

## THE ORDINATION COMMITTEE

*SCOPE: This commentary is on the ordaining processes in those Christian communions in which ordination is not part of seminary commencement but is in the hands of a committee charged by the church authority with the dual assignment of (1) screening out inappropriate candidates & (2) guiding to ordination those candidates whom the committee judges appropriate. Having no particular denomination in mind, I'm not following any one nomenclature or design....AIM: To provide, for members serving on an ordination committee, some personal reflections that may help them get a better handle on their work & so do a better job.*

### 1 I'm thrice **of two minds**;

(1) Ordination into lifelong membership in a priestly prophetic caste has ambiguous standing in Christianity. It may be necessary for the Christian religion, but it's + & - for Christian community & irrelevant to Christian faith. These three considerations had me, for many years, convinced of local-church ordination (ordination ceasing at the moment the person ordained to serve a particular congregation ceases to be that congregation's official minister)....Think of the three as concentric circles, with "the Faith" as the center. Socalled "independent churches" imagine they can do without the third circle, but they cannot: being necessarily more than a fellowship, they act as a one-congregation denomination, a religion under the priestcraft of a charismatic personality whose social role is closer to guru--followers than to shepherd--flock. (Televangelism is the independent church gone electronic.)

HISTORICAL NOTE on New England radical congregationalism: It'd be a wrong guess that these folk were "independent churches" in the current sense of no quality-control beyond the congregation. Harvard was founded (1636) out of "dread of an unlearned ministry"; Jon. Fisher in the Blue Hill area of Me. pushed for an association of Congregational churches having some control over clergy; & in northern Me., Bangor Seminary was founded (from a decision made in 1801) so that (1) those Congregational churches would not have to depend for their clergy on seminaries (considering transportation those days) far away, & (2) because the area was crawling with sheep-stealing uneducated "sectarians."

My reluctant conclusion: Religion, with a lifelong priestly prophetic caste, is necessary in order to fend off something worse. But ordination committees should keep in mind that their work is of a third order: they are doing something essential for the Christian religion but not for Christian community & the Christian faith except in the secondary sense that without intelligent structures of the Christian religion, it doesn't go well for the Christian community (which becomes guru-ridden in an iffy life) or the Christian faith (which dissolves into a swarm of destructive heresies). But the ordination committee, as direct servant of the church (religion), is vital as an indirect servant of the community & the Faith.

I'm appealing that the ordination committee, in receiving its definition from the church & in defining itself, be continuously aware of the three dimensions--faith, community, religion--yet the one intention, viz the betterment of the church's official ministry. (My model, the three concentric circles, speaks both to this trinity & to this unity.)

(2) I'm of two minds also vis-a-vis the validity, for Christian faith & community, of the cleric-laic distinction. This overlaps with my first problem & may be seen as just another perspective on it, but it seems to me worthy of being presented as a special & separate worry. In preaching ordination sermons, I've sometimes said, "Will this ordination do the candidate any damage? It may," & then I've detailed the subtle temptations of being, among all the ministers (all the members of the church), the official minister, & the games congregations can play with the distinction (eg, "You're the minister, you pray, or what do we pay you for?")....But there's biblical & commonsensical warrant for "separating," for official ministry, those whom the "laity" (literally, the "people" of God) believe the Spirit has touched for the purpose.

(3) And I'm of two minds about official credentialing of those the congregation

or larger body or guild or officialdom has become convinced should be recognized as official ministers. The NT severally signs special gifts as distributed by the Spirit in each congregation, which is to discover & release--for service in church & world--those gifts. Why all the fuss & feathers about just one gift, the gift of pastoral ministry? Why not recognize & celebrate all the gifts as they emerge / are discovered? Following this logic, many churches have a category of ministry intermediate between laity & clergy (eg, "permanent deacons" in RCC & "commissioned ministers" in UCC). I'd rather see ordination expanded than eliminated. But if it's generalized, it's going to take an inordinate amount of time, & also weaken the "separation" (meaning not separation FROM the other member-ministers so much as separation FOR, UNTO, a special ministry--but Gilbert & Sullivan applies: "When everybody's somebody, nobody's anybody")....So again: while I think radically about ordination, I conclude conservatively....What I'm pleading for is that clergy & laity, & here especially ordination committees, be aware of the three caveats I'm enunciating, lest ordination be seen as more or less or something other than it should be seen as.

2 It's no business of an ordination committee to determine who gets to minister, but only who gets to minister officially--in churches of congregational polity, as ministers of congregations. No congregation should recommend for ordination anyone who is not already ministering in & through that congregation. In churches whose official ministry is a vocation but not an occupation or profession--eg, Apostolic Christian or the older branch of the Society of Friends--ordination means the designation of what in the ancient synagogue & early church was called "the president of the elders." But in addition to that, in most churches we're talking money: ordination is, in addition to being a "vocatio"n ("call" from God & the church), a job, a remunerated occupation, a profession. Here entereth, for me, a fourth area where I'm of two minds: much of clergy & church corruption roots in the clergy's financial dependence on the laity, a dependence that keeps them responsible to, but tempts them to be sycophantic under, the laity--as it tempts the laity to see their power on the secular model of employer-employee, insisting on what they want to hear instead of standing, with the minister, under the Word of God.

Here's the principle involved: Since most of those preparing to become official ministers are in job preparation, ie studying toward making a living off religion (which may be a questionable, but is not a dishonorable, aim), screening out of the unacceptable should occur at the earliest possible stage. Here the Moravian Church is a model: nobody gets into seminary (which is cost-free) without going through many hoops. I'm very familiar with one of those hoops: for some years I was an examiner of Moravian candidates as to their mental-spiritual health. I'll not speak of the battery of tests & the conversations, but I'd like to list a few types who should be discouraged from the start (& encouraged to pursue certain courses of action toward Christian wholeness, with the [slight] possibility of reapplying some years later):

(1) Those for whom the fine line separating fantasy & reality is blurred. Christian leadership needs a lively fantasy-power, for one is to lead others in imagining--imagining--living in the alternative world of "the Kingshipdom of God." An attractive & effective Christian minister has a lively child within & a well-developed inner sexual opposite (anim-a/-us). But fantasizing is unhealthy, dysfunctional, when it (1) coopts time needed for reality (eg, for fulfilling one's commitments) or (2) distorts one's perception of truth, which then is treated cavalierly or even (in deliberate lying) betrayed....Here we can learn something from fantasy geniuses. Take two Danes, one a playful fantasist (Hans Christian Andersen) & the other a profound one (Soren Kierkegaard).

This pathology is of two categories. (1) Cases of underdevelopment of the line separating fantasy & reality (on which Barry Brazelton is expert), & (2) cases of corruption, where the line is there but is deliberately smudged (by self-serving cunning, or drugs--but sometimes also, nonculpably, by neurological disease).

(2) Those with an inaccurate sense of self-size. People come in all sizes of body & being. They have outer-objective checks as to their body-size perception,

viz. the other bodies "out there." All you need for this self-assessment is eyes & a measuring tape. But for taking your size "in here," another reality-sense is needed, & refining it prayerfully in self-examination is a lifelong task. To have "a right judgment in all things"--& how important that is in clergy!--one must avoid thinking of oneself either more highly or more lowly than one should, ie than reality supports.

Now, nobody's perfect at this, & we all know that mood swings (which everybody has) influence the sense of self-size. But candidates should be ruled out who give outward evidence of being especially poor at self-perception. A trained examiner easily picks up, eg, whether a prospect has a + or - authority problem (excessively resistant or submissive to the examiner--in either case, from either too high or too low self-esteem).

Why is this factor important in ministry? I'll mention one of many reasons. The less troubled one's inner being, the more accurate one's reading of one's self. And the more accurate the reading, the less danger that in ministry one will impose one's inner agenda on others. The more one imposes one's inner agenda on others, the more they sense you are not "there" for them & thus not God's servant to them--so the less effective one's pastoral ministry, & the greater the stress-buildup.

(3) Those whose spiritual formation level is too low to convince the examiner / committee that they will grow into effective spiritual leaders. The unspoken, often unconscious, message of the people is, "Tell us about the God you know & love." If the pastor is not perceived to be a spiritual person, the spiritually hungry will take that question elsewhere: the pastor & the congregation will be a doughnut, lacking the Center. I'm not talking about sainthood as an entry qualification--but in this candidate, do you ever see the saint-to-be peeking out? hear holiness in the voice (the longing & singing, Ps.84)? Candidates come with many motives, & seminaries train them with many goals (displayed in the Dec/90 ATLANTIC feature article). Spirituality, & spiritual potential, aren't optional.

(4) Those whose intellectual formation is decidedly unpromising, their minds too weak for the critical thinking the multivalent tasks today's & tomorrow's pastor must undertake. I'm not talking high IQ, but there has to be enough sharpness to "cut the mustard."

(5) Social formation may be so low as to worry the examiner / committee as to whether this person is / can become outgoing enough for effective pastoring. I'm revulsed by the oversocialized cleric, who strikes me as more performer than pastor, more concerned (like the Reagans) with appearance than reality, more given to "image enhancement" than to spiritual & intellectual growth. But occasionally one faces a candidate who, as it were, loves ONLY God, & doesn't quite know what to do with & about people. Here, though, I have great hesitance. If the love of God is true & vital, the yearning to share that life with others can--I have seen it happen--socialize an apparent introvert in a hurry! But there are psychosocial cripples, & being a pastor is no way to do self-therapy.

(6) Ethical formation is the hardest of the "formations" to get at. Does this person have moral substance? An active sense of guilt & shame as positive (as well as negative) values? Is the moral sense excessively concentrated in the personal or societal spheres? Is getting ordained seen by the candidate as one strategy is some revolution/liberation? Is some cause or issue "where it's at" & apt to remain, or can you believe it may broaden out into the full range of Christian-ethical personal & social concerns?....And what is this person's record of promise-keeping, interpersonal & institutional & financial?....Is this person a finisher as well as a starter?....Does this person have an unethical history that might catch up with him/her & hinder or destroy her/his ministry?

3 But, you say, if you're going to screen out all of the above, we won't have enough ministers (for our congregations)! All I'm asking is that you expect candidates to be **paragons of health & virtue** & that, when you're disappointed (as you'll be in almost every case), you won't go soft & shoo 'em all into the profession (as so many ordination committees do).

How does this happen? A clearly inadequate candidate is dithered with, the

decision to reject so long delayed that, against the majority, someone says, "It would be cruel to say no now, after having gone along so long with this candidate." After a long discussion, the consensus is it'd be less cruel to the candidate--& to churches!--to be honest with the candidate NOW. But then somebody hits the committee with Christianity: "It would be unChristian to let our compassion fail us." Compassion (a weakness as well as a strength of Christianity) overwhelms truth, & the committee afflicts an unknown number of successive churches with a minister who (one often hears said) "should never have been ordained in the first place."

4 This brings me to a fifth two-mindedness: Should an ordination committee consist of clergy only or of both clergy & laity? It depends on your sociomodel. If the committee is seen as a **consumer research** team (like a pastoral search committee), both laity & clergy. But if (as I prefer) it's viewed as a **guild entry** team, its membership should be clergy only. For these reasons, I prefer the latter:

(1) While pastoring is a vocation, the ordination committee deals with it primarily as a profession after the recommending church represents the candidate as "having a call." Entry into a profession has, as watchdogs, members of that profession.

(2) The presence of laity dilutes the discussion, making it both less technical & less open.

(3) The dynamic is different when laity are present, & the tendency to be soft is stronger. (Yes, some laity are tougher than some clergy; but laity are more apt to be swayed by "compassion.")

(4) The guild factor is more important in this profession than any other, for this is the only profession whose professionals are, once launched, unguided missiles (MDs have their ethics committees, JDs have their performance reviews--both, with power to delicense).

5 Because we're all so therapeutized & educationized these days, an ordination committee is under perpetual temptation to go beyond its legitimate screening-&-guiding function to go messing with **therapy** (curing what's wrong with the candidate, which I'd compare to a woman marrying a man thinking she can reform him) & **education** ("growth," "personal development"). If the committee becomes a bunch of therapists & educators, it's almost certain the candidate, no matter how inadequate, is home free: saying no would defeat the therapists & educators!

The inadequate candidate may just be highly skilled at seducing the committee into the therapeutic mood & the education mode--perhaps from having developed these skills in a seminary that behaved liked a counseling clinic. On this, Walt. Brueggemann wrote a splendid in-house (for his own faculty) monitory paper ("Learning: 'Full of Grace and Truth,'" 28 Aug 89, Columbia Theol. Sem., unpublished). "False evaluation by way of therapeutic support is false support, and therefore destructive" (10). Seminary teachers should be faithful to their memberships in guild, church, & collegium.

When the committee comes upon therapeutic & educational needs, it should have a referral-&-report process. Eg, candidates who obviously need counseling they should have had in or even before seminary should be referred to a pastoral therapist & that expert's judgment be treated as conditional (say, try again after a year of therapy) or final (rejection). Likewise, educational deficiencies should be made up under a tutor the committee assigns, & the committee should spend no more time on the candidate until/unless the tutor gives a satisfactory report.

6 For everybody's good, the ordination committee should have a looseleaf **log** on each candidate. P.1 should explain the committee's scope, what it is & isn't to do. This should be followed by a listing of the stages of the candidate / committee relationship ("management by objective"). Each assignment should have its own page, detailing (1) the assignment, (2) the negotiated date for reporting on the assignment, (3) the committee member responsible for writing the evaluation when the assignment comes in (& is attached) to the assignment sheet, (4) the committee-member's signature when the assignment has been satisfactorily fulfilled, & (5) the next assignment by the committee, the completion date to be negotiated between the mentor (ie, the responsible committee member) & the candidate.