



Local Ordination? A Boon to Congregational Vitality

MARK D. TRANVIK

An imaginary dialogue between imaginary characters, Jay Ecke, a bishop, and Nick Gallus, a teaching theologian. The two find themselves seated next to each other on an airplane. Gallus inquires how Ecke's work is faring.

ECKE: It's always a struggle. Too many responsibilities and too few resources. One thorn has to do with ordination. Congregations want to color outside the lines and they don't realize the harmful precedents they are setting.

GALLUS: What are the issues?

ECKE: Basically, people want to work around the roster. Some want to ordain gay and lesbian pastors in committed relationships. Others are ordaining pastors who are not approved for ordination. Many have forgotten the bigger picture. Surely the body of Christ is larger than a local parish!

GALLUS: I know it isn't new to you, but there is a widening gap between national offices and local congregations. Today, people have very little attachment to or emotional connection with the national organization. It is telling when giving is up on a local level, yet income on the regional and national level is down. When the national church does make news, it tends to be linked with sexuality—a topic many wish would go away. I am not saying this is right, but it is the word from the pews.

ECKE (sighs): I know there is substantial alienation, but surely we need each other to be effective in mission! We can't just let congregations be autonomous and do whatever they like! This ordination issue baffles me. Shall every church arrogate to itself the right to ordain? Does the title "pastor" mean nothing? The one thing that connects us is the roster! When I know someone is on the roster I can be reasonably assured the person has earned academic credentials from an accredited institution and has been approved by a judicatory with responsibility for oversight in ministry.

GALLUS: I am not sure that the "roster" has that type of connotation for most pastors. It may mean a certain level of credentials but it doesn't necessarily mean fidelity to the Scriptures and confessions. I have heard pastors on the roster suggest that the Qur'an has equal authority to the Bible. I know some who question infant baptism and others who doubt the doctrine of justification.

ECKE: So what is your position? You seem to be hinting at a free-church model run wild. How is that going to further mission? Don't we need to correct abuses in the system we have and shore up the loose ends?

(continued on page 86)

TO FACE

Local Ordination? A Barrier to Ministerial Freedom

GREGORY A. WALTER

Ordination to place makes as little sense as baptism to place does—not because ordination necessarily parallels baptism as a sacrament, but because both of them initiate a person into a new community. Where baptism marks the beginning of a new life in the people of God, ordination publicly designates a person as a member of a community within the people of God. God has liberated this community of the ordained to concern themselves entirely with the communication of the gospel of Jesus Christ. Ordination to place restricts the freedom of the ordained person to pursue the task of sharing that message. These ministers should enjoy the freedom to wander with the pilgrim church. Just as no individual Christian or assembly of Christians can be restricted to one place, ministers of the gospel cannot be restrained. Both communities are on the move!

The conception of ordination to place restricts the freedom of ministry for a number of reasons. All of them concern notions of “place” that, though commonsensical, are not fueled by the biblical imagination of the wandering people of God. This people enjoys a strange freedom. They make their homes everywhere and nowhere. Their homeland is both their nation and their nation to come. They are citizens of the world in a new sort of cosmopolitanism: the city of God. This freedom is strange because it brings deep commitment to a local place together with an openness to other places, a seeing of this place together with all places, in light of that same city. Ministers play an important role in cultivating this imagination of place. How could they do so when another view of place captivates them? The church should avoid this practice for the sake of the gospel’s freedom. Why?

First, the place to which a pastor is ordained ought not be determined by the cartography of the North American congregation. Congregations are vital for many reasons: They are the place where the people of God meet, discuss, learn, repent, rejoice, and share with and in each other. They, especially in the mainline denominations, own property, buildings, campuses, schools, and many more things. But their boundaries do not mark the limits of their ministry, by any means. The solidity of their parking lots and their sturdy walls does not mean that they are not in transition. They, as the wandering people of God, are going somewhere. In their midst, ordained ministers proclaim the word and share the sacraments. Indeed, this activity always happens in a place; but to restrict that minister to just that one

(continued on page 87)

GALLUS: We do need an educated ministry—and laity too! But mission is not fostered by top-down administrative tactics. Nor can we forget that the trajectory of the Reformation on the issue of ministry and ordination is imbued with a spirit of innovation and freedom. From 1535 onwards, the rite of ordination used by Luther and other Wittenberg reformers was but a brief interlude in the regular Sunday service. The ordinator was an ordinary member of the clergy. And there was probably not even a distinction between an ordination and an installation. In other words, it appears that candidates would be “reordained” or “installed” (same thing) when called to a new congregation.

ECKE: So all power to the congregation! Can’t you see the dangers in that?

GALLUS: There are dangers, and I am not saying we should jettison every form of church structure. We need institutions to ensure we have a trained pastorate. Congregations also need to support and be nourished by the global dimension of the church’s mission. But we shouldn’t shackle congregations in the area of ministry. Let’s say a congregation has a talented and trusted man or woman who receives the requisite theological training needed to be a pastor. What is the harm in calling them as a pastor as long as they subscribe fidelity to the Scriptures and confessions of the church? If they wish to be called to another church they will have to seek admittance to the “official” roster. But why not allow a streamlining of the process so they can serve effectively in a setting where they have established credibility? Our theology supports this kind of flexibility.

ECKE: What if that pastor is a non-celibate homosexual? Does the sort of congregationalism you advocate extend to the so-called “local option” that some see as a middle ground in the current debate on homosexuality?

GALLUS: I said that anyone called “pastor” should be loyal to the Scriptures and confessions of the church. Only if the church agrees to revise its understanding of sexuality would such a move be permissible. The flexibility in ordination I have in mind is needed for the sake of mission. But it should not be exercised in cases where the historic norms of the Christian tradition are being questioned. Unless, of course, it is decided that those norms need to be changed.

ECKE: That sounds like doublespeak. You have opened the door for the congregation to set the standards.

GALLUS: Perhaps, but top-down models of denominations are dead—people are voting with their feet and pocketbooks. The energy unleashed by the Reformers gave new vitality to word and sacrament ministry at the congregational level. Maybe it’s time to revise our church structures so that the needs and mission of congregations become primary.

ECKE (to the flight attendant): Could I please get a chardonnay? ☩

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place limits not only the freedom of the minister to wander but also fixes the congregation to just one place.

Second, an ordained minister must be free to serve the people of God wherever they are and where the Spirit leads. As members of the community of those committed entirely to the task of communicating the gospel, ordained ministers are interchangeable. Despite numerous unique gifts, interests, and skills, they all share the same task: preaching the word and sharing the sacraments. And with this community comes a mutuality. Ordained ministers share the same task and standing. If such mutuality is lacking, then there could develop different classes of ministers. The denominations may already suffer from multiple gradations of ministers in terms of regionalism, economic class, and other factors. The practice of ordination to place would further extend these divisions.

Third, ordination to place restricts the kind of hope that befits Christians. This hope remains open to the future, to the possibilities that may come. Thus, hope involves discernment of one's gifts and vocation. This discernment continues throughout one's life. If a minister is ordained to speak only in one place, the minister would have to stop speaking if he or she finds that it is time to move the tent and wander on.

These three reasons indicate that much is at stake in the practice of ordination to place. The issues are tied together with other questions facing the churches, especially the much controverted question of the nature of ordained ministry and the future of church life in North America. An important difficulty emerges especially when we encounter the division of the churches. Individual church bodies should try to avoid actions that would further disunity.

Crises of pastoral ministry are never just negative. They present the churches with a new opportunity to reexamine, looking forward and looking back. The biblical vision of the wandering people of God can flower; the churches of North America can strive to find the communion, mutuality, and common gifts that God has given, and with them the joy and freedom of a new world. ⊕

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