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The passage to ordination in the Southern African Presbyterian tradition: A historical perspective and prospect

ABSTRACT

This article traces some of the formal processes in the passage to ordination in southern African Presbyterianism. It draws on historical aspects from the Scottish, English, USA and New Zealand experiences, these being churches which are in historical and current relationship with the Uniting Presbyterian Church in Southern Africa. It notes how these processes are dynamic and contextual. This inherited situation is marked by inconsistency, not least in the situation where it is assumed that a call from a congregation is a prerequisite for ordination. A revised model is suggested.

INTRODUCTION: AN ORDAINED MINISTRY?

> "In order to fulfil its mission the Church needs persons who are publicly and continually responsible for pointing to its dependence on Jesus Christ. It is as the servant of God to the people of God, alongside fellow-Christians, that an ordained Minister proclaims and teaches the Gospel, celebrates the sacraments, guides the life of the community or serves in the world. More particularly ministers have a responsibility to help congregations interpret the Gospel for today and pray for the Church and the world … ordained Ministry thus points beyond itself to Christ" (Uniting Reformed Church in England and Wales [URC] Assembly Reports 1993:137 in Church of Scotland 1997:24/20).

This statement places the ordained ministry firmly within the ministry of the entire people of God: '*Priesthood is an office of every member of the church*' (Lane 1972:11, emphasis in original; cf. Coertzen 2004 105-106). It is a ministry of servant leadership grounded in and representative of Christ's ministry and founded on Him as the Word of God. Coertzen (2004: 101) correctly affirms that within the Reforming tradition, 'the only service in the church is the ministry of the Word'. All expressions of the church's life must flow therefore from the ministry of the Word. It is a teaching and preaching ministry where all other expressions of ministry are dependent on and support the proclamation of the Word eg. pastoral care.

There was a time when the ordained ministry was full-time and paid, as well as a ministry of Word and sacrament and this distinguished the ordained minister among the 'priesthood of all believers'. However, these qualifications are no longer valid in many forms of ministry exercised at the beginning of the 21st century.

One of the earliest definitions of calling to be found in the Scottish Reformation is to be found in the *Second Book of Discipline*, chapter 3 (1578) in Calderwood 1843:

> "2. There are two sorts of calling: one extraordinary, by God immediately, as were the prophets and apostles, which in kirks established, and already well-reformed, has no place.
>
> 3. The other calling is ordinary, which, besides the calling of God and inward testimony of a good conscience, has the lawful approbation and outward judgment of men, according to God's word and order established in his kirk. None ought to presume to enter in any office ecclesiastical, without he have this testimony of a good conscience before God, who only knows the hearts of men".

Presbyterianism recognises three means of a person being called to ordained ministry, although Niebuhr (1956:64) reminds us correctly, that the process, in fact, begins at an earlier stage than the inner call with: '[t]he call to be a Christian, which is variously described as the call to discipleship of Jesus Christ to hearing and doing the Word of God, to repentance and faith …'. This begins with our baptism (normally though not necessarily as infants) and our subsequent response though professing our faith (normally in unspecified years of maturity). Then, there is the Church's seeking for persons who demonstrate evidence of possession of God-given gifts, followed by a challenge to develop and exercise such gifts (election). Alongside this, is the inner call experienced by the individual which is in accordance with God's discerned will for the person's life (testing). Further, there is the 'concurring judgment of a governing body of the church' (ratification) (G-6.0106a, *Book of Order*, and PCUSA, in Gray & Tucker 1986:16. Application to be recognised as a candidate for the ministry originates in the Kirk Session of the prospective candidate, through the presbytery 'of the bounds'[1] (BPCSA 1958:34) and is processed by the relevant committee of the General Assembly. This constitutes public recognition of the call which has been manifested in either or both of the means indicated above and involves a period of prescribed academic study, spiritual formation and practical experience. Following the prescribed training, the student returns to his/her presbytery to be taken on trials for license. The final form of recognition normally follows. It constitutes '[t]h ecclesiastical call, that is, the summons and invitation extended to a man by some community or institution of the church to engage in the work of the ministry' (Niebuhr 1956:64).

In addition, it is the right of congregations to call its own minister (Calvin, Institutes IV.3.15). This was entrenched in the Scottish context:

> "It appertains to the people, and to every several congregation, to elect their minister. … For altogether this is to be avoided, that any man be violently intruded or thrust in upon any congregation. But this liberty with all care must be reserved to every several kirk, to have their votes and suffrages in election of their ministers" (*First Book of Discipline, The Fourth Head 1560)*.
>
> "5. In the order of election, it is to be eschewed that any person be intruded in any of the offices of the kirk contrary to the will of the congregation to whom they are appointed, or without the voice of the eldership" (*Second Book of Discipline,* 1578 chapter 3 in Calderwood 1843).

1 Within which the presbytery exercises oversight.

This right 'is regarded as a fundamental one in the Church' though the ratification of the Presbytery is necessary (Weatherhead 1997:113). Its denial was one of the causes of the Scottish Disruption in 1843 (see Cheyne 1993). However, failure to call a minister within a specified period can lead to a presbytery taking the initiative and making an appointment to a vacant charge.

LICENSING

It has been demonstrated (Church of Scotland 1997:24/28), that there is no evidence of any specific service of licensing students to preach the Gospel in Scotland prior to 1694 (nor is there any evidence to explain why it was introduced, but the reasons were most likely to be contextual within the Scottish situation), though from an early time in the 17th century, candidates for the ministry were 'tried'[2] at successive stages of their preparation for ordination under the direction of the General Assembly (cf. the 1645 *Form of Presbyterial Government* 1969:181-186). One of these trials would lead to the granting of a licence to preach. There were also trials for probationer ministers and 'intrants'[3] before the sustenance of a call or appointment to a parish. The trials would focus on knowledge of Latin, Greek, Hebrew and theology, Scripture and 'the controversies concerning the government and discipline of this Church' (Church of Scotland 1997:24/28). The emphasis was on adequate preparation for and thorough examination prior to ordination. This process was modified periodically in terms of a changing context.

By the late twentieth century, candidates, once selected as candidates for the ministry had the responsibility of applying to their home presbytery to be taken on trials for licence during the final year of their academic training. The purpose of trials 'shall be to enable the Presbytery to ensure that an applicant for Licence is acquainted with the current legal and sacramental practice and past tradition of the Church of Scotland, and that s/he is a fit person to proceed to the ministry'(Macdonald 1976:222). The trials consisted of an oral examination and the conduct of a service of public worship before a panel selected by the presbytery. Thereafter, on successful completion of the trials, candidates are licensed during a service of worship under the supervision of the presbytery: 'those licensed are licensed to preach the gospel of the grace of God and to exercise their gifts as probationers for the Holy Ministry' (McGillivray 1995:59).

Herron (1995:126) has raised two pertinent and problematic issues with regard to licensing. First, is the seeming theological inconsistency regarding the granting of a license to preach while withholding a license to celebrate the sacraments? In a church of the Reformed tradition, it would seem more sensible to grant the first license to celebrate sacraments in view of their apparent subservience to the ministry of the Word, if at all this is the case and if it is acceptable to separate them. This is a significant issue if the sacraments are regarded as a physical expression and enactment of the Word: 'The ministering of the sacraments to the congregation realises nothing but the visible Word' (Coertzen 2004:102). Such is the case in the Uniting Presbyterian Church in Southern Africa where candidates for the ministry are licensed to preach on successful completion of their academic course, but must fulfil the requirements of a subsequent sacraments' test before being allowed to celebrate Baptism and Holy Communion. Second, is the discrepancy which arises out of the *de facto* situation where licentiates, and others, may already have been preaching

2 Hence the term 'trials for licence' and 'trials for ordination'.
3 Ordinands.

regularly for some time prior to official licensing? In this regard Herron (1995:126) quotes the experience of the nineteenth century church of Scotland as recounted by Mair in his *Digest of Church Laws* where:

> "Ministers are expressly prohibited from giving countenance or permission to students to engage in the public ministry of the Word before being regularly licensed to preach the Gospel. Hitherto the Church has considered that on the one hand the conducting of public worship was a service not to be grasped at, or even undertaken, immaturely, and that on the other hand the time and power of students were required for, and ought to be devoted to, their own studies. It is remarkable that in these days …. There should appear to be an inclination to permit students to leave their work and hasten to the pulpit".

The issue at stake here is that in such situations, licensing has become relatively meaningless since:

> "... Students for Divinity are for the purposes of their practical training under the direction of the Committee on Education for the Ministry and may not engage in the supply of vacant pulpits without the consent of the Committee on Education for the Ministry and the Committee on Probationers and Transference of Ministers" (Macdonald 1976:228).

One cannot deny the need for students for the ministry to preach as part of their ministerial formation. In fact, this must be the most important aspect of practical training. Further, other categories were also allowed so long as the relevant Presbytery was notified (ibid). There is also some reason to mark the transition implied in licensing by some appropriate ritual authorisation in a service of public worship. But this would raise the question why others are not so similarly licensed?

Being a licentiate and virtually synonymously a 'probationer' marked a transitory stage in the passage to ordination although not all licentiates proceed directly through probation to ordination; those who do not, revert to the status of licentiate (Weatherhead 1997: 192). Those who remain licentiates interminably were liable to be labelled in derogatory manner 'stickit [stuck] ministers'.

The Evangelical Presbyterian Church in South Africa (EPCSA) does not license candidates for the ministry but does have a one year probationary period which may lead to ordination (EPCSA sa:14, 5.1.2 iv-vi). In the Presbyterian Church of Aotoarea New Zealand, candidates are licensed at the completion of their academic training and remain so until they are ordained; there is no probationary period. Ordained service begins with the answering of a call. This may take some time due to the reluctance of congregations to call inexperienced ministers.

ORDINATION

Ordination is a process directed towards the proper ordering of the ministry of the Church of Jesus Christ. From a reforming Roman Catholic perspective Küng (1968:405-406) correctly defines ordination as 'the giving of authority and commissioning of particular members for a particular service. … this does not apply to all ministries'. The aspect of function is paramount in Küng's (1968: 427) thinking: 'the authority given is one of service, and it demands from him [the ordinand] a corresponding attitude, a corresponding life and work'. It begins with the identification of persons with particular gifts for office and concludes with authorisation to perform the specific duties pertaining to that office (PCUSA 1992:115) although there is a continuity in that the

ordained are held accountable for the performance of 'the distinctive core functions of the office' (PCUSA 1992:116). Ordination is the prerogative of the Presbytery and is normally granted only on receipt of a call in a person's favour by a congregation with a right of call. This is often regarded as the traditional means of entry into the ministry:

> "2. They that are called unto the ministry, or that offer themselves thereunto, ought not to be elected without [*unless*] one certain flock be assigned to them" (*Second Book of Discipline* 1578, chapter 4).

It may also result from the appointment of a minister to serve a congregation which has no right of call. The *Second Book of Discipline* (1578, chapter 4) also provides for the appointment of ministers: '1. Pastors, bishops, or ministers, are they who are appointed to particular congregations'. Any discussion of this matter within the UPCSA, as the most representative Southern African Presbyterian denomination, and other churches for that matter, has to take place within the variety of ministries which already exist within the denomination.

The South African context at present is generally one of stagnation or decline in membership[4], challenges being posed concerning the validity of established patterns of ministry, its relevance in a rapidly changing society. In the wider societal context, a number of changes are being experienced – economic and cultural, in the home and family, at work and in the local community and in the beliefs and values of society itself. Not the least of these is the current continuous debate on sexual orientation and same gender marriages which are impacting on the matter of ordination to the ministry of Christ's Church, and which is exercising the minds of most South African churches. Consequently, ordination must be related to God's purpose of reconciling a badly fractured world, through making it whole, to God self. This is the mission of the Church in which the ordained ministry participates. It must engage with the current realities of southern African societies. Within the UPCSA, while there are denominational tutors available to participate in mentoring candidates for the ministry, there has been reluctance in many congregations and ministers to undertake the care and development of students and probationers, an inability to provide adequate supervision and an inability to support them adequately. This has made the realisation of the theory in practice difficult. The problem has been substantially racial since white candidates do not experience the same problems; they are often privately sponsored by their home congregations and return to them to be ordained as associate ministers. Interestingly, since the transfer of the majority of students (black) to the University of Pretoria and to the care and supervision of Presbytery of Tshwane, there has been a marked improvement in the racial situation as white ministers and congregations have begun to integrate students into their congregational life. A more recent advance has been the placement of three probationers in white congregations.

God's mission is the task of the entire ministry of the Church, not only the ordained. Within the Reforming tradition, emphasis was laid on 'faithfulness to the gospel' rather than ordering ministry in a specific manner. This concept can be liberating in terms of how we proceed. For us it raises the question, is the call, and consequently ordination, restricted to parish ministry alone? If this is so, how can some be ordained to specialist ministries (i.e. differing ways of rendering service) to which they are called? As God calls individuals to ordained ministry, does this invariably require the confirmation of a calling congregation over and above the church at large, especially with regard to specialist ministries? *The Form of Presbyterial Church Government*

4 as is the case with all the main stream English-speaking denominations.

(Westminster Assembly of Divines, (1645] 1969) indicates that the ordained be 'designed to some particular church, or other ministerial charge' (1969:180). And this is a 'publick church office' (1969:180) and not a private or personal matter. It need not be to a congregation but may be to '[an]other ministerial charge' (1969:180). In the case of the UPCSA, tutors and chaplains to theological students are appointed to the institution of training, and theirs and others' calls to specialist ministries are recognised through the process of secondment (UPCSA, App E(2) 2001:146). The current practice of the UPCSA is that no minister may be seconded to a specialist ministry until three years have been served in a congregation. However, this takes no account of those who may experience a direct primary call to a specialist ministry. The ordering of ministry is dependent on the recognition of gifts which build up the church as a community and which enable it to be a community of service to the wider community.

In the Scottish context, and occasionally in other contexts, when an ordination is to a more general ministry than can be exercised within the bounds of a presbytery, the principle emerged that: 'To ordain for a more general purpose (as for Foreign or Mission Service) requires the authorisation of the General Assembly' (Wotherspoon & Kirkpatrick 1960:99).

In Calvin, the nature of the external call as a complement to the inner call (Institutes IV.3.10,11) to ordained ministry is based in the call of the apostles and the ministries of the Early Church. The earliest ministries were itinerant in nature ('no fixed limits were given to them' IV.3.4), charismatic/missionary and directed to 'the whole body' (IV.3.1, referring to Eph 4:4-16). Calvin also enumerates ministries which are not only restricted to the ministry of the Word eg. 'powers, gifts of healing, interpretation, government, care of the poor' (IV.3.8). These might be akin to our specialist ministries. With regard to the ministry of pastors, Calvin seems to indicate the existence of two forms of call to a particular ministry. The one is by appointment i.e. those who have 'the government of a particular church *assigned to them'* (IV.3.5,[7], emphasis mine). He also refers to 'the flock over which he is appointed' (IV.3.6). The other is a call attested by 'public authority' (IV.3.7). Ordination is, therefore, the church's acknowledgment and confirmation of God's call to ministry.

Certainly, the Church at large played a significant role in the authenticating and processing of a call which is a process rather than an event: 'that which included the various parts of the whole procedure in the authorising of a man [sic] for the Ministry of the Church' i.e. 'Electioun, Examinatioun and Admission' (*First Book of Discipline* in Ainslie 1940:143). In practice, this procedure properly consisted of 'selection of candidates, trial or examination of the fitness of the candidates, actual election of a candidate by the people or others, solemn installation of the candidate in the Ministry' (:143). There was no set procedure to be followed here and it was common for two of these elements to be combined in various combinations in practice: 'The sequence or course of the procedure of the "call" did not need in all respects to be everywhere and at all times the same' (:143). Admissions 'at large'[5] were not generally accepted; they were generally dependent upon specific vacancies to be filled. However, admissions were both by appointment and congregational call although calls were processed arising out of nomination by others eg. town councils, and only then by congregations. The ultimate authorisation was the prerogative of the Church and not the congregation.

5 Ministerium vagum, that is neither to a parish , congregation or to a specific appointment, but to minister in a general unrestricted sense.

From this it appears that the *semper reformanda* principle has operated as the Church sought, true to its reforming tradition, to be always in the process of reformation in the light of its changing context, though not in terms of the fundamentals or substance of the faith i.e., it is dynamic. Latourette (1949:147) noted that a feature of Protestantism in general is its flexibility with regard to change. In this regard it is instructive to learn from our colleagues in other denominations subscribing to Presbyterian polity. The insights of the Presbyterian Church (USA) are illuminating:

> "Presbyterian churches are found the world over, and the details of their polity differ somewhat to accommodate difference in culture and circumstance (Gray & Tucker 1999:5).
>
> The Reformed understanding of how the church is ordered and of the functions fulfilled by its officers has been worked out over many centuries, and in a great variety of situations. A look at the history of the Reformed church shows much growth, change and adaptability in the Presbyterian system" (Gray & Tucker 1999:21).

These are confirmed by Leith (1977:155):

> "Presbyterianism is not a fixed pattern of church life but a developing pattern that has both continuity and diversity. Many features of the system … vary from time to time and place to place. … No one pattern of church life can be designated as the definitive and final form of Presbyterianism.
>
> The governing bodies do not have power to require things that the Scripture does not require. As the Westminster Confession of Faith says:
>
> > God alone is Lord of the conscience, and hath left it free from the doctrines and commandments of men [sic] which are in anything contrary to his Word, or beside it in matters of faith or worship" (XX.2 Westminster Divines 1978:23).

So it is with the Church of Scotland which has a greater and lengthier heritage than any other Presbyterian church. The following statement is made in the context of momentous opportunities for change facing the church:

> "The conviction that ministry must be ordered never varied. The view of *how* it should be ordered was by no means fixed. Indeed a Reformed ecclesiology should encourage us to expect this. … Christoph Schwobel captures this well:
>
> > Since the *creatura verbi* cannot be identified with any empirical form of institutional order … none of the human forms of organising the ministry of the community of witness has divine dignity. Therefore the Church as an organised human community of witnesses can be an *ecclesia semper reformanda* which is open to change, as long as these changes help the Church to fulfil its fundamental task of witnessing to the truth of the Gospel of Christ in the specific historical, cultural and social circumstances in which it exists" (Church of Scotland 2000:13/18-19).

A question is raised concerning whether or not grace operates mechanically in ordination. The Reforming tradition assuredly says no. However, if this is the case then should ordination be repeated each time a minister accepts a new call since the necessity of a second or subsequent call does not disappear; nor does the need for grace! Subsequent ordination is not required because the Church has already recognised the call to exercise this ministry. Only the physical location changes, though in these days the call might be to a specialist ministry.

Such is the dynamic nature of patterns of ministry that two innovations have brought about change in what was traditionally viewed as 'a congregational context for ministry' (PCUSA 1996:22). First, the development of specialisation within pastoral ministry as in Christian Education; second in specific areas beyond the congregation such as forces' chaplaincies. In this case, for example in the South African Defence Force, the matter of ordination within a recognised church is mandatory for employment as is submission to its discipline for continuing employment. Deposition from the ministry of a chaplain's church of origin results in termination of contract within the chaplaincy service. It is of value to note that as far back as the 17th century, specialist ministries were catered for as in the *Form of Presbyterial Church Government:* 'Let such as are chosen, or appointed for the service of the armies or navy, be ordained, as aforesaid, by the associated ministers …' (1969:187). So, even at this early stage, appointments were considered of similar value to calls to specific pastoral charges.

A recent Scottish assessment suggests that:

> "[a]s a Church we recognise that our heritage is in the Presbyterianism that has been so faithfully handed on by previous generations. However, because of this, we tend to reconstruct history subjectively and see any radical proposals as an attack on the very basis of that heritage.
>
> To some it may seem obvious that new church structures, suitable for a 21st century Church will involve the elimination of practices arising from the 17th, 18th or 19th centuries. However, to others this will be seen as an attempt to strip away our heritage. Yet there is a way of seeing change as a mature response to the needs of the Church of today" (Board of Practice and Procedure 2001:7).

There comes a time on the life of a denomination when there needs to be new wineskins to contain the wine. This came to be an issue within the newly formed UPCSA, post-union in 1999, an issue which is not yet resolved.

A POSSIBLE WAY FORWARD

The present system of having the practical training following the academic training is not educationally sound. It prevents the practise of theories and skills learned for up to three or four years. It further prevents the process of *praxis* where students can practise their theories in the authentic ministry situation and reflect on them theologically in preparation for renewed and improved practise. These problems can be overcome if a comprehensive approach to ministerial formation is adopted with frequent opportunities given during the week, at weekends and during vacations for both practise and reflection. This would mean that there is even less need for licensing since candidates would be tested throughout their period of training for suitability for ordination.

In practical terms any proposal to ordain at the completion of the academic training and depart from the service of licensing presupposes that a comprehensive programme of ministerial formation (academic, practical spiritual and evangelical) is in place from the beginning of the period of training that would allow ordination to take place at the point of entry to full-time ministry. This would include the academic course, a programme of ministerial formation and close supervision of practical training in a variety of congregations and situations. It would inevitably bring the Church and academic institution into a close relationship and would conform to the needs and demands of outcome-based education.

CONCLUSION

In the course of time the service licensing to preach the gospel has become an anachronism while ordination remains the sole route for entrance into the ministry of the Word in the Reforming tradition. This implies the need for change in the process leading to ordination as well as renewed teaching of the meaning of ordination.

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KEY WORDS
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TREFWOORDE
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