

Are We All “Ministers?”

1 Peter 2:1-10

Lethbridge Mennonite Church

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We are on to our sixth out of eight questions in our 2025 Faith Questions sermon series, the series where your questions set the preaching agenda for our church.

This week our question is about something it says—and *has* said—on our church bulletin for a long time.

Ministers: Each One of Us

“What’s behind this statement,” this week’s questioner wanted to know. “Beyond the historical context, is there a specific reason our church has proclaimed this?”

Good question (I say that a lot in these sermon series).

I remember this statement being on our church bulletins when I arrived here at Lethbridge Mennonite Church back in 2011.

I remember thinking that it expressed something true and important about Anabaptist understandings of things like the priesthood of all believers, a suspicion of hierarchies and structures of power, and of the giftedness of all followers of Jesus.

I remember thinking, “That’s fine, but I’m not sure it necessarily needs to be in our bulletins every week.”

But I didn’t want to ruffle feathers. A wise mentor once told me that you shouldn’t make any significant changes in your first year of ministry, you should just get to know the church. So, I left it.

That was almost fourteen years ago. I honestly hadn’t thought about the statement much over the years.

This week's question gave me a good chance to dig into both the history of our church and a bit of our Anabaptist theology of ministry.

I decided that the most obvious place to start would be with the pastors who preceded me. I figured that the most likely candidate for a statement like this would be Fred Unruh.

I sent Fred a quick email inquiring as to whether this practice began with him. Here's some of what he said in response:

I thought you originated this line. I don't remember us using it while I was the pastor.

I like the thought that the work of the church belongs to us all. We have a relaxed view about who can be a deacon, or a church chairperson, etc....

Perhaps by saying everyone is a minister we are encouraging everyone to use their gifts freely and with our encouragement.

Well, some good insights. I certainly agreed with that last line. But strike one.

I moved on to my immediate predecessor, Ruth Preston Schilk. Evidently, it wasn't her either. Here's part of her response:

I don't know the history or the "why" of this practice at LMC.

I have seen [it done] in other Mennonite congregations.... The Pastor's name is printed, and Ministers are listed as: the Congregation. I think this practice comes from an Anabaptist extraction of the "priesthood of all believers," implying that we, as Christians, are ALL involved in Christ's ministry.

She went on to say that she saw both pluses and minuses in this statement. She suggested contacting Harold Peters-Fransen who served as interim pastor between her time and mine. So, again, interesting, helpful. But strike two.

I let it sit for a while. My schedule got busier and there were other things to prepare.

Then, this week when I was in Winnipeg for the CMU Pastor's Conference, I remembered that Harold Peters Fransen, lived in Winnipeg.

I happened to run into the MC Manitoba executive minister in the hallway on Tuesday and asked if he had Harold's contact information. As it happened, they attend the same church. So, now I could finally solve the riddle!

I contacted Harold immediately. Here's some of what *he* had to say:

It predates me. I would hunch Fred despite his denial. I always bristled at it—and it's not unique to Lethbridge Mennonite. Ordination has often been rejected on this basis.

He quoted a seminary president who said that many educated Mennonites of the boomer generation embraced this phrase as a way to be anti-clerical and perhaps anti authority.

Strike three. I was out. Not to mention thoroughly confused.

Nobody seemed to want to take responsibility for this statement in our bulletins. And everyone seemed to have at least somewhat mixed opinions about it!

Well, Friday morning I trudged upstairs in the church to do what I should have done right from the start. All the conversations with former pastors were good, and I made some nice connections, but I should have just looked through our bulletin archives.

Find the date, find the answer.

I opened the filing cabinet and began to pore over years of bulletins. And eventually, at long last I came to the end of my journey and found the answer I had been looking for.

The first Sunday where this statement appears on our church bulletin was...

March 9...

The First Sunday of Lent...

2014.

For those, like me, who struggle with math, that's nearly three years *after* I started as pastor at Lethbridge Mennonite Church.

I was... well, astonished. Amused. Embarrassed.

Fred, I guess you win the prize. Your suspicions were confirmed.

I humbly submit this story to you as item number “I’ve lost count now” in the, “In case you should ever be tempted to think too highly of your pastor” file.

In what remains of my sermon, I want to make three points in response to this story.

The first and most obvious point has to do with human limitation and fallibility. I have supplied you with rich evidence of this this morning.

For starters, it seems that I have an abysmal memory. Actually, it’s worse than that. Not only did I *fail* to remember something true (that I had put the statement on our bulletins); I also very clearly “remembered” things that had not happened.

I “remembered” seeing this statement on our bulletins when I started here and constructed a whole narrative in my head that had zero basis in reality.

(There’s a whole field of studies on false memories and how they can be implanted in people’s minds, which I will now never need to read because I know it’s embarrassingly true.)

I was *completely* convinced that this statement on our bulletin had preceded me. I figured that I was just preserving some prior decision way back in church history land—a decision that I had mixed feelings about, but I could live with.

And yet, the decision had evidently been mine.

The Irish poet and theologian Pádraig Ó Tuama once said: “We do not tell stories as they are; we tell stories as we are.”

I think the quote expresses something true about us as human beings. We tend to tell stories, interpret events, reflect on history in ways that reflect our present understandings of ourselves, or what we want to be true, or what we hope is true.

We are all prone to thinking, remembering, telling stories in self-interested ways, in ways that preserve our sense of who we are and what we value, etc. We are prone to this even when we earnestly want to be truth-tellers (as we discussed last week).

I can assure you I had no desire to deceive anyone about my role in the statement on our bulletin as I marched off on my journey of discovery! I was simply wrong.

And, again, this is all of us. If you leave today's service thinking, "Well, thank God I'm not as bad as the pastor!" I would humbly submit that you may have allowed an opportunity for self-reflection to pass you by. ☺

Basic to any authentically Christian theology of human nature is that none of us sees the truth entirely, that self-interest runs through all our faculties, and that human sinfulness affects even our ability to know (and remember!) things in the world.

I can think of few more crucial insights for our cultural moment than this. Everywhere we turn, it seems like people are demanding moral perfection—from the past, from institutions, from individuals—and if we don't see it (at least our preferred, usually highly inconsistent version of it), we will tear everything down (including one another).

Without a theology of human nature that acknowledges our limitations, we will continue to see the ugly mercilessness that shoots through our cultural discourse (even in the church).

On a less negative note, our limitation and fallibility as human beings means that we *change* over time... and this can be a good thing

I did some snooping around in my other files from 2014 to see what might have been going on at that time, something that might have led me to put this statement on our bulletins.

It seems that 2014 was also the year that I was trying to articulate and justify my reasons for not pursuing formal ordination.

I wrote a big document full of bible verses and rationales to our deacons and church council articulating why ordination reflected a hierarchical understanding of ministry, how I didn't want to have any unnecessary barriers between me and others in our community, how only Jesus was to be "revered" and I didn't ever want to be called "Reverend," etc.

It was very articulate. Very earnest. Very convinced.

And now, a decade later, I read it and found myself thinking, “Meh. Get over yourself.”

I wouldn’t write that document today. My views have changed over a decade, however subtly.

I have encountered the good things that clear lines of hierarchy can do. I’ve lived through COVID without having a bishop to default to! I’ve seen the limitations of flat church structures where people can be afraid to simply lead. I’ve discovered that ordination is at least as much about the community that wishes to formally set someone aside for pastoral leadership as it is about the individual themselves.

And Harold Peters-Fransen was right. Mennonites can at times be too suspicious of authority. Authority can be abused, certainly, but it can also be a good and necessary thing when used wisely.

So, in a world where we are prone to errors, where we have profound limitations as human beings, and where what we experience affects how we think about anything, we will change over time.

This is a good thing! If I believed everything at 49 that I thought when I was 19, I think I would have failed in some important ways.

Now, I should add that change isn’t *always* a good thing. Our awareness of our own limitations and fallibility should also lead us to be honest that some of our changes can go in the *wrong* direction, too.

But changing our minds should not be assumed to be a weakness or a deficiency. It could simply mean that God has led us through some things that have modified how we think about God, ourselves, and the world.

Ok, so there’s the “theology of human nature” part of the sermon. I’m going to move quicker on these last two points.

The second point I took from this week’s question and my memory adventures is to always be asking a simple question: Does practice x have a history or a reason?

Whether it's the things we do and say as a church, the practices we embrace, the things we put on our bulletins, the ways in which we structure ourselves, we should always be open to this question.

If our only reason for doing something is “because we’ve always done it that way” then perhaps it’s time to do some work, some rethinking, some reframing. At the very least, to remind ourselves of a good reason we may have forgotten.

This week’s faith question gave me the opportunity to take something we do as a church—a statement on our bulletins—and ask, “Does this practice have a history or reason?”

Turns out, I was a bit confused about both the history *and* the reason! And even if there was a good reason for doing it ten years ago, that doesn’t mean it’s necessarily the best approach right now.

And it’s not just about bulletins. We should ask this, at least periodically, about many of the things that we do and say as a church.

Finally, I should touch on the theology that this much-maligned statement attempts to convey.

To do this, I’m going to quote myself. Here’s part of what I wrote in my 2014 “Thoughts on Ordination”:

[Anabaptists have] historically been very committed to the “priesthood of all believers” and a strong rejection of barriers between “clergy” and “laity...”

Theologically, I am *very* committed to the basic truth that all Christians—whether in the broader church, or in Lethbridge Mennonite Church—are gifted and called by God to do important work in the church. My role as pastor is significant, certainly, but I don’t think that pastors represent an “exalted” class of Christians or that the work that we do is inherently more important or worthy of public recognition than the Christian public school teacher or consultant or engineer or farmer or whatever.

Again, I probably wouldn’t word this exactly the same a decade later. My feelings on ordination are not as strong today as they were then.

But the second paragraph I would leave unchanged. We are indeed all gifted and called to serve one another in the church. To *minister* to one another.

The English word “minister” is used to refer to government officials and clergy in churches, it is used as a noun and a verb, but if you go back to the Latin origin of the word, it simply means “servant.”

Jesus famously said that “even the Son of Man came not to be served, but to serve” and that “whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant” (Mark 10:43-45). Clearly, this is his expectation for all his followers, then and now.

Ok, what about that phrase, “Priesthood of all believers.” It comes from the passage we heard read today from 1 Peter.

But I’m not sure it means what we often think it does.

“The priesthood of all believers” is not a first century way of talking about democracy (which is how it is often used in Mennonite circles).

It is not a way of saying that everyone gets a vote on the carpet colour. It’s not a justification for piling up committees or implementing flat authority structures to guard against potential abuses of power, important though any of these things may be.

In the simplest sense, a priest was someone who mediated God to everyone else. The ancient Israelite priests did this by managing the sacrificial system, by ritually offering atonement for sin and guilt, purification rites, etc.

In the Roman Catholic church, the priest mediates Christ to the parishioners, whether in consecrating and serving the Eucharist, or by hearing confession and offering penance and absolution.

When we say that we believe in a priesthood of all believers we are saying something profound and something simple: Every follower of Jesus can mediate the saving, forgiving, healing, cleansing presence of Christ to another.

I can’t help but note an irony here.

I have heard Mennonites appeal to the category of “The priesthood of all believers” to justify flat leadership structures and the idea that every decision, however trivial, should be made by a vote.

I have also heard Mennonites, when asked if they would be willing to serve communion on a Sunday morning—to mediate Christ to their sisters and brothers—say “Oh, I couldn’t possibly do that, that’s only for the pastor and deacons.”

I would submit that we have this entirely backwards. At least when it comes to how we use that language.

We are all gifted, all called, all capable of mediating Jesus to one another. This is at least some of what I think I was trying to get at in that bulletin statement.

Well, we’ve covered a lot of territory this morning.

But let’s end with that statement that’s been on our bulletins since the first Sunday of Lent, 2014.

I do believe that we are all ministers in the sense that we are all capable of and called to minister to one another in the body of Christ. I think most of us believe this, too.

I think it is in our church’s DNA to serve one another.

But I’m not convinced that this statement needs to be on our bulletin anymore. I’m going to give this some thought in the week ahead, especially now that I know that I was the one responsible for putting it there in the first place!

For now, may we mediate Christ to each other with love, with grace, and with hope. Today and every day. May we be “ministers,” servants of all.

Amen.

