

Sacramental Ministry and Ordination in the United Methodist Church

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In this paper, I seek to explore and develop the following claims: first, John Wesley held throughout his ministry that sacramental ministry in the church required ordination as a presbyter/elder. Second, United Methodists and our predecessor denominations have supported the same in our ordering of ministry and church life. Third, the 20th century theological convergences in the ecumenical movement at bi-lateral, national, and international levels have made understandings of the relationship between sacramental ministry and ordination central in discussions of full communion between denominational families and any decisions made about the relationship between sacramental ministry and ordination must account for these convergences and agreements.

*1. Wesley, sacrament and ordination*¹

Throughout his ministry, John Wesley was concerned that his Methodist movement be a renewal movement within the Church of England. He had intended “refashion the English Church according to the apostolic ideal, restoring the sacrament of Holy Communion to the place that it had occupied in the life of the early Christians”—that is, every Lord’s Day.”² We know from his journals and letters that the question of separation from the Church of England presented itself on a regular basis and that, each time it did so, Wesley was compelled, at least for political reasons, to charge his preachers and congregations to remain within the Church. Wesley attempted to preserve this relationship by establishing a policy never to allow Methodist preaching services to conflict with the scheduled times of Sunday worship in the Church of England and to insist that those within the Methodist movement remain part of the sacramental life of that Church.³

Whatever Wesley’s best intentions, they did not reflect the actual situation for the Methodist societies or their changing relationship to the Church of England. As the societies grew both in size and influence among the English people, Methodists grew increasingly distrustful of receiving the sacraments from clergy they considered unworthy of such responsibility. As one writer has stated, “Perhaps Wesley feared the people were no longer ‘affected by the rites’ in the Church of England, due to the poor state of the clergy. If they could be brought back to a living faith, then the sacraments could again have their pre-eminent place in the Christian life, and be meaningful as a ‘means of grace.’”⁴ This distrust took on a more political character in the newly forming United

¹ Portions of this section were initially developed in collaboration with Robert Carroll Shoemake as part of a working paper for the Minnesota Annual Conference as it sought to understand why the ordination service itself is most appropriately a Eucharistic celebration.

² V. H. H. Green, *The Young Mr. Wesley* (London: Edward Arnold Ltd, 1961), 30.

³ Though, even here, Wesley made some exceptions in his own practice, changing the worship time at the Foundry to coincide with that of the Church. See Henry Rack, *Reasonable Enthusiast: John Wesley and the Rise of Methodism* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1992), 499.

⁴ Linda Durbin, “The Nature of Ordination in Wesley’s view of the ministry,” *Methodist History*, 9.3 (April 1971): 12.

States as it sought to separate itself from both the state and the Church of England. The result was that the Methodists in England did not receive the sacraments with any frequency, unless, of course, John or Charles presided; sacramental practice with Methodists in America was even more infrequent, due to the lack of ordained ministers, and often limited to the quarterly meetings.⁵

Pressure for ordained clergy within the Methodist movement who could provide the sacraments to the Methodist societies in their own chapels began as early as 1755.⁶ Because he refused to “allow unordained preachers to administer the sacraments and had only his brother Charles to help him, Wesley sought ordination for some of his preachers. When Thomas Maxfield received ordination from an Irish bishop, the pressure in London was greatly relieved...but by 1764 Maxfield had left Wesley, and the pressure was greater than ever.”⁷ Wesley continued to seek ordination from one of the English or Scottish bishops for some of his preachers until 1784 and, even after his “extraordinary ordinations” for the American church, held to his conviction that he would not ordain his preachers to sacramental ministry “anywhere within the jurisdiction of the Church of England.”⁸

Although it appeared that Methodism could, in some way, continue to rely on the Church of England for the sacraments as long as Methodism remained an English phenomenon, we know this was not the case in either England or America. The situation in America proved to be the context in which Wesley finally had to make a decisive choice, for “by 1784 there were 83 unordained, itinerant preachers in America, caring for 14,998 members with no provision for the sacraments.”⁹ The American revolutionary war, and the events that preceded it, had insured a break from the Church of England and its sacramental life for the Methodist societies in America. This pressure for ordained ministers in American continued to grow, as Methodist historian Jesse Lee recounts in his 1810 history of American Methodism:

Traveling preachers in Virginia and North Carolina, seeing and feeling the want of the instituted means of grace among our societies...concluded, that if God had called them to preach, [God] had called them also to administer the ordinances of baptism and the Lord’s Supper.... After consulting together, the conference chose a committee for the purpose of ordaining ministers. The committee thus chosen, first ordained themselves, and then proceeded to ordain and set apart other

⁵ Lester Ruth observes, “as early as 1772 Methodists were clamoring for their preachers to administer the sacrament,” but most “remained faithful to the ‘old plan,’ that is, a refusal to administer the sacrament without ordination and a consequent reliance upon Church of England priests.” Ruth also observes that “With creation of The Methodist Episcopal Church in December 1784, in which Wesley provided the American preachers with an ordination that they considered fully legitimate, the connection between quarterly meetings and sacramental administration became so strong that the meetings came to be the most regular settings for the Lord’s Supper.” Lester Ruth, *A Little Heaven Below: Worship at Early Methodist Quarterly Meetings* (Nashville: Abingdon / Kingswood, 2000), 118-119.

⁶ See Albert Outler’s introduction to Sermon 121 “Prophets and Priests” in *The Works of John Wesley*, vol. 4, *Sermons* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1987), 72.

⁷ Colin Williams, *John Wesley’s Theology Today* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1960), 223.

⁸ Outler, Introduction to Sermon 121, 72. Wesley himself continued to express an understanding of his preachers as “extraordinary messengers” within the Church and, as such, not requiring ordination. *Ibid.*, 79.

⁹ Williams, 225.

preachers, that they might administer the holy ordinances to the church of Christ.¹⁰

Wesley finally succumbed to this pressure, describing in his letter to “Our Brethren in America” how he had “appointed...Richard Whatcoat and Thomas Vasey to act as elders among them, by baptizing and administering the Lord’s Supper...I also advise the elders to administer the Supper of the Lord on every Lord’s Day.”¹¹ Wesley then proceeded to ordain Coke, writing on Coke’s ordination certificate the following justification:

“Whereas many of the people...of North America who desire to continue under my care...are greatly distressed for want of ministers to administer the Sacraments of Baptism and the Lord’s Supper according to the useage of the said Church...there does not appear to be any other way of supplying them with ministry.”¹²

Three things are worthy of notice within these responses. First, throughout his work Wesley distinguished between the ministry of preachers and the ministry of the ordained elder. As he had made clear in his sermon “Prophets and Priests” (or “The Ministerial Office”):

In 1744, all the Methodist preachers had their first Conference. But none of them dreamed that the being called to preach gave them any right to administer sacraments. And when that question was proposed, “In what light are we to consider ourselves?” it was answered, “As *extraordinary messengers*, raised up to provoke the *ordinary* ones to jealousy.” In order hereto, one of our first rules was—given to each Preacher—“you are to do *that part* of the work which we appoint.” But *what work* was this? Did we ever appoint you to administer sacraments, to exercise the priestly office? Such a design never entered into our mind; it was the farthest from our thoughts. And if any Preacher had taken such a step we should have looked upon it as a palpable breach of this rule, and consequently as a recantation of our connexion.¹³

Second, his purpose in ordaining Coke as an elder and in appointing Whatcoat and Vasey to “act” as elders,¹⁴ was for the primary purpose of the church’s sacramental life. An elder, in Wesley’s perspective, was always a “presiding” elder with a sacramental ministry (though the American church later turned the presiding elder into an administrative and superintending office largely separated from sacramental ministry). The *History of American Methodism* provides this summary:

The origin of the office of presiding elder in the Methodist Episcopal Church was intimately connected with the administration of the sacrament of the Lord’s Supper.... The office of elder was defined in the first Discipline as follows: “To administer the Sacraments of Baptism and the Lord’s Supper, and to perform all

¹⁰ As quoted in Douglas Adams, *Meeting House to Camp Meeting* (Saratoga: Modern Liturgy Resource Publications, 1981), 103.

¹¹ Outler, 83.

¹² Quoted in *The History of American Methodism*, vol. 1 (Nashville: Abingdon, 1964), 201.

¹³ Sermon 121 “Prophets and Priests” in *The Works of John Wesley*, vol. 4, *Sermons*, 79.

¹⁴ It is not clear in Wesley’s account whether his appointment to “act” as elders also included ordination

the other rites prescribed by our Liturgy.”¹⁵ At first every elder was a presiding elder and was one among the traveling preachers who had been ordained. His power to administer the sacraments was the distinctive feature of his office.¹⁶

In her comprehensive history of American Methodist worship, Karen Westerfield Tucker reinforces this connection between liturgical/sacramental presidency and ordination. She writes, “the first American Discipline” provided “a purely liturgical definition for the elder’s duty”, granting to the ordained elder an “unqualified capacity to baptize, celebrate the Lord’s Supper, solemnize matrimony, bury the dead, or perform any service of worship wherever there was need.”¹⁷ Westerfield Tucker’s comment leads to a third point: Wesley’s decision to ordain for the Methodists in America reflects his acknowledgement that, at least in America, communities of faith needed more than extraordinary messengers; they needed pastors.

Wesley’s *Sunday Service*, an adaptation of the *Book of Common Prayer* that Wesley prepared for Methodists in America, also demonstrates his understanding of the connection between the ordination of elders and sacramental ministry. This ordination service provides two specific statements regarding the elder and the sacraments. First, the superintendent asks the elder, “Will you then give your faithful diligence, always so to minister the doctrine and sacraments, and the discipline of Christ, as the Lord hath commanded?”¹⁸ (Contemporary UM practice locates similar questions in the “historic questions” prior to the “elder candidate’s” election to membership in the annual conference.) After answering this question, the elder is given the following charge, which remains in the UM ordinal today: “Take thou the authority to preach the Word of God and to administer the holy Sacraments in the Congregation. (When this is done, the Superintendent shall go on in the Service of Communion, which all they that receive Orders shall take together.)”¹⁹

In these statements, as well as in the documentation preceding them, we see that the overriding concern in Wesley’s decision to have any one of the Methodist preachers ordained as elder was for the primary purpose of providing the sacraments for the Methodist people. It is clear that if the role of a Methodist elder was (or is) primarily that of preacher, then there would be no reason to ordain. Preachers, as extraordinary messengers in Wesley’s system, were not intended to be pastors. It is also clear that, in the Methodist tradition, the office of elder was intimately tied to the priestly role of administering the sacramental life of the congregation and charge. This is seen as an addition to the prophetic preaching role that had been assumed by the lay preachers under the authorization and appointment of Wesley. Perhaps one of the problems we face today is that church has separated, or at least blurred, not only the distinction between preacher and pastor/priest, but also the relationships between pastoral ministry, sacramental

¹⁵ Both Wesley and the Church of England required not only ordination for sacramental ministry but also authorization or license to “read prayers”—to lead the daily offices of the church. The Church of England continues to have an office of “readers” of the liturgy, for which there is some parallel in United Methodist understandings of the lay reader and licensed preacher.

¹⁶ *History of American Methodism*, vol. 1, 465.

¹⁷ Karen Westerfield Tucker, *American Methodist Worship* (New York: Oxford, 2001), 259.

¹⁸ *John Wesley’s Prayer Book: The Sunday Service of the Methodists in North America*, introduction, notes, and commentary by James F. White (Cleveland, OSL Publications, 1991), 291.

¹⁹ *John Wesley’s Prayer Book*, 295.

ministry, and ordination. The result is that the elder has been returned to the position of preacher, at least in our operative theology.

2. *Sacramental ministry and ordination in The United Methodist Church.*

As Richard Heitzenrater has astutely noted, the problems we continue to experience in regard to the relationship between sacrament and ordained ministry are part of what seems to be an unresolved tension between being a reforming *movement* within the larger Church and being a church.²⁰ What may surprise many Methodists is the fact that there have been ministry studies in almost every quadrennium since 1944.²¹ At least as early as the uniting conference of 1939, the MEC recognized that authorizing persons “in charge” but unordained for sacramental ministry was “contrary to the practice of most Christian churches” and “at variance with historic Methodism.” As the bishops at the 1948 General Conference similarly noted, “having any unordained person sanctioned to administer the sacraments ‘involves us in an unsound and illogical position with respect to the means of the sacraments and the purpose of ordination.’” They argued that the solution to a short supply of elders was not the authorizing of the non-ordained, but the “recruiting and training an increased number of ordained ministers.”²²

This has not prevented the church from providing for “exceptional authorization” for such sacramental ministry, suspending this policy only from 1968-1976.²³ The 1968 uniting conference report, which brought about this suspension, sought to make clear that ordination is and signifies authorization to administer the sacraments.²⁴ The return of “exceptional authorization” has resulted, in Westerfield Tucker’s words, in a “weak ecclesiology...compounded by the lack of developed theologies of the sacraments and ordination.”²⁵ As James White explains, “In ordination, the Church articulates what it means by ordained ministry. For reasons of decency and order, the ordained fulfill some functions that other Christians do not (such as ministry of word and sacrament and order). In the ordination rite, the Church most fully expresses what it understands ordained ministry to be, and in ordaining, the Church clarifies its own experience and thought of ordained ministry.”²⁶ More bluntly stated, the licensing of a preacher is different from the ordination of an elder. The ordination of elders is to recognize, in the context of the connected/connectional church, the fullness of their responsibility in ministry for Word, Sacrament, and Order as well as their authorization and accountability to the bishop. (The ordination of deacons similarly recognizes the fullness of their responsibility for Word and Service.)

²⁰ Richard Heitzenrater, “Wesleyan Ecclesiology: Methodism as a Means of Grace” in S T Kimbrough, ed., *Orthodox and Wesleyan Ecclesiology* (New York: St Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 2007), 120.

²¹ Heitzenrater, “Critical Analysis”, 432.

²² Heitzenrater, “Critical Analysis”, 433.

²³ Westerfield Tucker, *American Methodist Worship*, 266.

²⁴ Heitzenrater, “Critical Analysis”, 435.

²⁵ Westerfield Tucker, *American Methodist Worship*, 267. What seems to be missing in the most recent discussions is any clear connection between the conversations about sacrament and ministry, as if *This Holy Mystery*, a document that has enabled several ecumenical partnerships to proceed, has no implications for the ordering of ministry or requires any accountability from those responsible for the ministries of oversight in the life of the church. (There is especially a lack of understanding about these connections, as well as a lack of awareness about *THM* itself, among district superintendents.)

²⁶ James White, *Sacraments a God’s Self-giving* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1983), 85.

These things are expressed clearly in the *Book of Discipline*, in the introductory material to the most recent edition of the United Methodist rites for ordination, and in the ordination liturgies themselves.²⁷ After exploring the connection between the ministry of all baptized Christians and the ministries of ordained Christians, the *Book of Discipline* spells out the specific ministries of each order, and identifies sacramental ministry as distinctive to the ministry of the elder (yet making provision for such ministry by those non-ordained persons appointed as pastors in local congregations). It states: “The ministry of the elder exemplifies and leads the Church in service to God in the world, in remembering and celebrating the gifts of God and living faithfully in response to God’s grace.” (§ 305) Further, the elder is “ordained to a lifetime ministry of Word, Sacrament, Order and Service. By the authority given in their ordination, they are authorized to preach and teach the Word of God, to provide pastoral care and counsel, to administer the sacraments of baptism and Holy Communion, and to order the life of the Church for service in mission and ministry.” (§ 332) And, “the responsibilities of elders are derived from the authority given in ordination.” (§ 340.1) Such responsibility and authority is located in the church as represented in the annual conference, is bestowed by the bishop, and accountable to the same: “Upon ordination, ordained deacons and elders become accountable to the whole church, to the community of the ordained, and to the order...of which they are a part. In the rite of ordination, ordinands express loyalty to The United Methodist Church, accepting its order, liturgy, doctrine, and discipline; accept the responsibility of accountability to the bishop and to the annual conference; and are charged with authority for leadership in their place of service.”²⁸ This authority is then given public liturgical expression in the act of ordination itself: “Take authority as an elder to preach the Word of God, to administer the sacraments and to order the life of the church.”²⁹

Similar statements concerning the relationship between sacramental ministry and ordination are found in *The United Methodist Book of Worship* and in *This Holy Mystery*, our statement on the meaning and practice of Holy Communion. The rubric in the *Book of Worship* states, “As Jesus gave thanks over (blessed) the bread and cup, so do the pastor and people. This prayer is led by the pastor appointed to that congregation and authorized by the bishop to administer the Sacraments there, or by some other ordained elder.”³⁰ *This Holy Mystery*, tracing much the same trajectory as has this paper, notes, first, that “Wesley insisted that there could be no sacramental ministry without ordination as an elder.” Second, “Elders administer the sacraments as authorized representatives of the church.” Third, acknowledging the need to provide for the sacramental life of congregations not served by an elder, “The church continues to seek the best ways to

²⁷ These rites are authoritative for the church by virtue of General Conference resolution 8015, adopted in 2004, in *The Book of Resolutions of the United Methodist Church 2008* (Nashville: United Methodist Publishing House, 2008). References to *The Book of Discipline* are to the 2008 edition.

²⁸ *Services for the Ordering of Ministry in The United Methodist Church* (Nashville: United Methodist Publishing House, 2008), 9.

²⁹ *Services for the Ordering of Ministry*, 29. The authority bestowed upon the deacon in ordination is to “proclaim the Word of God, and to lead God’s people to serve the world.” *Ibid.*, 26.

³⁰ *The United Methodist Book of Worship* (Nashville: United Methodist Publishing House, 1992), 28.

meet this need and still uphold the historic linkage of ordination and administration of the sacraments.”³¹

While these disciplinary, liturgical, and theological documents are open to revision every four years, they make clear, as is clear in our history, that Methodist tradition directly ties the act of ordination of the elder to the celebration of the sacraments. What we see, especially in the ordination rites is, in a way, the enactment of the close relationship between order, liturgy, doctrine and discipline. Thomas Trotter has put it this way: “The question of ordination is the question of the authority and integrity the church’s ministry. The gift of ministry, celebrated in the special ministry of those set apart for the care of the household, is of the essence of the church.”³² It is therefore puzzling that neither the *Book of Discipline* nor the ordination rites explain what it means to “authorize” persons for sacramental ministry apart from ordination as an elder (as bishops are permitted to do with local pastors) if, first, it is ordination as an elder in which this authority is bestowed and, second, as Trotter argues, if “the question of ordination is the question of the authority and integrity of the church’s ministry”. Our exceptional but increasingly normal authorization of those not ordained to sacramental ministry for such ministry suggests that we really do not believe this.

3. *Our ecumenical context and responsibilities.*

Both the *Book of Discipline* and the ordination service speak about the responsibility and accountability of the ordained. While it is very easy to believe that this accountability applies only within the Methodist household, such belief would be inconsistent with Methodist self-understanding and our ecumenical commitments. I return, therefore, to the concerns for ecumenical accountability expressed as early as the 1939 uniting conference. What those reports suggest is that, whether we think of ourselves as a reforming movement “now at liberty simply to follow the Scriptures and the primitive church”, as Wesley put it in his letter “To our brethren in America,”³³ or as an institutional church “organizing for mission,” we cannot act unilaterally in regard to the ordering of ministry. And, although the question of ordination remains a stumbling block in relationships between Protestant, Catholic, and Orthodox Christians, the tripping point has not been over the relationship between sacramental ministry and ordination but with the question of who (male/female and now homo- or heterosexual) may be ordained.

The theological convergence represented by the 1982 World Council of Churches document *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry* has had significant influence on the “official” sacramental theologies of its member churches. At the same time, the more recent ecumenical partnerships established between the UMC, ECUSA (with whom we have an agreement on “interim Eucharistic sharing” that has been endangered by our confusion about ordination and sacrament as well as by some of our haphazard Eucharistic practices), and the ELCA (with whom we are now in full communion, making possible cross-denomination appointments/calls) requires that we look at the question of sacramental ministry and ordination in a less parochial way. In these ecumenical

³¹ *This Holy Mystery: A United Methodist Understanding of Holy Communion* (Nashville: General Board of Discipleship, 2004), 31-32.

³² F. Thomas Trotter, “Ordination and the Unity of the Church,” <http://www.religion-online.org/showarticle.asp?title=505> (accessed 5 November 2009).

³³ Outler, 84.

partnerships, as in the larger WCC conversations, the question of sacramental ministry, and especially of Eucharistic presidency, is addressed in and as part of the ecumenical Church's understanding of the role and purpose of ordained ministry.

As Ted Campbell has argued, any polity we develop must be "consistent with our ecumenical commitments and the polity of our partner churches."³⁴ Campbell notes, therefore, that in receiving the ecumenical agreements expressed in BEM and COCU, the UMC "signaled [its] formal consent to an understanding of ordained ministry that is consistent with our historic polity and practice but is inconsistent with our current practice of authorizing nonordained persons to preside at Holy Communion."³⁵ The fifth world conference on Faith and Order, reported in *On the way to Fuller Koinonia*, makes the same point:

One question that needs to be faced in the development toward full Eucharistic fellowship concerns presidency at the service of word and sacrament. It is important that the president at the eucharist be as widely recognized as possible, not only within the celebrating community but also by other Eucharistic communities with whom *koinonia* is sought. All churches in fact have procedures for authorizing persons to preside at eucharist: most churches reserve this function to an ordained minister; others agree with this principle in general but allow that, in circumstances of pastoral need, a non-ordained person may act as presiding minister.³⁶

What do these ecumenical agreements, which the UMC has received and affirmed, say about sacramental ministry and ordination? The contemporary starting point for reflection on this question is *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry*, produced by the Faith and Order Commission of the World Council of Churches in 1982.³⁷

In the celebration of the eucharist, Christ gathers, teaches and nourishes the Church. It is Christ who invites to the meal and who presides at it. He is the shepherd who leads the people of God, the prophet who announces the Word of God, the priest who celebrates the mystery of God. In most churches, this presidency is signified by an ordained minister. The one who presides at the eucharistic celebration in the name of Christ makes clear that the rite is not the assemblies' own creation or possession; the eucharist is received as a gift from Christ living in his Church. The minister of the eucharist is the ambassador who represents the divine initiative and expresses the connection of the local community with other local communities in the universal church. (BEM, E29)³⁸

³⁴ Ted Campbell, "The Oral Roberts Option: The Case for Ordained Local Elders (and Local Deacons?) in the United Methodist Church" in Hendrik Peterse, ed., *The Orders of Ministry: Problems and Prospects* (Nashville: GBHEM, 2007), 35.

³⁵ Campbell, "The Oral Roberts Option," 33.

³⁶ Thomas F. Best and Gunther Gassmann, eds., *On the Way to Fuller Koinonia: Faith and Order Paper no. 166* (Geneva: World Council of Churches, 1994), 248.

³⁷ *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry*, Faith and Order Paper No. 111 (Geneva: World Council of Churches, 1982).

³⁸ Geoffrey Wainwright, active in the development and writing of *BEM* and is a continuing member of the Methodist-Roman Catholic bilateral dialogue, makes the following observation: [T]he general assumption

It is especially in the Eucharistic celebration that the ordained ministry is the visible focus of the deep and all-embracing communion between Christ and the members of his body. In the celebration of the eucharist, Christ gathers, teaches and nourishes the Church. It is Christ who invites to the meal and who presides at it. In most churches this presidency is signified and represented by an ordained minister. (BEM, M14)

The New Testament says very little about the ordering of the eucharist. There is no explicit evidence about who presided at the eucharist. Very soon however it is clear that an ordained ministry presides over the celebration. If the ordained ministry is to provide a focus for the unity of the life and witness of the Church, it is appropriate that an ordained minister should be given this task. It is intimately related to the task of guiding the community, i.e., supervising its life (*episkopé*) and strengthening its vigilance in relation to the truth of the apostolic message and the coming of the Kingdom. (BEM, Commentary on M14.)

Dr. Thomas Best, a Disciples of Christ minister and staff member of Faith and Order for the World Council of Churches, offered this comment:

The BEM ‘Eucharist’ section paragraph 29, and ‘Ministry’ paragraph 14, reflects what ‘ecumenical consensus’ there was—and is—today on the matter of lay presidency. ‘In most churches’ the president at the eucharist is a duly ordained minister. And this is understood as normative for ecumenical practice, with several comments made about how the ordained minister represents the presence of Christ in the service, and the unity which belongs to the church. Behind this lie thoughts about the importance of a church having identified, by formal decision, that person as a representative of both the church’s dependence on Christ and the church’s unity in Christ.³⁹

Best noted that the ‘consensus’ identified in these sections of *BEM* still stands, but that this consensus, is “not as inclusive as we would like” and that the issue needs further exploration to develop “a broader—and more nuanced—consensus on presidency at the eucharist.”

In an essay written a year after the publication of *BEM*, Geoffrey Wainwright argued, “To call ‘priests’ those who preside in the liturgical assembly and speak its prayers may therefore be regarded as *appropriate*, in a rather strong sense of the term. As a matter of historical fact, it is likely that, from the earliest days of the church, regular presidency of the worshipping assembly helped to reinforce the leading role of the minister in the whole life of the congregation, just as leadership in the general life of the

in about 99 per cent of Christendom, diachronically and synchronically, is that only presbyters (and bishops) preside at the eucharist...in *BEM* E29 (and to avoid any unnecessary argument) we simply said that ‘in most churches’ ‘this presidency [of Christ] is signified by an ordained minister’—and by ‘ordained minister’ we certainly did not include ‘deacon’, since that novel proposition by some in the UMC was not even on the horizon. Email correspondence with the author, January 29, 2003.

³⁹ Email correspondence between the author and Dr. Best, February 6, 2003.

congregation will have made such persons the ‘natural’ presidents of the worshipping assembly.”⁴⁰ There Wainwright pointed to a rather strong comment by Lesslie Newbigin, former bishop in the Church of South India. Newbigin asks

Why...is it important that the president should be ordained? Why is it not sufficient that he or she be authorized by a local manifestation of the Church—a congregation or a synod—to preside? The answer lies in the nature of the Eucharist itself. If in the Eucharist we are partaking of the body and blood of Christ, then it is in the whole Christ that we are partakers. We are not an autonomous body. We are not a ‘branch’ of an entity whose centre is elsewhere. It is the one holy catholic Church which is present in this local happening.”⁴¹

Newbigin presses the church to think more carefully about what ordination is:

Those who advocate the view that, as a matter of general principle, persons not ordained should be free to preside at the Eucharist, must address one question. What, then, is ordination? If, without ordination, a person is to do all things traditionally reserved to the ordained, what is ordination? If, in ordination, we are not authorizing a person to do what he or she would not otherwise be authorized to do, what are we doing?⁴²

I will return to Newbigin’s question of the relationship between authorization and ordination at the end of this paper.

A second document, *Eucharistic Worship in Ecumenical Contexts*, grew out of a World Council consultation held at the Ecumenical Institute in Bossey, Switzerland, in 1995. This consultation sought to consider the experience of churches since 1982 “from both the theological and the liturgical points of view, and in light of this to suggest principles for eucharistic celebrations in ecumenical settings.”⁴³

The celebration of [the eucharist in an ecumenical context] involves a participating assembly and many liturgical ministries. Its unity is best served by one person presiding, in order to serve the unity and flow of the whole liturgy and to draw forth the gifts present in the assembly.... A single ordained pastor, presbyter or bishop, whose ministry is recognized in a participant church, should preside. “In order to fulfil its mission, the church needs persons who are publicly and continually responsible for pointing to its fundamental dependence on Jesus Christ, and thereby provide, within a multiplicity of gifts, a focus of its unity.” [BEM, M8] Careful reflection should be given to this leadership. The presider may come from the leadership of a local host church. Ordinarily the presider will greet the assembly, preach, proclaim the thanksgiving and bless the assembly as

⁴⁰ Geoffrey Wainwright, “Reconciliation in Ministry” in Max Thurian, ed., *Ecumenical Perspectives on Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry* (Geneva: WCC, 1983), 131.

⁴¹ Lesslie Newbigin, “Lay Presidency at the Eucharist,” *Theology*, 99 (Sept.-Oct. 1996): 368.

⁴² Newbigin, “Lay Presidency at the Eucharist,” 369.

⁴³ Thomas Best and Dagmar Heller, eds., *Eucharistic Worship in Ecumenical Contexts* (Geneva: WCC Publications, 1998), 2.

they are sent. Presiding may sometimes take the form of the presider yielding place to another preacher or another leader of the eucharistic prayer. ‘Concelebration’, understood as group presidency by ordained ministers from different confessions, raises more ecumenical problems than it solves.⁴⁴

There are several points we might highlight in these statements. First, the sacramental ministry of Eucharistic presidency is signified by ordination: an ordained minister, whose sacramental ministry is recognized in a participant church, presides. In this context, “participant church” refers to those churches represented in the ecumenical gathering. Second, an ordained minister presides as a symbol and representative of the Church’s unity, even as our gathering continues in the midst of our division throughout the church. Third, the presider in one place may yield to another ordained person; that is, the ordained minister of one community may yield, in an act of hospitality and unity, to the ordained minister of another community. Put in United Methodist language, these documents assert that the ordained elder represents and makes visible connection—connection between the local congregation and the denomination and connection between the denomination and the ecumenical community. In this sense, sacramental ministry is not only a “liturgical” ministry but also a ministry of the “order” of the church.

When we shift our attention from the world church to somewhat more “local” ecumenical partnerships, we find similar claims concerning the relationship between sacramental ministry and the ordination of an elder/presbyter. With the ECUSA, there is enough agreement to warrant “interim Eucharistic sharing” but need for further conversation about the ordering of ordained ministry.⁴⁵ In our partnership with the ELCA, we have found enough agreement to warrant full communion. It is to these partnerships that I now turn.

a. The Episcopal Church USA. The Constitution and Canons of the Episcopal Church state the following: “The Rector of Priest-in-Charge shall have full authority and responsibility for the conduct of the worship and the spiritual jurisdiction of the Parish, subject to the Rubrics of the Book of Common Prayer, the Constitution and Canons of the Church, and the pastoral direction of the Bishop.”⁴⁶ The instructions regarding the Service of the Church in *The Book of Common Prayer*, which carry canonical status for the Episcopal Church by virtue of this previous statement and others within the canons, state: “The leader of worship in a Christian assembly is normally a bishop or priest. Deacons by virtue of their order do not exercise a presiding function; but, like lay persons, may officiate at the Liturgy of the Word, whether in the form provided in the

⁴⁴ *Eucharistic Worship in Ecumenical Contexts*, 32.

⁴⁵ Dr. Larry Pickens, general secretary of GCCUIC, quoting from the interim agreement with ECUSA, reports that “the official teachings in each church on the sacrament of the Holy Eucharist and Baptism are sufficiently compatible to enter into Interim Eucharistic Sharing,” but requires further discussion concerning “the historic episcopate and the ordering of ordained ministries within the apostolicity of the broader church.” See http://www.umc.org/atf/cf/%7BDB6A45E4-C446-4248-82C8-E131B6424741%7D/SOTC_PICKENS.PDF (accessed 6 November 2009).

⁴⁶ Canon III.9.5, “Rectors and Priests-in-Charge and Their Duties” in *Constitutions and Canons* (New York: Church Publishing, 2006), 84. http://www.churchpublishing.org/general_convention/pdf_const_2006/Title_III_Ministry.pdf (accessed 18 November 2009)

Daily Offices, or (when a bishop or priest is not present) in the form appointed at the Eucharist.”⁴⁷ The rite for the ordination of a priest, also in the *Book of Common Prayer*, details the liturgical and sacramental ministry of the priest: “You are to preach, to declare God’s forgiveness to penitent sinners, to pronounce God’s blessing, to share in the administration of Holy Baptism and in the celebration of the mysteries of Christ’s Body and Blood, and to perform the other ministrations entrusted to you.”⁴⁸ Following a prayer of consecration and the laying on of hands, the bishop then present the newly ordained with a Bible, saying “Receive this Bible as a sign of the authority given to you to preach the Word of God and to administer his holy Sacraments. Do not forget the trust committed to you as a priest of the Church of God.”⁴⁹

United Methodists and Episcopalians. The report of the Anglican-Methodist bilateral dialogue, *Sharing in the Apostolic Communion*, provides the “working foundation” for our current interim Eucharistic sharing with the Episcopal church. That report offers the following statement:

In every celebration of the eucharist, we believe the local community to be joined to the universal church. It is primarily because the risen Christ is the true president at each celebration of the eucharist that this is the case. Both our churches take care to see that the persons who preside in each community are duly authorized and commissioned so to do by those exercising *episcopate* in each church. In the Anglican communion this is always a presbyter or bishop; in the Methodist churches this is also the norm, though those exercising *episcopate* can authorize others so to do in particular situations.⁵⁰

This statement is important because for many years the ecumenical relationship between the Church of England and the British Methodist Church was, as Nicholas Taylor puts it, “more painfully frustrated largely on matters to do with ministry and the sacraments”⁵¹ because of Methodist practice of authorizing the non-ordained to preside in the sacraments. Thus, the guidelines for “interim Eucharistic sharing” between the United Methodist and Episcopal churches state:

In this covenant, the two traditions recognize each other as members of the one, holy, catholic, and apostolic church in which the Gospel is rightly preached. The resolution permits common, joint celebration of the Eucharist where it is deemed appropriate for the sharing of worship by congregations of the respective Churches. The adopted resolutions require that an ordained United Methodist elder or

⁴⁷ *The Book of Common Prayer* (New York: Church Publishing, 1979), 13.

⁴⁸ *BCP*, 531.

⁴⁹ *BCP*, 534.

⁵⁰ Jeffrey Gros, Harding Meyer, and William G. Rusch, eds. *Growth in Agreement II: reports and agreed statements of ecumenical conversations on a world level, 1982-1998* (Geneva: WCC Publications, 2000), 75.

⁵¹ Nicholas Taylor, *Lay Presidency at the Eucharist? An Anglican Approach* (New York and London: Mowbray, 2009), 138.

bishop and an ordained Episcopal priest or bishop stand together at the Lord's Table.⁵²

b. The Evangelical Lutheran Church in America. In 2008 the United Methodist General Conference approved the proposal to enter into full communion with the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America. This proposal, *Confessing our Faith Together*, was ratified by the ELCA at its general synod in the summer of 2009. Prior to this, in an August 1997 churchwide assembly, the ELCA adopted *The Use of the Means of Grace: A Statement on the Practice of Word and Sacrament*⁵³ (a document on which the United Methodist statement on the meaning and practice of Holy Communion was modeled). Two statements in this document are relevant to our discussion.

The Holy Communion takes place in the assembly

Principle 39

The gathered people of God celebrate the sacrament. Holy Communion, usually celebrated within a congregation, also may be celebrated in synodical, churchwide, and other settings where the baptized gather.

A pastor presides at the Holy Communion

Principle 40

In witness that this sacrament is a celebration of the Church, serving its unity, an ordained minister presides in the service of Holy Communion and proclaims the Great Thanksgiving. Where it is not possible for an extended period of time to provide ordained pastoral leadership, a synodical bishop may authorize a properly trained lay person to preside for a specified period of time and in a given location only.

When we look at the ordination rites of the ELCA, we find there, as we found in the United Methodist and Episcopal rites for the ordination of a priest/elder, a description of ordination as ordination to the ministry of Word and Sacrament. That rite, opening with a reminder of the ministry given to all Christians in baptism, then indicates to the ordinand “you are now to be entrusted with the office of word and sacrament in the one holy catholic church by the laying on of hands and by prayer.” In the laying on of hands, the presiding minister prays “pour out your Holy Spirit upon *name* and fill him/her with the gifts of grace for the ministry of Word and Sacrament.”⁵⁴ In its descriptions of what the ELCA calls “rostered ministry”, under which it includes ordained pastoral ministry, associates in ministry, diaconal ministries, and deaconesses, the ELCA describes ordained pastoral ministry as those who “serve with hearts filled with love and courage, to offer the hope of the sacraments and to lead the proclamation of the gospel.”⁵⁵ (United

⁵² [http://www.episcopalchurch.org/documents/Common_Guidelines\(1\).pdf](http://www.episcopalchurch.org/documents/Common_Guidelines(1).pdf) (accessed 12 November 2009).

⁵³ The full text of this statement is available at <http://www.elca.org/dcm/worship/worship/sacraments/umg.html>.

⁵⁴ Ordination ELCA 2009.pdf, pages 1 and 5. See <http://elca.org/~media/files/Worship/Rites/2009%20Rites/Ordination%200609.pdf> (accessed 12 November 2009).

⁵⁵ See <http://www.elca.org/Growing-In-Faith/Vocation/Become-a-Leader/Candidacy/Resources/Rostered-Ministry.aspx> (accessed 6 November 2009).

Methodists might see in this list of rostered ministries four “orders”, but the ELCA claims one ordained order, the ministry of Word and Sacrament.⁵⁶⁾

United Methodists and Lutherans. In the implementing resolution for *Confessing our Faith Together*, the United Methodist Church and the ELCA claim to hold the same view of ordination, “recognize the validity of our respective ministries including each other’s ordination of persons to the ministry of Word and Sacrament; the authentic diaconal service of ordained deacons in the UMC and rostered lay ministers in the ELCA”; and “recognize the full interchangeability and reciprocity of all ordained ministers of Word and Sacrament subject to the constitutionally approved invitation for ministry in each other’s churches.”⁵⁷⁾

Episcopalians and Lutherans. The Episcopal/Anglican and Lutheran churches have also entered into full communion with each other. What has been more recently said about the relationship between sacramental ministry and ordination in their agreements with the United Methodist Church, was also said in their agreement with each other. That document, *Called to Common Mission*, states:

We agree that ordained ministers are called and set apart for the one ministry of Word and Sacrament, and that they do not cease thereby to share in the priesthood of all believers. They fulfill their particular ministries within the community of the faithful and not apart from it. The concept of the priesthood of all believers affirms the need for ordained ministry, while at the same time setting ministry in proper relationship to the laity. The Anglican tradition uses the terms “presbyter” and “priest” and the Lutheran tradition in America characteristically uses the term “pastor” for the same ordained ministry.⁵⁸⁾

We can summarize the position on sacramental ministry and ordination in these bilateral relationships as follows: First, the sacramental ministry of Eucharistic presidency is signified by ordination. The presiding minister is an ordained minister, whether we identify that person as presbyter, priest, pastor, or elder. Second, while the ordained presbyter shares in the “ministry given to all Christians at baptism,” as do all orders of ministry, the distinctive ministry of the ordained presbyter is the ministry of Word and Sacrament. These claims are foundational for our agreements on Eucharistic sharing and full communion. Third, in our sister denominations the “pastor-in-charge” is ordained for the ministry of Word and Sacrament, regardless of educational credentials or financial compensation. Fourth, all three traditions also make provision for authorization for sacramental ministry in exceptional circumstances. Nevertheless, the ECUSA and ELCA are clear that such circumstances are truly exceptional. Though UMC policy intends such exception, in practice the exception is or has become normal, if not the rule, to the point that there is no one, ordained or lay, who might not receive authorization for sacramental ministry in the church. Therefore, if the ecumenical ecclesial norm is the

⁵⁶⁾ See *Confessing our Faith Together*, par. 55 and the Implementing Resolution. http://www.gccuic-umc.org/index2.php?option=com_docman&task=doc_view&gid=15&Itemid=235 (accessed 12 November 2009).

⁵⁷⁾ *Confessing our Faith Together*.

⁵⁸⁾ *Called to Common Mission: A Lutheran Proposal for a Revision of the Concordat of Agreement*, ¶ 7. See <http://www2.elca.org/ecumenical/fullcommunion/episcopal/ccmresources/text.html> (accessed 12 November 2009).

ordination of a presbyter for sacramental ministry and the distinctive ministry of the presbyter is sacramental, as our three traditions and the ecumenical documents of the past thirty years make clear, then we need to look more carefully at the ecclesiological consequences of our actions not only within our “internal” reflections on the ordering of ministry but also with our ecumenical partners. As the 2008 General Conference “conversation” on ministry states, “the extent of the practice [of authorizing persons not ordained as elders to celebrate the sacraments] in The United Methodist Church—with about one-third of pastoral charges in the United States being served by pastors not ordained as elders—is exceptional in the church ecumenical. It is a hindrance to mutual recognition of ministries among communions and traditions with whom United Methodism is in dialogue.”⁵⁹ If the ecclesial norm is the ordination of a presbyter for sacramental ministry, then we must press ourselves to more rigorously answer the question “What supports, rather the undermines, the unity, solidarity, and mission of the church?”⁶⁰ As Lutheran theologian Thomas Schattauer has argued, “whatever we do in regard to practices surrounding ministry, it needs to deepen both local [by which he means adaptable and diverse] and catholic [by which he means unified and ecumenically recognizable] commitments.”⁶¹

Schattauer’s argument leads us back to Newbigin’s question about the relationship between authorization and ordination for sacramental ministry. Newbigin’s question about this relationship is important, but easily overlooked because it is an ecclesiological question rather than one related to the economics of the local congregation or of educational qualifications for ministry, which questions are beyond the scope of this paper. When we separate authorization from ordination, as happens when United Methodist, Episcopal, and Lutheran bishops authorize non-ordained persons for sacramental ministry in exceptional circumstances, two things happen: first, authorization for sacramental ministry disappears from public view and, second, in doing so sacramental ministry becomes a “local” ministry separated from communion with the ecumenical church. In the language of the 2008 General Conference conversation, such authorization undermines United Methodist understandings of pastoral leadership as communal, connectional, and covenantal.⁶² Schattauer describes well both of these concerns. Authorization for sacramental ministry disappears from public view because

without ordination, there is no prayer of the people of God for the Spirit to show how the exercise of ministry is utterly dependent upon God and sustained in relation to a local assembly of God’s people; and there is no laying on of hands by

⁵⁹ *Study of Ministry Final Draft: Minutes of Several Conversations* (Nashville: General Board of Higher Education and Ministry, 2008), 16 (question 47). http://www.gbhem.org/atf/cf/%7B0BCEF929-BDBA-4AA0-968F-D1986A8EEF80%7D/studyofministryfinaldocument_web.pdf (accessed 26 August 2009). The same report states “the current *Book of Discipline* does not provide explicit justification for the sacramental authority of local pastors, and to say that it is a missional exception that simply extends from the ordination of elders or from the authority of the annual conference or the bishop is not adequate in a church in which a third of the pastors are not ordained as elders.” p. 17, question 49 (4).

⁶⁰ Taylor, *Lay Presidency*, 228.

⁶¹ Thomas Schattauer, “Ordination for all who exercise the ministry of Word and Sacrament: A practice and its implications,” 4. <http://archive.elca.org/ministry/essays/pdf/schattauer2.pdf> (accessed 24 August 2009)

⁶² *Study of Ministry Final Draft*, 9 (question 27).

bishop and pastors to show in a public way that the wider communion of the church is present in the local exercise of this ministry.⁶³

Authorization without ordination makes sacramental ministry a “local” ministry because while “[a]n administrative procedure may convey the authority to exercise the ministry of Word and sacrament, . . . it does not fully realize the way that authority stands ‘in relation’ —in relation to God and the people of God.” It fails to signify the “supra-local sign of communion exercised in the ministry of bishops and pastors.”⁶⁴ As Schattauer suggests, “the local assembly, however constituted, does not act on its own but rather in communion with other local assemblies. The ministry of the bishop in particular represents this supra-local dimension at ordination.”⁶⁵ This supra-local dimension, is I think, more evident in United Methodist ordinations, which occur in the context of annual conference session, than in Lutheran ordinations, which occur in the context of local congregations. Nevertheless, all three traditions have worked to strengthen this “supra-local dimension” by inviting ecumenical representatives, often bishops of other denominations or delegated representatives, to participate in the act of ordination.

4. Conclusion

My goal in this paper has been to explore the relationship between sacramental ministry and ordination by attending to the ways in which this relationship has been articulated by John Wesley, by the United Methodist Church and its predecessor denominations, and by the contemporary ecumenical movement. I have drawn on canonical and disciplinary statements as well as liturgical documents because in them we see, on the one hand, the unity of the church’s doctrine, discipline, and liturgical prayer and, on the other hand, the inconsistency between these and some of our practices. This inconsistency is made more complex by the ways in which we continue to justify, on largely economic grounds, the separation of appointment for pastoral leadership from ordination for pastoral sacramental ministry and, therefore, from the ministry of the elder. Finally, I have focused more attention on recent ecumenical statements because, as United Methodists, our responsibility to and accountability for these agreements are often given little more than a nod of acknowledgment at “official” levels of leadership in the church and largely ignored at local levels of leadership. As I suggested earlier in the paper, the sacramental ministry authorized in the ordination of a presbyter/priest/pastor/elder is more than a “liturgical” ministry; it is, finally, a ministry of the “order” of the church through which we make visible relationships to God, to local communities, and to the ecumenical Church as a communion of communions.

⁶³ Schattauer, “Ordination for all who exercise the ministry of Word and Sacrament,” 1.

⁶⁴ Thomas Schattauer, “A Liturgical Perspective on the Meaning and Function of Call and Ordination in the life of this Church,” 4, <http://archive.elca.org/ministry/essays/pdf/schattauer.pdf> (accessed 24 August 2009).

⁶⁵ Schattauer, “A Liturgical Perspective,” 4.