introduces a new order of ministry in the form of 'pastor'. I would prefer to see something of a combination of the first and second options which recognizes particular people in local situations who may be ordained into a local ministry, but I would prefer to retain the current term 'Minister' for such people and not to use a different term.

### **A Post Script – Urgently Needed: Formation for Ministry and the new CTM !**

With the exciting development in the Synod of the new Centre for Theology and Ministry, one of the many highly significant benefits is that formation for ministry of the whole people of God will come under a single umbrella. Those being prepared for one of the ordained ministries will be part of a single community with those being prepared for other specified ministries; and those who provide leadership and teaching in these fields will form a single team. This development is to be celebrated by the church and will surely give rise to a situation where the many current confusions and tensions about ministry and Ministry have the opportunity to be addressed. I await this with keen anticipation because unless and until this happens, it is doubtful that we shall be able to make an adequate decision about any future options for ministry.

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