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An Evaluation of "Ministry in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Canada: Its Forms and Practice" (July 1991)

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The document from the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Canada (ELCIC) Task Force on Forms of Ministry and action on it at the National Convention 10-14 July, 1991 have been watched with interest and some confusion by many.¹ This especially includes those involved in the United States in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA) Study of Ministry, whose first report² with its "foundations" and three models and ten options on ministerial structures went to the churchwide assembly in August 1991. It contains no recommendations but seeks discussion for proposals in 1993.

The analysis below does not speak for the ELCA Task Force but represents one individual's views, like that on the first ELCIC study (1990), published in *Consensus* 17/1 (1991) 87-99.

General Comments on the Document

The 1991 report is a bit briefer than its predecessor and has no doubt listened to constituencies at a number of points. There are more references in it to the 1983 Lutheran World Federation (LWF) study *The Lutheran Understanding of Ministry* (*LUM*), and biblical quotations have been changed to the NRSV. One general impression is that LWF (*LUM*) elements are now dominant over certain themes from the World Council of Churches' study, *Baptism, Eucharist, and Ministry* (*BEM*), but at several points neither international document has been followed.

The *biggest change* is a shift from an ordained ministry "expressed in three ways: pastor, bishop, and deacon" (1990:3.7)

to “the public exercise of the one ordained ministry ... expressed in two ways: a pastoral ministry (pastor, bishop) and a diaconal ministry (diaconal minister)” (1991:3.7). It is not absolutely transparent what caused this *shift from threefold to twofold*, since the first paragraph in 3.7B (= Background) on the New Testament is substantially the same in 1990 and 1991, and ends with the statement that “the threefold pattern ... became the normal pattern of ministry” (only) in the second and third centuries (cf. *BEM*).

Presumably the basis is the Reformation position that pastor and bishop are one office (see the new second paragraph in 1991:3.7B). This point is most clearly stated in 1991:4.2.2B, par. 2, the reformers based “their position on the original unity of the offices of presbyter and bishop.” The outcome can be termed a triumph of *LUM* (section 29 of which is cited, cf. 56) over *BEM*. The case for twofold ministry against threefold would be immensely strengthened, however, if the church father Jerome, whom the reformers cited, were mentioned, and more attention paid to the Pastoral Epistles, whence Jerome got the idea that presbyter/pastor and bishop are interchangeable terms.

This shift from threefold to twofold has certain results which show up elsewhere. The change is most apparent in the overall outline (helpfully presented in the 1991 Table of Contents on p. i): while the first three points, all ending with reference to “the whole people of God (*laos*)”, are the same, the old sequence has changed:

1990	1991
4. Pastor (<i>Presbyter</i>)	4. The Pastoral Ministry
	4.1 Pastor (<i>Presbyter</i>)
5. Bishop (<i>Episkopos</i>)	4.2 Bishop (<i>Episkopos</i>)
6. Deacon (<i>Diakonos</i>)	5. The Diaconal Ministry
	5.1 Diaconal Minister
	(<i>Diakonos</i>).

“Diaconal Ministry” is not an absolutely new term, for it appeared in 1990:2.4B and 6.2B, par. 3, with regard to “(present) diaconal ministries”; cf. 1990:6.5B, “diaconal office”, “diaconal

authority". Striking is the fact that the 1991 report does not refer to those who are to be placed in this new, second ordained group as "deacons" (a word that occurs only in descriptive paragraphs about the New Testament period) but rather as "diaconal minister". Are they or are they not deacons? It is predictable that they will think of themselves as such and that popular usage will call them that, even if the report is trying to make a distinction. More striking, although the exact distinction between "pastoral" and "diaconal" may not be fully clear, in no way are "Word and Sacrament" and "Word and Service" the operating categories.

Relative to this usage is the new paragraph 3 in 1991:3.7B which calls "a diaconal ministry ... part of the Lutheran tradition since early in the nineteenth century when it began in Germany," though admittedly not "ordained" there but "set apart" (p. 12). On the one hand, there are *historical* allusions to deacons in the New Testament period (1991:5.1.1B, 5.1.2B) and echoes of *patristic* references (5.1.1B, "serve together with a pastor or bishop"—but there has been long debate over which of these the deacons related to; 5.1.2B, worship role; the tradition of service to the poor is not overtly brought out). (One looks for such history of the diaconate, since the ELCIC mandate included "early church practices", post-New Testament.) On the other hand, the argument for a Lutheran "diaconal office" seems based historically on the nineteenth-century German deaconess movement (though here John Collin's strictures in his book *Diakonia* deserve attention³), plus an innovation in this report, ordaining persons in the diaconal office by means of "a single ordination", which is the same for pastoral and diaconal ministries (1991: p. 12, 4.1.6, 4.2.6, 5.1.6).

The Ministry/Ministries of the Whole People of God (1,2,3)

Sections 1 and 2 on *laos* contain few changes from 1990. Section 3 about "the office of ordained ministry" is considerably reworked.

The running theme of "the (one) ministry of (Jesus) Christ" has, if anything, been made more prominent by moving the initial reference to it from 1.8 (cf. 1.3) in 1990 to the very first statement in 1991, 1.1. Questions were raised in my previous evaluation about this phrase as confusing the one office of ordained ministry (traditionally for Lutherans that of

pastor/bishop) with “one ministry” involving all the people of God, laity and the proposed twofold ministry (1991:2.1; 4.1.3; 4.1.6B; 4.2.3; 4.2.6B; 5.1.3; 5.1.6B). Imprecision here can prove harmful, for once any clear distinction between *laos* and pastoral ministry is obscured, drawing a dividing line between a second ordained group, the proposed “diaconal ministers”, and laity becomes even more problematic.

What of the curious feature in the 1990 report, to which my earlier evaluation called attention, that the whole people of God seem to *transfer* their responsibility for clergy authority and ordination *to the bishop*? It is ameliorated first by dropping the third paragraph that was in 1990:3.6B on the bishop’s role (1991:3.5, p. 10) and secondly by adding to the list of how bishops serve (4.2.1B), in which had read simply in 1990, “ordaining other ministers” (5.1), the fuller phrase “ordaining *or providing for the ordination of* other ministers”. On the other hand, 1991:3.5 has dropped a reference to ordination “by those in pastoral leadership” that appeared in 1990:3.6, which could be interpreted in light of 1991:3.6B (p. 11 top) as “qualified leaders publicly recognized through the rite of ordination”, i.e., pastors. At issue is a tradition of presbyteral ordination (Jerome) versus ordination exclusively by bishops.

Several emphases in the 1990 report evidently fared rather badly in popular responses. While the phrase “apostolic tradition” remains in 3.6, defined as “*living and ministering* in continuity with the faith, witness and service of the apostles” (the italicized words are added in 3.6B to 1990:3.5), the phrase in 1990 about pastors, bishops, and deacons as “example of apostolic witness and lifestyle” (4.4, varied slightly in 5.4 and 6.4), has now become “example of commitment to the faith, witness and lifestyle of the Gospel” (1991:4.1.4; 4.2.4; 5.1.4). This is probably a happy change, since exegetes might be hard pressed to tell what the apostles did in many instances. There may, however, be an implicit argument in both reports that ordained ministry stems from apostolic ministry (cf. 1991:3.2B, par. 2; 3.6B), unless the sections mean to suggest a sharp contrast between “apostles” and “church” (3.2B, par. 2).

More puzzling, and less fortunate in my opinion, is the total *omission* in 1991 of “the *gegenueber*”; as it was put in 1990:4.5, 5.5, 6.5, following *LUM*, the ministry of the pastor/bishop/deacon “stands *over against the community* as well

as within the community". This was spelled out in terms of "the authority of the Gospel" in the pastoral office "over against the community" (4.5B, etc.). All such talk has disappeared in the 1991 report. The key section is 3.3B. What had been a carefully balanced statement, citing Treatise 60 and CA 28:21-26 has become unbalanced by speaking of the ordained only "within" the community, never "over against" it. The surgery here is indicated by retention in the revision of the telltale phrase "on the other hand", after the first hand has been amputated. "On the other hand" here really means "on the same hand", the side of the community or church (*not* the individual lay person).

What the 1991 report has done is give us in 3.3B an image of clergy drawn from the minister's positioning in a liturgical service as (a) intercessor for the community, addressing God; and (b) commissioned by God, addressing the community. Unfortunately this latter aspect is put primarily in terms of speaking "the *prophetic* Word of God" (*italics added*). That has the double effect of seeming to limit "the prophetic word" to clergy and blunting the prospect of preaching law and judgment against community positions.

Since 1991:3.3 has thus been rewritten, it was necessary to redo also the old statements 4.5, 5.5, and 6.5. What pastor/bishop and diaconal minister are now said to do is simply proclaim "the prophetic Word of God", although the phrase "critical word of God to awaken ... God's people" appears in 4.1.5B, and in 4.2.5B a reference to "the negative ... dimension" of communities. Deacons are simply to challenge the community (5.1.5).

This dimension of the "over-againstness" of the word of God to church pretensions is probably a reflection of optimism about the church or the local congregation. Further reflections of this stance crop out in 4.1.5B, where in paragraph 2 the three sentences of old 4.5B are rearranged in a 3-1 order, to emphasize the community, omitting the earlier sentence 2, namely, "The pastoral office ... has the authority of the Gospel over against the community." Possibly for related reasons the service of the bishop no longer includes "warning against false teaching" or "administering the decision of the Church as its constitution and conventions prescribe" (cf. 1990:5.1 with 1991:4.2.1).

The Pastoral Ministry, Diaconal Ministry (4,5)

In treating section 3 above, a great deal has been anticipated about 4 (pastoral) and 5 (diaconal) ministry.

In section 4.1 on *pastors* a sentence is added in 4.1.1B to cover ordained persons not serving “a local eucharistic community”. The necessary assurance for those in *specialized ministries* (chaplaincy, teaching, administration), that they are valued among the clergy, had been provided in the 1990 report by paragraph 2 in 4.1B. This paragraph is repeated in 1991:4.1B. The new sentence attempts to reassure them further by adding at an earlier point, “A local eucharistic community designates congregations as well as several non-parish communities such as schools, health care institutions, synodical offices, etc.” This will strike some as semantic nonsense, for such places are not in many cases “local eucharistic communities”; they may be regional/national components of the church or, as the next paragraph recognizes, may involve pastors who do not “perform all functions”, like officiating at the Lord’s Supper, baptizing, or preaching, or not “perform them in equal measure”. What persons in specialized ministries seek and need is affirmation of their church-requested service, which may not be either local or eucharistic.

In the section on *bishops* (4.2), now part of “the pastoral ministry”, in addition to features already noted, we may add the omission in 4.2.1 of the service described in 1990:5.1B as “expressing and serving the unity of the Church”. Was “expressing” the offensive word? If so, why drop “serving unity”? Whether “schism” instead of “break” is a helpful word in 4.2.2B to describe results of the Reformation ought to be looked at. Indeed, it is unclear whether “the Roman Church” (adjective added in 1991 version) or the Lutherans were guilty of this.

More intriguing is the change in the next paragraph from 1990:5.2B, “The office of bishops exists by divine command,” to 1991:4.2.2B, “The office of bishop is recognized by the Augsburg Confession as a historic ministry serving” Gospel-continuity, unity, and supervision. See CA 28:21ff. It is to be noted that the final two statements about the bishop in the 1990 report—5.8, responsible for the orderly transfer of ordained ministry within the church, and 5.9, oversees the shepherding of local communities and ordained ministers—have

been dropped. Does 1991:4.2.1B cover these under “shepherding ... congregations in their life of worship” (a curious limitation to shepherding) and “placing ... ordained ministers”? If not, by-laws or other statements on such necessary matters will be difficult to frame.

What is likely the most novel and groundbreaking part of the 1991 report, section 5, on *diaconal ministry*, has been constructed by taking the seven statements of the 1990 report about deacons, which were seemingly influenced by *BEM*, and revising them in the following ways.

5.1 (1990:6.1) adds to the phrase “proclaiming the Gospel through a ministry of service” the words “related to Word and Sacraments which enables and equips the people of God to do their ministry.” The “which enables...” clause presumably refers back to “ministry of service” and links diaconal ministers with the whole people of God. The phrase “related to Word and Sacraments” is necessary, presumably, to justify their *ordination*, something not directly mentioned in any statement of 5.1 but suggested in 5.1.6 (“with other ordained ministries”) and overtly stated in 5.1.1B (top of p. 20). There is only *one ordination*, the same for pastor, bishop, or deacon (3.5; 3.7B final paragraph).

It is unclear, at least to me, *how* the definition of “ministry of service” in 5.1.1 (“related to Word and Sacraments”, enabling and equipping other people) *differs from* what some *laity* do already. Diaconal ministers are intended to assist *both* in service (in the world) and in public worship. They are said to serve “in a local or regional community”, presumably not the National Church as is true for pastors (4.1.1B) and bishops (4.2.1). Yet 5.1.7 will make diaconal ministers symbols of universal church unity.

5.1.2 reiterates the both/and of “worship and service in daily life” (as in 1990:6.2) and expands with the somewhat tautological phrase, “A diaconal minister serves in a ministry of proclaiming the Gospel through ministries” that do these two things. But how do they differ from many other Christians who are not ordained as diaconal ministers but practice their faith? The first paragraph under 5.1.2B simply says “certain persons may be called” to this office to serve the church’s needs. A reasoned *case for ordaining them* seems best set forth on p. 12, under 3.7. One should read and weigh the arguments there:

realities in church life today, ecumenical heritage (but this is somewhat dissipated by answering *BEM* that a Lutheran version of threefold ministry is twofold); and Reformation concerns (but the previous paragraph says the Lutheran Reformation did not recognize the diaconate as “a separate *ordained* ministry”, italics added).

5.1.3 and 5.1.4 are parallels to what is said about pastor and bishop as regards *subordination to Christ's ministry* (4.1.3; 4.2.3) and *example* (4.1.4; 4.2.4). 5.1.5 is the revised version of “the *gegenueber*” statement balancing ordained leadership and congregation, now verbatim the same as for pastor (4.1.5) and changed from that for the bishop only with regard to the geographical sphere of ministry (4.2.5). If the criticism above was that the report says too little about pastoral role, the comment here is that it says too much about the diaconal minister: in saying such a person “proclaims the prophetic Word of God *and the means of grace*”, the statement offers little ground for distinction from “the pastoral ministry”. It may well be necessary to have others than ordained pastors officiate at the sacraments in some situations and places; if so, that should be said plainly. Writing by-laws and standards will be difficult if pastoral and diaconal ministries are not better and more distinctly profiled.

5.1.6 on *collegiality* and 5.1.7 on symbol of *unity* both reiterate much in the 1990 report and what was said of pastor/bishops.

What is a diaconal minister? One is hard put to be clear on the basis of the 1991 report, let alone distinguish such a person from pastor *or* laity. Here the “realities” the report itself mentions seem to be the real influences (pp. 11–12): the Deaconess Community; people outside the Deaconess Community “who recognize God’s call to a Gospel ministry which focuses on service rather than shepherding”; individuals in full-time ministries not “validated by a public recognition of their call and gifts”; congregational needs. The ELCIC (and others) will have to decide whether these factors and the “ecumenical” and “Reformation” arguments on p. 12 already alluded to, add up to a convincing case for the new step of *ordaining* such a diaconal ministry.

Who would be in such a category is even less clear. In Canada one did not start with rosters of persons already re-

garded as ordained deacons in a predecessor body, the Association of Evangelical Lutheran Churches. Considering the list of ministries in corporate life in 1991:2.4 and applying the criteria specified in 5.1.1 (professionally trained, 5.1.1B; called by the Church; cf. 5.1.2B, professional status, theological education), one is puzzled where to draw the line in that list in 2.4 between active laity and ordained diaconal ministers. It would be even more difficult to classify those ministering in “the world” (2.3).

One has the impression from pp. 11–12 that “deaconesses from one of our predecessor churches who serve in the ELCIC” are, or have here been presented as, the grounds for moving toward a far broader “diaconal ministry”. But that raises all sorts of questions for a (bi-national) Deaconess Community, especially depending on what the ELCA does. Might a sister be in a “diaconal ministry” north of the border but south of it not or, another possibility, be a “deacon” of a different sort? (There is no statement that the *BEM* term “deacon” was shifted to “diaconal minister” in the 1991 report for reasons of inclusive language.)

Besides the complexities ecumenically with deacon(ess) communities—by no means always part of a threefold ministry and usually not ordained—one misses attention to what I have come to see as a major question: shall (permanent) deacons or diaconal ministers be *non-salaried*, as usually with Episcopalians, Roman Catholics, and in the AELC tradition, and usually of *local* or synodical initiative, not national?

Convention Action and Future Study

The document recommended that the ELCIC “adopt [it], in principle”. The proposal of the Floor Committee of Theological Education and Leadership declined that recommendation. The motion (NC-26) that carried reads,

That the ELCIC receive the document . . . and affirm that this church will have pastors, bishops, and diaconal ministers, instructing the Division for Theological Education and Leadership to carry out further study about how pastors, bishops and diaconal ministers are set apart for their tasks (e.g., three ordinations, one ordination with separate installations, or two ordinations); and to report to the 1993 convention.

Other motions that carried called for any committee to include “two ecumenical observers, a representative of the diaconal community, and additional lay persons of this church who

are not in the employ of this church, its agencies or congregations" and for the DTEL to prepare "standards of acceptance for the diaconal ministry and to report to the 1993 national convention."

To "receive" a report is a weak parliamentary action compared with "adopt". What does the action mean? The document itself plainly calls for two types of (ordained) ministry, pastor-bishop and diaconal. That is twofold. The convention delegates are said to have "affirmed that the ELCIC will have a threefold ministry consisting of pastors, bishops, and diaconal ministers" and to have voted "further study about 'how (the three offices) are set apart for their tasks' (a reference to ordination)" (*Canada Lutheran* 6/8 [Sept. 1991] 33; note the plural, "offices", that is supplied). If one takes "pastors, bishops, and diaconal ministers" as separate groups, each with an ordination, then it is truly "threefold". But "pastors, bishops, and diaconal ministers" can also be taken as a description of what already exists on the ELCIC (and ELCA)—a unitary office of Word and Sacrament and the deaconess community plus various "associates in ministry" or their equivalents. Since the further study is to decide the issue of "setting apart", of which the three options on ordination are but an "e.g.", it would seem that the ELCIC process is at a point similar to the ELCA study as of late 1991, studying (three) models and several options. Perhaps the only ELCA possibility excluded by the 1991 ELCIC document is "Word and Sacrament/Word and Service", since that language is not employed.

It would be presumptuous to pose common solutions for North America at this point, but there are some common problems and joint opportunities. I outline, from the standpoint of the ELCA study to date, some of these with regard to "diaconal ministries/deacons".

a) Little or no support is heard for the "transitional" or "stepping-stone" deacon—ordination to deacon as a stage to ordination to pastor.

b) The "permanent deacon" has ecumenical analogy in Roman Catholic and Anglican and other churches, and in the AELC. It involves persons trained for (part-time) work in a local parish, without salary.

c) The diaconate in the form of the deaconess movement, begun in Germany and familiar through sisters from the Motherhouse in Gladwyn, Pennsylvania, is an existing and venerable form of ministry, generally full-time, stipendary and communal. It has numerous ecumenical analogies, its participants usually set apart or commissioned, not ordained. In U.S. hearings, it was sometimes suggested that all associates-in-ministry groups ought to be located under this existing diaconate. Question must be raised whether permanent, non-stipendary, congregational deacons (b, above), day school teachers, and church support staff all belong under such an aegis, and whether their inclusion would not swamp the deaconess community and change its historic character.

d) None of these categories help meet the needs of certain urban and rural areas or linguistic groups in preaching and sacramental ministrations, customarily done by ordained pastors, for deacons/diaconal ministers have not historically officiated at the Lord's Supper or preached. Is the solution to such growing needs to "license" or otherwise authorize certain persons from various rostered groups and the laity to carry out such tasks "related to Word and Sacraments" for a given period in a specific place?

e) Our U.S. study involves groups and factors not apparent in the ELCIC document, such as "commissioned teachers" and proposals (through a separate Task Force on Theological Education) for changes in ministerial training (e.g., 3 years of seminary followed by 2-3 years "internship" leading to ordination at some point in this process).

A final observation: the ELCIC document achieves a curious compromise. It seems to move toward a "catholic" view of (threefold) ministry. But at a crucial point it removes any idea of pastors "over against" (*gegenueber*) the church, locally or beyond, and thus moves toward congregationalism.

Notes

¹ An editorial in *Dialog* (30 [Autumn 1991]) 265-266 wonders if Canadian Lutherans are "out in front" (if the results in the ministry study turn out "right") or are "catching up".

- ² *The Study of Ministry, Study Edition: Report to the 1991 Churchwide Assembly* (Chicago: ELCA Division for Ministry).
- ³ John N. Collins, *Diakonia: Re-interpreting the Ancient Sources* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990). This reexamination of use of *diakonein* words in Greek argues that the meaning was “ministry”, not “service”, and that the German Lutheran diaconal movement was responsible for a vast misunderstanding in biblical studies and ecumenism that led to the concept of *diakonia* as “active love in service of the neighbor” in a “servant church”. See my review in *The Patristic and Byzantine Review* 10 (1991) 65-70.