

## **Reflections on Ordination**

The issue of ordination and the hiring of ministers is a significant one for Plymouth. To assist in our discussion and decision making related to these issues, I have offered, and the Deacons have accepted, to write a 'white paper' on the issue of ordination. The paper is divided into four parts and will reflect theologically, historically, and contextually on the topic of ordination both generally and for Plymouth as we engage the future.

The purpose of this paper is to serve as a discussion starter that will help Plymouth craft any future bylaws and make decisions as it related to ministerial staffing.

What this paper IS:

- material for reflection
- basis for conversation and feedback
- basis for questions and other ideas

What this paper IS NOT:

- a series of recommendations
- a series of pre-determined conclusions
- an imposed set of ideas from the church leadership

Please feel free to respond to this paper by contacting Daniel Wolpert electronically, by phone, or in person. [danw@plymouth.org](mailto:danw@plymouth.org), (612) 977-1274. All responses will be coordinated and reviewed by the staff and Deacons. We will also be scheduling some times of public discussion, reflection, and the opportunity to ask questions and give input. Keep a watch for these opportunities later this Fall.

Peace,

Dan

## **What is ordination?**

Ordination in the Christian tradition has been understood as the communal recognition of a person's spiritual calling to be of religious and spiritual service to a community.

The history of this concept is documented in the Bible through numerous 'calling' stories in which a person hears a word from God giving them a particular task, or function, or life mission. Such calling stories include the calling of Samuel, Jeremiah, and Mary among others. In these stories, the call is also recognized by a community, or by other leaders, or individuals in the community, and this recognition then enables the person to live out their calling in their context.

Another set of stories that manifest the concept of ordination is the anointing of Kings. Here the particular person is recognized as King by God and this recognition is authenticated and 'sealed' (like the wax seal on an authentic document) through their anointing, a service carried out by a prophet who, by virtue of their spiritual leadership, validates God's choice.

In both of these cases the process of ordination involves three parties: God, the person, and the community; the community serving the important function of validating the relationship that exists between God and the person.

Another important religious function related to ordination in Christianity has been the priestly function, however it is important to see that this function wasn't connected to ordination in Scripture because priesthood was a familial function: you were born into the tribe of priests, the Levites. However, this tribe as a whole was 'ordained' to this function by God and were 'set aside' to be priests. Thus later, as Christianity developed, the priestly function, the function of overseeing the religious offerings and ceremonies, were included in the ordained office.

When we then look at the history of Christianity and the variety of methods and rules related to ordination, we can see that all of them attempt to maintain the basic understanding of ordination: a community recognizes that some people are called by God to fulfill spiritual leadership. The differences we then see in ordination flow from the different understandings of how God works with individuals and communities to create and sustain spiritual leadership. For example, in the Roman Catholic model, the Spirit flows to the people through the Pope, and thus ordination occurs in the context of the ecclesial hierarchy moving from the Pope to the Bishops to the priests. On the other end of the spectrum, in the non-programmed Quaker tradition, the Spirit is seen to speak to every individual through the inner light and there is no one person set aside to be ordained, rather everyone functions as ministers as they are called to exercise spiritual leadership in the community.

The Reformation brought two significant changes to the understanding and practice of ordination. The first was a change in the understanding of the nature of communion and the second was the radical shifts in church governance that were embraced by the Reformers.

In the Roman Catholic Church, the practice of communion was seen as a reenactment of the sacrifice of Christ. It is understood as a literal offering to God. Thus the person presiding over communion must be a priest, because priests preside over ritual sacrifice. In the Reformed understanding of communion (except in the Anglican church which is a hybrid theology), Jesus performed his sacrifice once and for all and the communion liturgy isn't an endless repeat of this sacrifice. So priests became ministers or pastors in Reformation traditions. This also meant that the person who was ordained didn't need to be 'set apart' in terms of ritual purity to the same degree that priests are, and this opened the way for the ordination of, among other things, married people (the Orthodox Church has a slightly different view of priesthood but that's not too relevant for our conversation here).

The second change was the in the theology that informed governance. The Reformed notion of the 'priesthood of all believers,' that the Holy Spirit could speak to anyone who had sacrificed their old life for a new life in God, opened the way for all manner of polities that also allowed for all manner of new styles of ordination practice.

In the communities that led to the Congregationalists in the US, the congregation became the body that could recognize the call of individuals to ordination, and it is important to note that most of those who were ordained were raised within the congregation. Usually the elders would recognize some spiritual gifts in a young person and encourage them to preach or lead worship and eventually the community would ordain that person as they saw their spiritual gifts flourish. Again we see the three part interaction between a person, God, and community. Once the person was ordained, they might travel to other churches or communities and their recognition in the first community was honored by the other churches. This led to the practice of ordination requiring a 'call' but then the ordination was seen as lasting even if the person moved.

## **Modern Considerations**

As the American Church scene grew along with the country, we began to have the rise of denominations and the professionalization of the ministry. Seminaries were created for theological study and each denomination developed its own method for testing the call of individuals seeking ordination. The church bodies that had more connected polity tended to have more denominational oversight of ordination, while the wide variety of congregationalist churches continued to ordain from within with pastors then moving to other churches as they desired different calls and churches sought people from outside the congregation to lead them.

Once a professional class of ministers appeared, and the local pastor wasn't simply a farmer in town, a sense of professional identity among clergy developed and this group gained the considerable power and status that clergy had in our country during the height of Christendom. Professionalization also led to denominations creating pension funds, healthcare funds, collegial associations, denominational loyalty, and a disconnection of clergy from their 'home churches' that nourished them and recognized their call. It also led to the rise of a significant number of clergy who had not grown up into their calling but rather discovered it on their own and then entered into a professional track to become ordained. This has meant that church bodies, congregations, and denominations have had to create processes to assess calling and fitness for ministry. This situation is a far cry from the home grown pastor of the 17th Century.

While this has been the trend within what we call the 'mainline churches,' one exception to this trend can be seen within some Baptist, Christian Church, small independent churches, and non-denominational churches of all sizes. Within these bodies, semi-professional, or 'tent maker' pastors are called and ordained within their churches and often have little or no professional training or status. In some ways these churches continue the old congregationalist habit of calling and ordaining from within the church.

In most recent time, another challenge has arisen, that goes hand in hand with the new professional class of clergy and that is a spiritual disconnect from any understanding of 'calling.' As we have become a more functionally atheist society, the language of calling sometimes sounds like spiritual mumbo jumbo and ordination is seen as simply the credentials needed to 'get a pastor job.'

As we fast forward to our current situation in the more mainline world, we see that this professional job mentality, coupled with a decline in Christendom, pastoral status, and job availability have all combined to create a great deal of stress and confusion over just what is the point of ordination and what does it really mean anyway in a world where people may not even 'believe' in God and the manner in which people are trying to grow in their spiritual lives have expanded way beyond a sermon on Sunday morning.

In this new reality, where does Wisdom arise and how do we recognize and engage spiritual leadership?

## **Plymouth's situation**

This brings us to Plymouth's situation. Where does it fit into this history of American ordination and the ministerial role?

The main point to keep in mind going forward is that Plymouth, as an independent Congregational Church can do ANYTHING IT WANTS in regards to ordination. That is, it can call and bless its spiritual leadership in any manner it sees fit. In recent conversations with the

Deacons and others, I feel that this point is still a bit lost on the church and its leadership. Yet this is the point of congregational polity: the congregation can do what it likes and what it feels God is calling it to without any interference from or deference to another church body.

Because of its long history, Plymouth has seen all of the modern developments in relation to clergy and ordination. It has had very strong professional Senior Ministers. It has been involved in conversations about how to connect with modern Congregationalist denominations. And it has a history of very capable, smart, spiritually engaged lay leadership.

Plymouth has also experimented with a variety of methods for hiring ministers and defining job descriptions. In the very early days of Plymouth, the congregation called the minister but, in a perhaps distinctly non-Congregational fashion, had a Trustee Board, whose members didn't even have to be members of the church, that decided whether to confirm the call and pay the pastor! Over the past 50 years, associate pastors have come and gone and have also frequently changed job descriptions and areas of focus, often without any sort of broad consensus from the congregation.

Finally, as the 21st Century has dawned, Plymouth also finds itself in the situation of most mainline church bodies: aging and somewhat challenged with regards to how to move forward and form itself into a 21st Century Church. Another way of stating these issues is to ask: how do we understand spiritual leadership in the current environment and how do we find the leaders we most need and value?

### **Questions/Issues for consideration moving forward**

Looking at all of the above, here are some questions and issues for consideration moving forward as Plymouth seeks to define how it will find and engage spiritual leadership.

As you review what follows, remember that ordination describes the validation of a spiritual calling, a relationship between God and an individual for the purpose of spiritual leadership by a community of faith.

- If Plymouth is a community that has little concern for, or even belief in, God, is there even a requirement for 'ordained' staff?
- If Plymouth desires professional clergy these individuals will want professional association, healthcare, pensions, and a network of other clergy to relate to. The network of people who are used to being part of non-aligned churches tend to be conservative in theology. If Plymouth desires to maintain its independent, liberal stance, it should realize that this puts it at a disadvantage as far as attracting professionals who are going to want to keep their professional identities and networks. Leaving their denominational 'fold' to risk working at an independent church is a significant step from the professional point of view. Plymouth needs to be realistic about this landscape and reality.
- Because Plymouth is Congregationalist in polity and history, it has the option of 'calling from within,' or raising up its own leaders, or 'ordaining' people for new types of 21st century ministry. If Plymouth begins to see spiritual leadership as encompassing the arts, or the theatre, or digital media, or outreach to the neighborhood, then it could 'ordain' individuals to those ministries; individuals who may or may not look like traditional clergy. Thus maintaining maximal flexibility and not tying itself to numerous rigid by-laws of its own making may be of great advantage to the church.

- Plymouth has vast resources within its lay leadership, many of whom are already engaged in ministry of all forms. The history and theological roots of Congregationalism validate and uphold the notion of the 'priesthood of all believers' and the understanding that the Holy Spirit can work directly through any individual. What might it look like to 'lift up,' 'ordain,' some of these people and validate the work they are already doing and seeing this work as part of the vast network of Plymouth ministry?
- Currently there are many young people who are interested in ministry of all forms, traditional and non-traditional, who, as they engage the professional clergy track, are often forced into calls in remote rural areas that they are not particularly interested in. What might it look like for Plymouth to begin to invite such people to serve at Plymouth, be mentored by the staff and elders of the congregation, and rather than be 'sent out' elsewhere, be 'hired from within' and ordained at Plymouth? Such an approach would mirror the historical method of congregationalist ordination.