

The Ordering of Ministry: Apostolic, Representative, Collegial, and Universal

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Introduction

Ordination in the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) isn't just a box to check or a title to hang on the wall. It's a calling. It's a commitment rooted in the life and mission of Jesus Christ Himself. And it's not something we invent on our own - it grows out of the rich traditions of the church and the way Jesus shaped ministry from the start.

There are four dimensions that help us understand what this looks like in real life: Apostolic, Representative, Collegial, and Universal. These aren't just theological categories. They're like the backbone that keeps ministry strong and moving in the right direction. In this reflection, I want to walk through each one, not just from a theological standpoint, but from my own calling - what these look like in practice and how they shape the way I serve.

Apostolic

When we talk about the apostolic side of ordination, we're talking about the roots of ministry - roots that go all the way back to the mission and message of the apostles. These were real people, hand-picked by Jesus, and given a job: "As the Father has sent me, so I send you" (John 20:21). That wasn't just a one-time send-off for them. It's still happening today. Every ordained minister steps into that same ongoing mission.

This isn't about keeping a museum of old traditions. It's a living, breathing witness that moves with the Spirit and meets new situations head-on. The World Council of Churches puts it this way: "The ministry of the church is derived from the ministry of Christ and the apostles and is meant to serve the apostolicity of the church" (BEM §8). And our own Theological Foundations and Policies document reminds us: "The ordained enter the apostolic ministry... Ministers in every generation preach, celebrate, witness, and gather disciples in continuity with those early apostles" (TFPC, 2009, p. 12).

In our Disciples tradition, this starts with Scripture at the center. We preach it. We teach it. We help the church listen for God's direction and hold on to the essentials of the faith. Paul said it straight to Timothy: "Preach the word; be prepared in season and out of season; correct, rebuke and encourage-with great patience and careful instruction" (2 Timothy 4:2). That's what guarding the gospel and growing the faith looks like.

And here's the thing - apostolic ministry isn't just about what happens inside a church building. Jesus' last words in Matthew's Gospel are a go-order: "Go therefore and make disciples of all nations..." (Matthew 28:19-20). So this is about being sent - into neighborhoods, into hard conversations, into places where hope is thin - to show what God's love, justice, and reconciliation really look like.

At the end of the day, apostolic ministry keeps us humble. It's a calling, not an achievement. Our authority comes from Christ and the community He first called. As Jesus said, "Whoever wants

to be first must be last of all and servant of all” (Mark 9:35). Apostolic leaders lead like servants - following Jesus’ example, living out the apostles’ witness, and staying locked in on God’s mission in the world.

Representative

The representative side of ordination is about standing in a unique place - between Christ, the church, and the people we serve. Paul said it this way: “We are ambassadors for Christ, as though God were making his appeal through us” (2 Corinthians 5:20). That’s a huge responsibility. It means we don’t just speak for ourselves - we speak and act in a way that reflects Jesus.

And it’s not about status or power. It’s about embodying the church’s shared faith and mission. The WCC says: “Ordained ministers represent the community in the exercise of its ministry and in the service of God’s mission” (BEM §13). Our TFPCOM adds that representative ministry means “personally and publicly... pointing the church to its dependence on Jesus Christ, who is the source of its faith, mission, and unity” (TFPC, 2009, p. 12).

In worship, this comes to life - leading in prayer, preaching the Word, presiding at the table. It’s not just the minister doing these things for the people; it’s the minister gathering up the hopes, needs, and praises of the whole community and offering them to God. When we stand at the Table and say, “This is the body of Christ, broken for you,” we are speaking on behalf of the church and of Christ Himself.

And it’s not limited to Sunday mornings. The representative role often extends into the public square - showing up at community events, speaking for justice, or standing with those who are hurting. Jesus modeled it perfectly in Matthew 25:40 when He said, “Whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me.” That verse reminds us that representation isn’t symbolic; it’s lived out in tangible acts of compassion, advocacy, and presence.

Inside the church, it’s pastoral. It’s walking with people in their high moments and in their heartbreak. It’s helping the community hear God’s leading. It’s being there when words fail, and simply sitting in shared silence. Representative ministry also calls for careful listening - because speaking on behalf of the church requires hearing the voices within it.

And it’s always grounded in humility and accountability. As the WCC reminds us, “The authority of the ordained ministry is to be exercised in a spirit of service” (BEM §18). We don’t represent Christ for our own sake, but for the sake of others - to make Him visible in how we live, how we lead, and how we love.

Collegial

The collegial side of ordination reminds us: ministry is never a one-person show. From the start, Jesus sent His disciples out in pairs (Mark 6:7). Paul wrote about the church as a body with many parts (1 Corinthians 12:12–27). Ministry is built to be shared.

Collegiality means ministers working shoulder-to-shoulder - with other pastors, with lay leaders, with the whole church. The WCC says it like this: "The ordained ministry is exercised in collegiality and shared responsibility" (BEM §26). TFPCOM adds, "No minister is independent or autonomous... All are to build up the Body of Christ in love. Lay and Ordained are partners together in governance and witness" (TFPC, 2009, p. 13).

In the Disciples tradition, our structure reflects this. Ministers are connected to regional and general bodies. We're accountable to each other. We learn from one another. This web of relationships guards against isolation and keeps leaders from drifting toward control-driven leadership.

Collegial ministry shows up in simple, everyday ways - planning worship as a team, sharing resources, mentoring younger ministers, and working together on community outreach. It also shows up in moments of crisis, when churches rally together for relief work or prayer vigils. In both ordinary and urgent moments, collegiality is a strength multiplier.

Jesus modeled this when He washed His disciples' feet (John 13:15). He didn't just tell them to serve - He showed them. True collegial leadership is service-oriented, mutual, and humble.

Collegiality also stretches beyond denominational lines. The ecumenical movement calls us to work with Christians from other traditions, seeking unity so "the world may believe" (John 17:21). This doesn't mean erasing differences, but recognizing the shared mission of Christ and celebrating the diversity of gifts God has given His people.

In my own ministry, I've seen collegiality breathe life into projects that would have been impossible alone - from multi-church service days to shared pastoral care for a struggling congregation. Collegiality reminds us that the mission of God is too big for any one person or group to carry alone.

Bottom line: collegial ministry is about mutual support, shared leadership, and collective mission. When we lean on each other's strengths, the whole church is stronger.

Universal

The universal aspect of ordination pulls our focus beyond our own walls. The church is bigger than our congregation. It's bigger than our denomination. It's part of the one, holy, catholic, and apostolic church across time and space - a body of believers stretching across cultures, languages, and centuries.

The WCC says: "The ordained ministry serves the unity and mission of the whole church" (BEM §32). TFPCOM puts it plainly: "Those Ordained are representative ministers of the Church Universal... called to point out the community of Jesus Christ, to work to bring new expressions of the one universal Church into being" (TFPC, 2009, p. 13).

This means we carry a global vision. We remember Jesus' Great Commission: "Go and make disciples of all nations" (Matthew 28:19). We embrace Paul's reminder that there is "one body

and one Spirit... one Lord, one faith, one baptism" (Ephesians 4:4–6).

For Disciples, this shows up in our commitment to ecumenism, global mission, and social justice. It means building relationships across traditions, cultures, and borders. It means refusing to let our vision shrink to just "our" church or our own personal preferences.

The universal call also asks us to be learners. We gain wisdom from Christians in other cultures, who often face challenges - and display faith - in ways that stretch and inspire us. We stand with believers around the world - celebrating with them, suffering with them (1 Corinthians 12:26), learning from them.

It also reminds us of the hope we share. The church is not bound by geography, language, or culture. We're part of something bigger - a great cloud of witnesses, past and present, who have lived out this mission. When we remember that, our local ministry feels connected to a much larger story.

And practically, the universal dimension means praying for the persecuted church, engaging in global partnerships, supporting missionaries, and being aware of the spiritual and material needs of believers in other places. In short, the universal aspect reminds us: ministry is local and global. It's about the neighborhood and the nations. It's about being faithful here while remembering that God's kingdom has no borders.

Conclusion

These four aspects - Apostolic, Representative, Collegial, and Universal - aren't just categories in a policy document. They're lived realities.

Apostolic keeps us rooted in the gospel and sent into the world. Representative reminds us who we serve and why. Collegial ensures we walk with others in shared mission. Universal lifts our eyes to the big picture of God's global church.

Hold them together, and ministry stays balanced, focused, and alive. And that's exactly the kind of ministry I'm committed to living out.