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## The understanding of ordination and the ministry of Word and Sacrament in the context of a plurality of ministries: Norwegian discussions and conclusions

How is a plurality of ministries to be interpreted on the background of a traditional Lutheran theology of ordination and the ministry of word and sacrament? This has been an ongoing discussion in the Church of Norway for more than fifty years, and the theme of various commissions. The question has especially been linked to questions regarding ordination, even if this question also has had consequences for the discussion on how various ministries should be organized and linked to each other. In 2010, the Bishops' Conference issued a statement on the diaconal ministry which has been widely accepted in the church, including by the General Synod, as a basis for the continued work on ministry structures and ordination liturgies. Although the statement from the Bishops' Conference concerns the diaconal ministry, it establishes a fundamental understanding of ecclesial ministries that has also been applied to other ministries, as well to the understanding of the structure of ministries. This shift has been described as a shift from a theology of THE ministry, to a theology of ministries, from "embetsteologi" to "tjenesteteologi", from "Amtstheologie" to "Diensttheologie".

In this paper, I will present the position represented by the bishops' conference and the theological reasons for this position. In order to understand the context in which the statement stands, I will first look at the background and the discussion that preceded it.

In the centuries following the reformation, the Church of Norway had only one ordained ministry, the ministry of the pastor (in Norwegian "prest"). Even if the church also had bishops, and there was a consecration liturgy for bishops, this was not understood as a separate ministry, but rather as part of the same ministry, as a pastor with special tasks. (In recent years, especially after the Porvoo agreement, we have developed a "thicker theology" of the bishops' ministry, which I will not go into in this paper)

The theological basis for this singularity of ministry is found in Article 5 of the Augsburg Confession, or more correctly: In the interpretation and traditional use of this article.

“So that we may obtain this faith, the ministry of teaching the gospel and administering the Sacraments was instituted.” Even if this article does not exclude the possibility of other ministries in the church (which is obviously beyond the scope of this article), the traditional Lutheran theological view has seen this as the only ministry of the church. This limitation has been further re-enforced by the Latin title customarily assigned to the article: “*De ministerio ecclesiastico*,” “of the ecclesiastical ministry” or “ecclesiastical office” (German: “Amt”, Norwegian “embete”). Although this title was not part of the original text, it has served as a key to interpreting this article and has subsequently contributed to the understanding of the ministry within the Lutheran church as being one ministry. In the Lutheran tradition this single ministry (*the ecclesial ministry*) has generally been identified with the ministry of the pastor. Even if the pastor has taken care of other functions in the church as well, the core of pastoral ministry has been understood as a *ministry of Word and sacrament*. Other ministries in the church, such as church wardens, organists, etc., have often been perceived as ministries in a subordinate role, as a sort of assistants to the pastor.

Since the reformation pastors have been ordained, usually by a bishop. As a result of Porvoo, ordination now is carried out by bishops only.

In its understanding of the single ecclesial ministry, Lutheranism has traditionally distinguished itself from churches with a plurality of ordained ministries, for example, the fivefold ministries of the Reformed tradition. (An interesting exception is the Lutheran Free Church in Norway, which in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century adopted a Presbyterian church order, influenced by the Free Church of Scotland. In addition to ordained pastors, they also ordain elders.)

The singularity of THE ordained ministry in the Church of Norway did not mean that there were no other ministries in the church; these were understood as “lay” ministries. In the revival movements of the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, being “lay” was a positive attribute, connected to the idea of the priesthood of all believers. These movements understood themselves as lay movements, and as such not in need of ordination or integration into the official church order – even if ordained pastors often had leadership roles in the movement, and in the organizations that grew out of the movements. In the Norwegian ecclesial reality, lay movements and the official church supplemented each other in local congregations.

This shifted in the decades following Second World War, as the activity in the congregations organized by the church increased, which led to an increase in the number of employees, and also to new categories of employees. In the 1960s,

new positions as deacons and catechists (responsible for teaching confirmands and others) were introduced in congregations. Thus, introducing a new type of plurality of ministries. This raised a theological question whether these ministries should be understood as lay or ordained ministries. And if ordained: What is the relation to the ministry of the pastor?

In 1974 a temporary liturgy for ordination of deacons and catechists was introduced, and in 1986 all ordination liturgies were revised, also for the ordination of pastors. In 1998 a liturgy for ordination of cantors (church musicians) was introduced.

At this point it is necessary to comment on terminology. In the liturgy from 1920 that was used for ordination of pastors until 1986, the term used in Norwegian was “ordinasjon”. In the temporary liturgies for deacons and catechists from 1974 the term was “vigsling”. In the liturgies from 1986 all three liturgies were called “vigsling”. However, in daily use, ordination of pastors often was referred to as “ordinasjon”, while ordination of deacons and catechists was referred to as “vigsling”, thus introducing a conceptual difference.

As the English language does not have this distinction, it has been difficult to explain in English and led to a lot of confusion in ecumenical and international conversations.

Other languages have similar concepts without necessarily a difference in meaning. Swedish is a parallel with both “ordination” and “vigning” as alternatives, even if “vigning” now is used for all ordinations. If I have understood it correctly, German Lutherans talk about “Ordination”, while German Catholics talk about “Priesterweihe”.

While terminology may be difficult enough, the theological question was even more demanding. In the following discussions, a common premise was the understanding of one ecclesial ministry. The question was therefore: Which ministries are part of the “ecclesial office” mentioned in the article 5 of the Augsburg Confession, and which are not. If not, they are to be understood as lay ministries, and the ordination liturgies are not to be understood as ordination in a proper sense, but rather as a sort of dedication or commissioning.

For all, it was clear that the pastor represented the ecclesial ministry in its full sense. If deacons and catechists also was included in the ecclesial ministry, it was in a partial sense, as being responsible for aspects of it, while the totality still belonged to the pastor. This model was referred to as differentiation of ministry (“tjenestedifferensiering”). For some, this was not a viable solution, as they thought that only the ministry of the pastor should be understood as an expression of “the ecclesial ministry”, and all other ministries as lay ministries.

From the 1980s onward, the question was increasingly placed within a broader ecumenical context. An important document here was *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry* from the Faith and Order Commission of the World Council of Churches (1982).

In many churches there has traditionally been a *threefold pattern of ministry* consisting of bishop, priest, and deacon. Such a pattern is found, for example, in the Orthodox churches, the Roman Catholic Church, and Anglican churches. In these traditions the three ministries are not understood as equal but as different degrees within the ministry. A bishop has first been ordained as deacon, then as priest, and finally as bishop. The bishop therefore possesses the ministry in its fullness, while the priest and the deacon possess parts of what the bishop has.

The Faith and Order document suggested that churches that did not have such a pattern should consider whether it might also be useful for them. The document is important as it introduces an idea of a plurality of ministries, even if it restricted to the threefold pattern.

Whether such a model might be appropriate also became a topic of discussion in the Church of Norway. In the Norwegian context, however, the problem was that there were not only three but four (and later five) ministries to which people were ordained.

One possible solution was to broaden the understanding of the diaconal ministry into a "*general diaconate*" that would include more functions than the traditional diaconal ministry. In order to realize a threefold structure, it was also proposed to discontinue the catechist ministry as a distinct ministry and instead understand catechists as pastors with a special responsibility for teaching.

In 1998 ordination was also introduced for cantors, making the limitation to the number three even more problematic. Moreover, in the Norwegian context it was difficult to accept a hierarchical relationship between the ministries, for example that the pastors should be considered somehow "more" than the catechist or the deacon.

After a failing attempt to understand ordained ministry as "a multidimensional ministry" without binding it to the number three or to a hierarchical structure, the bishops' conference was asked to give a statement on the matter, a process that resulted in the statement "The Diaconal Ministry in the Church's Pattern of Ministry" (BM 3/10). The understanding developed there corresponded to a large extent with the position previously advocated by professor Harald Hegstad, among other publications in the book *Den virkelige kirke* (Tapir 2009, published in English as *The Real Church: An Ecclesiology of the Visible*,

Pickwick 2013), and Hegstad also participated in the preparation of the statement.

The understanding developed there for the diaconal ministry later became the basis for the understanding of the catechist ministry as well.

Whereas earlier discussions had often focused on whether other ministries shared in the one ecclesial office, the statement instead took as its point of departure a broader understanding of ministries in the church. A central biblical text here is Paul's description of the variety of *charisms* in the church in First Corinthians 12. Here he talks about the many tasks and functions within the congregation given by the Spirit, which he compares to the diversity and interaction between the members of the body (1 Cor 12). Although the ministries are different, they together contribute to realizing the totality of the church's mission.

Among the tasks that are essential for the church, the bishops' statement highlights the mission of diakonia. Even if this is a task for the whole church, within the fellowship some will have a ministry primarily directed toward diakonia, and here lies the theological basis for the ministry of the deacon. This is not to be understood as a ministry derived from the pastoral ministry but as a ministry with an *independent theological foundation*, the bishops underline.

The statement then says something about the understanding of diakonia and the ministry of the deacon in the Church of Norway today, which is primarily understood as responsible for the church's ministry of care for people in need. It is not a stepping stone on the way to become a pastor, as in the Catholic and Anglican tradition.

That a deacon has particular responsibility for the congregation's diakonia does not mean that the deacon is alone in this mission or the only one who practices diakonia. The deacon's special responsibility is a leadership responsibility, exercised among other ways through guidance and inspiration.

This special leadership responsibility is also the basis for the ordination of deacons.

From New Testament times there have been some ordered ministry, responsible for specific aspects of the church's mission, and we see that ordination *through the laying on of hands and prayer has belonged to such ministries*.

The statement describes ordination as follows:

“Ordination [Norwegian: “vigsling”] is understood as a liturgical act in which the church appoints a servant through calling, blessing, and sending. Ordination

is a charismatic act in which the congregation prays that the Spirit will grant the ordained person the necessary gifts. In the act of ordination the church confirms that the candidate has been found suitable for the ministry, and the one ordained promises to perform the ministry faithfully in accordance with the church's teaching and the commission given in the ministry. Ordination also includes an element of sending. It is not time-limited but is intended as a lifelong ministry. Because ordination concerns the whole church, in the Church of Norway it is performed by the bishop."

The statement also comments the use of concepts in Norwegian, and notes that ordination of pastors has traditionally been called "ordinasjon", whereas other ministries have been referred to as "vigsling". The Bishops' Conference emphasizes that there is *no theological difference* between "ordinasjon" and "vigsling", but nevertheless sees no need to avoid this difference in terminology.

At this point the statement created some uncertainty as to whether the Bishops' Conference nevertheless regarded pastoral ordination as having a different theological status from the ordination of deacons and catechists. That this was not the case is demonstrated by a later statement from the Bishops' Conference in 2023 recommending that new ordination liturgies use the term "vigsling" for priests, deacons, catechists, and cantors alike.

Returning to the statement of 2010: after emphasizing that the diaconal ministry has its own specific and independent theological basis as an ordained ministry, this understanding is also applied to the ministries of pastor, catechist, and cantor. The statement distances itself from earlier attempts to understand the various ministries in terms of "differentiation of ministry."

The other ministries do not carry aspects of the pastor's ministry of Word and sacrament as described in The Augsburg Confession Article 5 but are *independent ministries with their own theological foundations*. The statement also distances itself from the model of the "threefold ministry", both because it often implies a hierarchical relationship and because the limitation to three ministries is unsuitable in the present situation.

The number of ordained ministries should therefore not be fixed to a specific number (e.g. three) as the needs of the church may vary between contexts. In the present context the Church of Norway has a fivefold pattern of ministry: Pastor, deacon, catechist, cantor and bishop. The relationship between these ministries should not be understood in a hierarchical or transitional manner. The different ministries are different, but equal. Ordination is ordination into a specific ministry.

This means that while the responsibility for administer the sacraments belong to the pastor's ministry, this is not part of ministry of other ordained ministries, even if deacons in the Church of Norway are allowed to administer eucharist at sickbeds.

The General Synod in 2011 considered a case concerning the diaconal ministry and endorsed the theological understanding of ministry developed by the Bishops' Conference. On this basis it was also decided that deacons should wear a *diagonal stole* as a sign of consecration, and this was late also applied to catechists and cantors.

What does this understanding mean for the understanding of pastoral ministry? Does it become less important when understood as one of a number of ordained ministries? I think no. It is rather a way to focus on the core tasks of pastoral ministry. In a Lutheran perspective, this is understood as the ministry of word and sacrament. It is precisely this ministry that is described in the Augsburg Confession Article 5. From the context in the confession, it is clear that this ministry is fundamental for the life of the church, because people cannot come to faith unless the gospel is preached and the sacraments administered.

For the interpretation of Article 5, this means that it should be understood as referring to the ministry of the pastor, and not to a general "ecclesial ministry" that includes other ministries as well. (This also resonates well with the German text, that talks about "das Predigtamt") Rather than understanding these other ministries a differentiation of the pastoral ministry defined in Article 5 would, in the view of the Bishops' Conference, be artificial. Instead, the various ministries should be understood as distinct ministries within the fellowship of ministries in the church, with their own theological foundation. The relationship between these ministries should not be understood in a hierarchical or transitional manner. The different ministries are different, but equal. Ordination is ordination into a specific ministry, not into a general status of being ordained.

What are the ecumenical presupposition and implications of this?

Regarding ecumenical implications, the bishops' conference is primarily concerned with the relationship to the Anglican churches in the Porvoo communion. In the Porvoo Declaration, the Church of Norway together with other Lutheran and Anglican churches committed itself "to work towards a common understanding of diaconal ministry." The bishops do not find it ecumenically necessary for the Church of Norway to adopt the model of the threefold ministry (deacon–priest–bishop) found in many other churches, as it should be possible to recognize specific ministries without having the same structure of ordained ministry, or the same number of ordained ministries.

Anglican and Lutheran churches already recognize each other's pastoral and episcopal ministries within the Porvoo agreement, even though they do not share an identical understanding of the structure in which these ministries are embedded. In the same way, mutual recognition of the diaconal ministry should be possible on similar premises, the bishops state.

So far, the discussion on ministry in the Church of Norway has primarily been directed towards the Anglicans in the Porvoo communion. There are good reasons to argue that there are overlooked resources in developing the conversation with our partner churches in the CPCE. I therefore find this consultation and what follows from that an important and promising opportunity.