

A spirit of power

An ordination sermon

Dan Epp-Tiessen

For God did not give us a spirit of cowardice, but rather a spirit of power and of love and of self-discipline. (2 Tim. 1:7; NRSV)

The gifts he gave were that some would be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, some pastors and teachers, to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ. (Eph. 4:11–12; NRSV)

What does it mean to ordain someone? Many of us may have only a vague notion of what we are actually doing today. Most of us do not attend many ordination services, and we rarely hear sermons or have Sunday school discussions or read articles about ordination. So what are we doing today as we ordain a pastor?

Ordination is about a particular person

On one hand, ordination is about a particular person. By ordain-

Ordination symbolizes God's call of a particular person, the church's affirmation of this call, the pastor's acceptance of her call, and the whole church's blessing and affirmation of her ministry.

ing Melissa Miller today, we as a church are acknowledging that God has called her to pastoral ministry. We are declaring that we have undergone a process through which this congregation and the denomination have discerned her call to ministry, her gifts for pastoral leadership, her theological training, and her personal life of faith. By ordaining her, we as a church place on her the mark of Christ and the mark of the church, as we declare, "We commission and empower you

to proclaim the gospel, to shepherd the flock, to lead us, to challenge us, to inspire us for ministry in the church and the world."

Melissa has already been involved in such ministries here at Springstein Mennonite Church ever since she was installed as pastor two years ago, so what difference does ordination make? When we install someone, we affirm and empower him for ministry in a particular setting for a limited period of time, but ordination sets him apart for life. Ordination in our denomination normally occurs after a period of testing pastoral gifts and calling, and after the larger church has conducted an extensive discernment process. Ordination sets the person apart and claims him for a lifetime of ministry, both in the local congregation and the broader church.

To sum up, ordination symbolizes God's call of a particular person, the congregation's and the larger church's affirmation of this call, the pastor's acceptance of her call and her dedication to pastoral ministry, and the whole church's blessing and affirmation of her ministry. All these things and more are what we are doing here today. And what we are doing is very much about a particular person.

Ordination is also about the church

But ordination is also about us as the church, because ordination is about the church's office of pastoral ministry, and this ministry belongs to the church.¹ To whom does this pulpit behind which I

But ordination is also about us as the church, because ordination is about the church's office of pastoral ministry, and this ministry belongs to the church.

am standing belong? This pulpit was here long before Melissa Miller arrived on the scene, and it will stand here long after she leaves. By virtue of her calling and ordination, Melissa is granted the privilege and responsibility of occupying this pulpit for a period of time, but this pulpit belongs to Springstein Mennonite Church.

This pulpit symbolizes the ministry of leading worship, preaching, and proclaiming the gospel, a ministry that lies at the heart of church life. Other people in this congregation also exercise this ministry, but by ordaining Melissa, we designate her to carry out this ministry in a special way both here at Springstein and beyond. But the ministry of leading worship and preaching from this and other pulpits belongs to the church.

What is true of preaching is also true of other ministries, such as pastoral care. Caring for one another, and extending the love, grace, and healing power of Christ to each other, is the ministry of the whole church. This ministry of pastoral care has been happening here at Springstein long before Melissa arrived. Although many people in this congregation extend pastoral care, by ordaining Melissa we confer on her the authority to exercise this ministry on our behalf in a special way.

Ordination is about Jesus Christ

This ordination is about a particular person. It is also about the church. And even more importantly, it is about Jesus Christ. Why does the church engage in the ministry of preaching and proclaiming the gospel? Because Jesus came proclaiming the good news.²

The church has pulpits so that this ministry of proclaiming the good news will continue in every generation.

Ordination is about a particular person. It is also about the church. And it is about Jesus Christ. Why does the church engage in the ministry of preaching and proclaiming the gospel? Because Jesus came proclaiming the good news.

The church engages in pastoral care because Jesus came as the good shepherd to pastor the flock, to heal the sick, and to comfort the broken-hearted. The ministries of preaching and pastoral care, like the other faithful ministries of the church, continue the ministry that Jesus Christ initiated and then entrusted to the church after his ascension.

So what are we doing here today? We are ordaining Melissa to empower her, not to carry out her own ministry, but to carry out the ministry of the church. And thereby we are today empowering the ministry of the whole church, and the ministry of Jesus

Christ. Ordination is about far more than just the person being ordained. Ordination is about the church and the church's need for leadership as it carries on the ministry of Jesus Christ.

Ordination confers God's power

But we are ordaining a particular person, and so it is fitting to read 2 Timothy 1:3–7. Paul is encouraging the young Timothy, whom he has mentored into church leadership: “For this reason I remind you to fan into flame the gift of God, which is in you through the

laying on of my hands” (2 Tim. 1:6; NIV). The laying on of hands is a ritual symbolizing that the person is set apart for a particular ministry and receives special power from God to carry out this ministry. That is why Paul adds, “For God did not give us a spirit of cowardice, but rather a spirit of power and of love and of self-discipline” (2 Tim. 1:7; NRSV). Paul encourages Timothy to fan into flame this spirit of love and power that he has received.

Melissa, today we will lay our hands on you and claim you for the ministry of the church and the ministry of Jesus Christ. We

The power and authority that come with ordination are not for the benefit of the person being ordained. The office of ministry for which we ordain someone belongs to the church, and so the power and authority conferred by ordination exist for the sake of the church and the sake of Christ.

declare that this ordination confers God’s power on you. We declare that God gifts you with a spirit of power and love and self-discipline.

If ordination does not confer power and authority, then there wouldn’t be much sense in ordaining anyone. The power and authority that come with ordination are not for the benefit of the person being ordained, as we may sometimes think. The office of ministry for which we ordain someone belongs to the church, and so the power and authority conferred by ordination exist for the sake of the church and the sake of Christ.³

The purpose of ordination is not to grant someone prestige or status in the eyes of the church or world but to empower them to minister to the church and the world on our behalf and on Christ’s behalf. This conferring of power is important because if pastoral ministry depends only on the pastor’s own gifts and abilities, then both pastor and church are in trouble. Human gifts and abilities, as crucial as they are for pastoral ministry, are still human and fallible. They are essential but by themselves inadequate to sustain someone for the long haul in the demanding role of pastoral leadership. Pastors need the ongoing spirit of power and love from God that Paul speaks of. At least in part, this spirit of power comes from God through the office of ministry to which we ordain the pastor.

Pastors represent the whole church and its ministry

Pastors need the empowerment that comes from knowing that as they minister they represent the whole church, and that they also represent Jesus Christ. Pastors offer themselves to the church, but what they give is more than themselves, by virtue of their office.⁴

Why is it that when a church member is in hospital, the pastor must visit? Won't the visits of an ordinary sister or brother in Christ do? When a person is at death's door, why is it so important that the pastor visit and speak a prayer releasing the dying person into the tender mercy of God? Can't ordinary church members pray with someone on their deathbed? When the pastor visits, prays, preaches, or offers pastoral care, then the whole church visits, prays, preaches, or offers pastoral care. When the pastor visits the sick or the dying, we intuitively recognize that this visit is different from the visits of ordinary church members, as impor-

When the pastor visits someone who is sick, dying, or in crisis, then the whole church visits, and Jesus Christ visits. The pastor's presence brings the resources of the church and the Christian faith and the healing power of Christ into the situation of need.

tant as such visits are. When pastors offer themselves in service to the church, by virtue of their office what they give is more than themselves and their own gifts and abilities.

The pastor fills a powerful symbolic and representative role. We ordain a pastor so that the pastor will represent and embody the whole church and its ministry, and so that the pastor will represent Jesus Christ the Lord of the church. When the pastor visits someone who is sick, dying, or in crisis, then the whole church visits, and Jesus Christ visits. The pastor's presence brings the resources of the church and the Christian faith and the healing power of Christ into the situation of

need. In their ministry, pastors give more than themselves by virtue of the office that we ordain them to.

For this reason the pastor need not necessarily be the most intelligent, wise, sensitive, loving—or even the most pious—person in the congregation. Pastors should be gifted in these areas and demonstrate depth in Christian character, but ultimately a pastor's ministry does not rest only on his own gifts. Pastoral ministry is rooted in the claim of Jesus Christ and his church on the pastor, a claim symbolized by ordination. The paradox of

pastoral ministry is that the pastor is like any other church member, a frail human being in need of God's grace and healing power, and yet the pastor is set apart to serve and lead on behalf of Jesus Christ and his church.

Ministers equip others for ministry

The ministry for which we are ordaining Melissa does not belong to her. It belongs to the church and to Jesus Christ, and so

We call and ordain pastors not so that there will be less work for the rest of us but so that the pastors will help equip all of us for ministry and help set free the gifts that Christ bestows on us.

Melissa's ministry finds its proper place among the ministries of many others here at Springstein who lead worship, preach, offer pastoral care, and minister in countless other ways. It is fitting that we read two scripture texts today. Second Timothy 1:3–7 relates more closely to Melissa's call to pastoral ministry, while Ephesians 4:11–16 reminds us that ministry belongs to the whole church. Christ has gifted believers in a variety of ways to equip them for ministry so "that some

would be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, some pastors and teachers" (Eph. 4:11; NRSV). All these gifts and ministries serve the same end: to build up the unity, faith, and witness of the church. We call and ordain pastors not so that there will be less work for the rest of us but so that the pastors will help equip all of us for ministry and help set free the gifts that Christ bestows on us.

So, what are we doing here today in this ordination service? We are claiming Melissa Miller for the ministry of the church and the ministry of Jesus Christ. We are affirming her calling from God, and we are inviting God's blessing on her and her ministry. But this ordination service is also about us as a church. By acknowledging Melissa's calling, we also acknowledge and embrace our own calling to be the church, the body of Christ that ministers in his name. So Paul's words are addressed to all of us, "for God did not give us a spirit of cowardice, but rather a spirit of power and of love and of self-discipline" (2 Tim. 1:7). Thanks be to God for the gift of this Spirit.

Notes

¹ See John A. Esau, "Recovering, Rethinking, and Re-imagining: Issues in a Mennonite Theology for Christian Ministry," in *Understanding Ministerial Leadership: Essays*

Contributing to a Developing Theology of Ministry, ed. John A. Esau (Elkhart, IN: Institute of Mennonite Studies, 1995), 14. I am indebted to John Esau's insightful article for many of the ideas in this sermon.

² For an excellent discussion of this point, see David Buttrick, *Homiletic Moves and Structures* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1987), 449–52.

³ Esau, "Recovering, Rethinking, and Reimagining," 15–16.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 15.

About the author

Dan Epp-Tiessen teaches Bible at Canadian Mennonite University, Winnipeg, Manitoba. A member of Charleswood Mennonite Church, he appreciates invitations to preach in a variety of congregations. This sermon was given on the occasion of Melissa Miller's ordination as pastor of Springstein (Manitoba) Mennonite Church, October 18, 2009.