THEOLOGY OF MINISTRY

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Theological Reflection in Practice

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In this paper I articulate my own theology of ministry as the vocation of all believers. To do so, I find I must begin by exploring my ecclesiological commitments, for these inform my beliefs about the nature of ministry. Having done this, I will then examine the relationships, responsibilities, and indicators of a healthy minister in a particular ecclesial context.[[1]](#footnote-1) Next, I will briefly explain three depictions of ministry that resonate with my perspective. And finally, I will share a few thoughts on my own ministerial vocation.

**The Church, Catholic and Congregational**

The church is the network of those people who are committed to pursuing together a life of submission to the Christian God.[[2]](#footnote-2) Within the worldwide church network, smaller, more intimate groups of Christians meet together to exhort and encourage one another in their shared pursuit of submission to the way of God: honoring God as creator, redeemer, and sustainer of all things; being transformed by accepting God's love and grace; and joining in God's work by imitating the actions and attributes of God (particularly as revealed in Christ). On both the catholic and congregational levels, Christ is the one who holds this church together; individuals and communities find their place as members of the body for which he is the head.

Given the variety found within the catholic church, it is only natural that variety exists at the congregational level as well. Among the various manifestations of the congregational church, however, the prevailing model is the medium-to-large, formally structured community of faith that I will call here the “legacy church.”[[3]](#footnote-3) While this manifestation of the church is a faithful expression of the church's fundamental identity and purposes, the rendering of congregational culture that most resonates with my own disposition and theological commitments is the house church.[[4]](#footnote-4) For several reasons, I believe that a house church structure offers the opportunity for Christians to fulfill the church’s functions to a degree that is not as feasible in the legacy church.

First, because of its small, comparatively informal arrangement, the house church is more readily constructed around natural relationships and rhythms rather than contrived and synthetic connections and practices. Because the house church more accurately reflects the situatedness of its members, its structures are more sustainable and more likely to succeed. And the natural ties between members allow for deeper relationships to form. If these relationships are healthy, church members become truly vulnerable and accountable to one another more easily.

Second—and with similar result—the house church format recognizes (rather than ignoring or evading) the reality that we human beings are limited in our capacity for deep relationship.[[5]](#footnote-5) In order for a church's members to connect with one another (and thus with God as God is exhibited through us) in the ways we were intended to, a congregational faith community should be small, ideally no more than roughly 15 people. A community of this size offers the opportunity for Christians to know one another as thoroughly as possible, with the deep, heart-level connection (rather than mere surface-level knowledge) that is necessary for effective exhortation and encouragement, as well as for the awareness and ready application of one another’s spiritual gifts.

Third, the superfluity of bureaucratic structures and ministerial titles in the house church context allows Christians to more effectively cultivate a congregational culture in which Christ is recognized as the only head of the church. These organizational elements, which are necessary (or at least conventional) for a legacy church’s smooth functioning, are extraneous to the house church gathering. With no officially designated human leader in place, members of healthy house church are essentially required to practice communal discernment and to submit to God's direct guidance. Thus they can avoid a danger that plagues many legacy congregations: sidestepping or obscuring the role God is meant to play in leading the church by focusing as much (or more) time and energy on human leadership as on divine leadership.

**House Church Ministry**

Because of these characteristics and commitments, ministry within the house church context takes on a different form than is typical in the legacy church. Both contexts recognize similar ministerial tasks and callings. They simply envision different ways in which those tasks and callings are carried out. Though the differences are subtle—so subtle that I may not name them well here—they are important. Essentially, the house church and the legacy church follow different “orders of operations.”[[6]](#footnote-6) By doing so, they yield different congregational cultures and different ministerial expectations.

The legacy church first assumes that some-*one* in particular must serve the congregation. Thus it prioritizes the selection and hiring of a minister (almost always an outsider) as a leader, often effectively negating its sole submission to Christ’s headship. This minister is then tasked with the job of caring for the church, which relieves the congregation’s members of most of their ministerial duties to one another. Thus members are “freed up,” but they are more disconnected from other church members as a result. Moreover, they are generally not further equipped with an understanding of their own vocations as Christian ministry, for “ministry” is what their “minister” does.

The house church, in contrast, prioritizes the headship of Christ, a theological commitment that generally results in a rather egalitarian structure in which no one person is elevated to the status of the church’s leader. Rather, all church members are recognized as equally vital parts of a flourishing body, and all engage in the task of ministering to one another as their own gifts prepare them to. Ministry in the house church, then, is primarily seen not as the profession of a select few but rather as the vocation of all members. And if, as the house church discerns and encourages the particular gifts of its members, it becomes clear that some are gifted to serve the church—whether catholic or congregational—with undivided emphasis, the congregation encourages their vocation alongside that of its other members, showing honor to all. Though it may rightly compensate these individuals in some way for their service, the church does not allow this specific gifting to negate either the headship of Christ or the ministerial roles of its other members.[[7]](#footnote-7) All are full participants in ministry—caring for the church and the world—simply in varied ways, according to their createdness and calling.[[8]](#footnote-8)

Some might be concerned by my claims here, offering a troubled “If everything is ministry, then nothing is ministry,” to express their hesitations. I must reply simply that I disagree, believing that all things that intentionally serve for the building up and care of the church are ministry, regardless of who is doing them. And that is what I see all members of the house church doing, in a two-fold way. First, all church members minister to one another on a regular basis. Second, all members’ vocations are ministry for the church in that, if done well, they contribute to the health and growth of the church.[[9]](#footnote-9) Thus their work is ministry, even if it does not fit the paradigm of the legacy church.

**Healthy House Church Ministers**

Within the house church paradigm, then, markers of healthy ministers are nearly identical to markers of healthy Christians. Nevertheless, they are important, so I offer here my insights into the indicators of healthy Christians and healthy ministry. I will begin by focusing on the three relationships emphasized in Scripture as constitutive of healthy Christian existence: God, self, and others.[[10]](#footnote-10) In addition to examining these relationships, I will also note some further markers of and prescriptions for good ministers and ministry.

Counterintuitive as it may seem, the main relationship that ministers need to attend to is their own relationship with God, not their relationships within their congregation. Their relationship with their creator, redeemer, and sustainer is the one that grounds their very being, and unless this relationship is healthy their other relationships will be deficient. Among other things, a healthy relationship with God is characterized by openness to, connection with, and submission to God. The minister who is committed to God in these ways will also be able to discern the will and guidance of our self-revealing God, on both individual and communal levels.[[11]](#footnote-11) In order to cultivate an ever-deepening relationship with God, this minister should also be engaged in spiritual disciplines, drawing closer to God and learning to walk the Christian life more faithfully through them. And though times of doubt and trial may come, leaving the minister feeling vulnerable and disconnected from God, these challenges are but opportunities for alternate expressions of healthy relationship.[[12]](#footnote-12) As a further prerequisite for constructive congregational engagement, the minister needs a healthy relationship with herself.[[13]](#footnote-13) First, she must value herself as one good expression of the created image of a good God.[[14]](#footnote-14) From this foundation, she should be able to carefully examine her own strengths and weaknesses, her successes and her failures, her giftedness and her calling. As she submits all these things to God, she learns to discern and appreciate her own place within the body of Christ, and she strives to carry out her vocation well.[[15]](#footnote-15) As she does so, she must also attend well to herself, caring for herself with good rhythms and boundaries. Healthy relationships with God, self, and others require habits of work, rest, and play. They require time with family and friends and time alone. And they require the ability to say both “yes” and “no” appropriately. If the minister is thus able to love and care for herself, she will be better prepared to love and care for her fellow Christians.

It is only when the minister’s relationships with God and self are healthy that his relationships with others, including his faith community, will be wholesome.[[16]](#footnote-16) Recognizing himself as part of the body of which Christ is head, he will practice submission to God and mutual submission with his church, who are also submitted to God. He will therefore be able to work collaboratively with others as a unified body under God’s authority and direction. As part of that body, he will help carry the burdens of others and will build his fellow Christians up in love. And together with his fellow Christians, he will serve according to his vocation as a witness to and participant in God’s loving, redemptive work in the world.

Additional indicators of life-giving ministry exist for those Christians who are gifted for and called to a ministry of focused service to the church, whether at the congregational or catholic level.[[17]](#footnote-17) At the most basic level, these ministers should be able to recognize that their vocational calling is not higher than that of their peers. It is simply a different expression of the same overarching mission: honoring God and joining in God’s work. They should also acknowledge that they themselves are neither better nor inherently more authoritative than their fellow Christians. Rather, Christ is the head of the church, and they (as all members) are submitted to Christ. Human leaders are recognized only for their perceptible submission to God and discernment of God’s will. Thus while other Christians may submit in certain ways to a minister who is serving the church, they do so only because she is visibly submitting to Christ and is guiding the church in its task of submitting to Christ. The minister, therefore, should not collect authority and influence to herself, but should rather recognize and encourage its appropriate distribution and cultivation throughout the community. She should be able to increasingly identify, encourage, and nurture the vocations of others, as part of the communal task of discerning and living as the body of Christ. And she should engage in her own ministerial calling out of a deep desire to fulfill her own God-given vocation through faithful service to the church, regardless of measurable results or personal sacrifices. By doing these things, the minister who renders focused service to the church will strengthen the body of Christ so that it can more adequately submit to its true head, Christ.

**Metaphors and a Model for Ministry**

To illustrate further my convictions regarding healthy ministry—and to spur on your own imagination—I would like to briefly share two metaphors and one model for ministry that resonate with me. Each of these interpretations is imperfect, to be sure, yet I believe each offers important insight into the ministerial calling and task of all Christians, including those who are called to serve the church itself. I will move from metaphor to model to metaphor, in order of increasing strength and personal significance.

First, a minister is a participant-observer. The minister is not the originator of his work, for God is the designer and instigator of all community and all ministry. However, the minister does *see* God at work, for God’s immersion in our lives is inescapable, even when we cannot interpret it rightly, as the minister, who has eyes that are open and trained to see, can. And he does *join* God at work. He is both a passive and an active partaker in that work, for he must first be transformed by God’s love before he is fully able to join in the transformation of others. Yet the minister does engage in the work of God in both these ways—as observer and as subsequent participant.

Next, the minister is one who is called to the task of serving as a theological guide, a moral exemplar, and a pastoral caregiver. This three-fold framework summarizes the ministerial task with regard to the three relationships outlined above. A minister serves as theological guide by having a rightly ordered relationship with and understanding of God. She serves as a moral exemplar by acting in the ways she knows are appropriate for one who is an expression of the image of God and a submitted part of the body of Christ. And she serves as a pastoral caregiver by ministering as necessary to others who will benefit from her own vocational skills.

Finally, the minister is an organic gardener. As is the case with all gardeners, he must be a learner. Knowing nothing about his task at first, he learns from other amateurs, from experience, from experimentation, and from the expert: the master Gardener. He learns the rhythms of the seasons, knowing what tasks are called for and in what order. He knows how to test and amend the soil for optimum health. He knows how to plant the seed and care for it as it germinates and emerges. He knows when to fertilize and when to prune, and how to do both in ways that help the plants rather than harming them. He is generous but not stifling with his care, allowing nature to take its course, for he realizes that he is not the one who directly causes growth, though he does develop an environment in which growth can happen well. He learns to identify and care for the wide variety of produce in his garden, knowing them by their seeds, their plants, and their fruit. He knows how to harvest the fruit and save its seeds for future use. And he knows how to help plants die well, in ways that contribute to the overall health and growth of the garden. In all these things, he is a faithful worker, using methods and supplies that are not harmful or unnatural for the plants or their wider environment. Process is important to him, as well as product, and this results in both a healthy process and a quality product, both of which honor the traditions and the hopes of the master Gardener.

**My Own Ministry**

So where is my own place within this theology of ministry? Though you will be able to find further details in my more comprehensive reflections on personal ministerial identity, certain characteristics of my own ministry can be summed up well enough here. As is apparent from the content of this paper, I find myself committed to the house church manifestation of Christian community, and I am learning to exist and serve well in that context in the ways described here. In addition to thus engaging in house church forms of congregational ministry, my own vocation also entails focused service for the church at the catholic level. I am gifted with the ability to serve through theological teaching, conversation, and writing, as well as the employment of wisdom and discernment. I am also blessed with a passion and talent for helping guide people into a missionally focused life. I am, in more sense than one, a gardener. Though God may employ these gifts in any number of ways, I could easily foresee myself serving the catholic church through my reflection on and teaching about mission, evangelism, and community. The theology of ministry that I have articulated here is only one further step along that path.

1. While other and widely varied ecclesial contexts do exist, I will not here give a theology of ministry that fits all of these contexts. Such an endeavor would be interesting to undertake, but it is beyond the scope of this paper. That being the case, I have chosen to focus my theology of ministry so that it flows from and into my own ecclesial commitments. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Though administrative structures are sometimes used to aid in the organization of this network, no such structures are necessary to identify or demarcate the church, for the church is constituted by the people who make it up rather than by formal denominational (or even congregational) constructs. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. I have chosen the phrase “legacy church” only after much hesitation. I know of no good term or phrase to describe the form of the church as it has generally existed over the past few centuries. Many labels carry a patronizing tone, which I wish to avoid here. “Legacy church” was the best option that came to mind. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. You will not hear me argue in this paper that other forms of church are bad, wrong, or ungodly. I will point out some of their limitations, highlighting ways that a house church structure can avoid or correct those. I do recognize, however, that house church congregations do have their own specific limitations and weaknesses. I simply believe (for reasons shortly to follow) that despite those limitations and weaknesses, the house church structure most closely resembles God’s intent for the church as I can discern it theologically, including from comparison to the New Testament. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. The limitations are both psychological and temporal. Even if we had the psychological capacity to connect deeply with a large group of people regularly—which we do not—we would still be restricted by the demands of our daily rhythms to connecting with only a handful. In order for the kind of relationships that are meant to characterize the church to flourish, it is essential that we orient our church gatherings to this reality. Better a few meaningful, intimate church relationships than many shallow, empty ones. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. An equation done according to the mathematical order of operations yields one result, while the same equation done in a different order yields different results. Subtle change, yet important difference. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Such gifts at the congregational level include (among many other things!) the abilities to discern wisely and shepherd others. (These are good qualifications for serving as an elder in either a house church or legacy church setting. Elders are not the head of the church, however; they simply use their gifts to remind the church who the head is. Their gifts, then, do not overshadow Christ’s role or the roles of other Christians.) At the catholic level, those called to serve the church might work, for example, as educators, writers, or speakers. They might be leaders of faith-based non-profits or missionaries who work toward establishing new congregations. As such focused service to the church might preclude these Christians from engaging in other activities that would offer a sustainable income (i.e., jobs), monetary or material compensation could be in order as the church’s way of honoring the vocation of these Christians. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Sometimes Christian service to the church and the world are viewed as separate endeavors. Though nuances do exist, I believe that the two are closely tied, for by serving the church one empowers it for service to the world, which in turn makes it—and more importantly, its God—attractive to the world. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. One might understandably ask how the work of a trash collector, for example, builds up the church. I offer two thoughts in response. First, I would argue that we must not conflate career and vocation. The two often overlap (and ideally should, in my opinion), but they are not the same thing. The trash collector’s vocation may be as an encourager, a prophet, or any number of things. Second, I would argue that the way in which this trash collector fulfills his vocation (and his career, for that matter), serves as a credible and inviting witness to the power of God and the truth of the Christian faith, thus sustaining some in and drawing others to the faith. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Most notably, this three-fold framework is found in the “Greatest Commands” of Jesus in the gospels (Matthew 22:35-40, Mark 12:28-34, and Luke 10:25-28). As I examine these relationships, I will note things that are generally true, though exceptions may be appropriate. Also, though the relationships should, I believe, be prioritized in the order I outline below, in all reality the process is not a straightforwardly linear one. Just as the relationships intermingle, so do their processes and some of the characteristics defining them. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. While I have in mind my own particular view of revelation (namely that God is currently and near-continually self-revealing if we will but pay attention), other views on revelation (e.g., that God is revealed only in Scripture) can also fit this framework. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. I am thinking here of Mother Teresa, who was so grounded in her commitment to God that she remained faithful even in the midst of great personal doubt. Though her relationship with God surely changed during her time of trial, it was nevertheless a healthy relationship, likely made even stronger by her struggle. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. The Greatest Commands do say, after all, that we are to love our neighbors *as* ourselves. For that reason, healthy self-love is a necessary precursor to healthy other-love. Many a relationship (and many a church) has been marred as a result of unhealthy individuals trying to find the purpose, completion, and redemption that are lacking in their views of self. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Inherent in this statement is the recognition that others are also created good in the image of our good God. Thus also inherent in this statement is the virtue of humility. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. This means also releasing traits and tasks for which she is neither gifted nor called. She is not every part of the body. See 1 Corinthians 12:4-31, particularly verses 15-20. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Keep in mind here that we are discussing a member of the congregation of ministers in a house church setting, not the leader of a legacy church. I will have further observations about those called to serve the church with undivided commitment shortly. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. These indicators may be similar throughout the widely varied vocations of all church members. It is not my intent here, however, to set forth universal markers of Christian ministry *as* the church. Rather, these are aspects of focused ministry *to* the church that stand out as particularly important (sometimes because of the contrasts between the house church and the legacy church systems). [↑](#footnote-ref-17)