

A RESOLUTION AFFIRMING THE ESSENTIAL ROLE OF COMMISSIONED MINISTRY AS AN AUTHORIZED MINISTRY OF THE UNITED CHURCH OF CHRIST

Submitted by:

Local Church Ministries (a Covenanted Ministry of the United Church of Christ), the Rhode Island Conference, the Penn Northeast Conference Board of Directors, and the North East Association of the Indiana-Kentucky Conference.

Background

Since the earliest days of the church, diaconal ministries have been a defining sign of what it means to be a Christian. As described in the “Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry” document of the Consultation on Church Union, the deacon represents the church’s role as servant in the world: “they exercise a ministry of love.” This diaconal role has been expressed in many ways through the centuries.

The act of commissioning first came to prevalence in the history of the UCC in the Congregational mission board, called the “American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions.” They “Commissioned” persons (co-Missionaries) to act on their behalf overseas. In another tradition of the church, the Evangelical Synod in its 1929 Constitution and Bylaws invited commissioning for lay workers in many categories, which were recognized as a “department of the Church” (such as teachers in parochial schools, deaconesses, lay missionaries, directors of religious education, parish workers or pastors’ assistants).

The 1934 Constitution of the Evangelical and Reformed Church defined a commissioned worker as “a member of the church who is called, trained and consecrated for specific full-time service in the church.” This description was incorporated into the Constitution and Bylaws of the United Church of Christ. In 1983-4, amendments replaced this designation with that of “Commissioned Minister.”

Introduction

Commissioned Ministry is one of the yet undiscovered treasures of the United Church of Christ. While it has approximate counterparts in other denominations, there is no other form of authorized lay ministry quite like it. For those who seek to be commissioned, it is the answer to a heartfelt longing to have one’s call to ministry recognized and affirmed. The United Church of Christ is blessed with many gifted and talented individuals serving in a variety of settings within the church who are living out a ministry, a unique and highly personal call from God, every day of their lives. It may not be one requiring word and sacrament as for ordination or licensing, but it is no less a ministry and no less important. And yet, “why don’t you want to be ordained” is often the first question a person seeking to be commissioned hears from his or her local pastor or Conference or Association committee on the ministry contact. The persons posing these questions always seem to forget that the answer to that question is one the person seeking Commissioning has long since wrestled with.

This lack of understanding of Commissioned Ministry, what it is and what it isn’t, and why people would seek it out is at the foundation of this resolution. The idea for the resolution originated with the Commissioned Ministers who are members of the Association of United Church Educators, most likely for the simple reason that many of those who are commissioned are educators in the church and educators tend to gather together to “pick each other’s brains” for ideas and resources to share.

These conversations led to a dawning realization that those of us who were commissioned had amazingly similar experiences in terms of what it was like to be commissioned and what we experienced once we were commissioned. The need for knowledge about commissioned ministry and the need for a true appreciation for what commissioned ministry can and does mean in our church and all its settings led those of us in Association of United Church Educators to come to believe that a General Synod resolution affirming Commissioned Ministry, and calling for heightened attention within the United Church of Christ, was in order, if not long past due. As we expanded our conversations to other groups, the enthusiasm for this project grew, support increased, and here we are.

Commissioned ministries are vocational ministries. They could include calls to ministries such as Christian education, youth work, outdoor ministries, music, administration in a church-related setting, parish nursing, visitation, and spiritual direction. All of these ministries are vital throughout the church. Each of these ministries serves an essential and unique role in preparing and empowering the people of God to come to the sacraments. They are the embodiment of the servant ministry of Christ.

Summary

In summary, this resolution affirming the essential role of Commissioned Ministry as an authorized ministry in the United Church of Christ seeks to recognize and affirm the call to Commissioned Ministry for those seeking it. It also seeks to provide the impetus needed for the polity structures of the church, including Parish Life and Leadership in the Local Church Ministries as well as Conferences and Associations and local churches, to deepen their understanding and appreciation of commissioned ministry so that they are enabled and empowered to assist and support those seeking to be commissioned, and those seeking to add or retain commissioned ministers on staff.

WHEREAS in the Letter to the Church at Ephesus we are told “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;” (Ephesians 4:11-12), and

WHEREAS in Paul’s first letter to the Church at Corinth he says, “now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit; and there are varieties of services, but the same Lord; and there are varieties of activities, but it is the same God who activates all of them in everyone. To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good;” (1 Corinthians 12:4-7), and

WHEREAS the Constitution of the United Church of Christ “recognizes that God calls the whole Church and every member to participate in and extend the ministry of Jesus Christ by witnessing to the Gospel in church and society;” (Article VI, paragraph 20)), and

WHEREAS “the United Church of Christ recognizes that God calls certain of its members to various forms of ministry in and on behalf of the church for which ecclesiastical authorization is required by the church; (Constitution and Bylaws, Article VI, section 21), and

WHEREAS “Commissioning is the act whereby the United Church of Christ, through an Association, in cooperation with a person and a local church of the United Church of Christ, recognizes and authorizes that member whom God has called to a specific church-related ministry which is recognized

by that Association, but not requiring ordination or licensing;” (Constitution and Bylaws, Article VI, paragraph 27), and

WHEREAS professionals in the areas of Christian education, parish nursing, church music, church administration, worship and the arts, parish visitation, spiritual direction and other church ministries serve in positions in our congregations or in other settings of the church that do not require ordination or licensing, and

WHEREAS these ministries are vital for the faith formation, continued spiritual growth, and empowerment of the children, youth and adults of our local churches to live as a people of faith in an ever more volatile society; and are undertaken on behalf of the entire United Church of Christ,

THEREFORE BE IT RESOLVED that the Twenty-fourth General Synod reaffirms, emphasizes and celebrates the essential role of Commissioned Ministry as an authorized ministry in the United Church of Christ, as one which seeks to empower lay persons through the granting of ecclesiastical authority and standing to those individuals who have demonstrated a call from God to specific ministries, and for which ministries they have gained the credentials required by the authorizing Association or Conference; and in which ministries they will serve a calling body which will enter into covenant with the authorizing Association or Conference.

BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED that in so recognizing and affirming the essential role of Commissioned Ministry as an authorized ministry in the United Church of Christ the Twenty-fourth General Synod requests that the Parish Life and Leadership Ministry Team of Local Church Ministries works intentionally and as needed to increase knowledge and awareness about commissioned ministry with committees on the ministry in the various Conferences and Associations so that they are able to provide adequate assistance and support of candidates for Commissioned Ministry, including a period of mentorship and preparation which is patterned after the “In Care” process used with candidates for ordination, for the length of time deemed appropriate for the discernment and commissioning process to evolve effectively;

BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED that the Twenty-fourth General Synod requests that the Parish Life and Leadership Ministry Team of Local Church Ministries undertakes a diligent effort to determine how best to provide support and assistance on Commissioned Ministry to all interested parties, and to undertake a study of Commissioned Ministry as it is currently being lived out, in order to ascertain how best to provide that support and assistance;

BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED that the Twenty-fourth General Synod recommends that all professionals living out a call from God through their service in the various settings of the church in positions which do not require ordination or licensing should seek the recognition and authorization of their calls through the process for Commissioned Ministry, providing they possess the credentials deemed necessary for said authorization;

BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED that the Twenty-fourth General Synod recommends that all candidates for Commissioned Ministry be mentored effectively through the commissioning process by the local church and the Conference and/or Association; and that, once the process is completed and the

authorization granted, the standing of all Commissioned Ministers be recognized through such official channels as listings in Conference and Association directories, inclusion as appropriate in United Church of Christ Ministers' Associations, and the recognition of anniversaries of Commissioning for those with long periods of service.

BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED that the Twenty-fourth General Synod urges local congregations, Conferences and Associations and other settings of the church to consider Commissioned Ministers as viable candidates for those professional positions not requiring ordination or licensing and that the compensation for those positions be comparable for the level of credentialing and responsibility required, including such additional items as sabbatical time, access to pension and health plans, continuing education funds and housing allowance as appropriate.

Funding for this action will be made in accordance with the overall mandates of the affected agencies and the funds available.