

# Ministry and Communion in Christ: Reflections from the Experience of the Church of Christ in China

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## Introduction

1. A Chinese Call for a United Christian Church
2. Challenges to the Call to Christian Unity
3. Ministry in the Church of Christ
4. Renewal of Ministry for Communion in the Church of Christ
  - 4.1 Ministry for Communion: beyond doctrinal differences
  - 4.2 Ministry for Communion: beyond denominationalism
  - 4.2 Ministry for Communion: beyond nationalism

## Conclusion

## Introduction

After recalling the historic call, at the 1910 World Missionary Conference, in Edinburgh, for a united Christian Church in China, this essay reflects upon some of the subsequent challenges to Christian unity. In world Christianity

today, doctrinal disagreements and denominationalism do not play the same dominant roles, as in the past, in precipitating or overcoming divisions within Christianity. Nationalism and other political forces continue to complicate ecumenism, although not necessarily in the same ways as in the past. Consideration of these developments suggests the importance of renewal of ministry for promoting communion in the Church of Christ. Ministry is ordered to communion by proclaiming the Word of God, building up the body of Christ, and serving the faith community.

## 1. A Chinese Call for a United Christian Church

A Chinese pastor once offered the following reflections regarding Christian communion and mission:

As a representative of the Chinese I speak entirely from the Chinese standpoint [...]. Speaking plainly we hope to see, in the near future, a united Christian Church without any denominational distinctions. This may seem somewhat peculiar to some of you, but, friends, do not forget to view us from *our* standpoint, and if you fail to do that, the Chinese will remain always a mysterious people to you!<sup>1)</sup>

While expressing gratitude for what western missionaries had done in bringing the Gospel and establishing the Church in China,<sup>2)</sup> the speaker, conscious of the divided character of that Christianity, emphasized:

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1) Cheng Jingyi, untitled speech in *World Missionary Conference, 1910*, vol. 8, *Report of Commission VIII: Co-Operation and the Promotion of Unity*, (Edinburgh: Oliphant, Anderson and Ferrier, 1912), 196. Romanization of Chinese names varies; for the sake of consistency, regardless of the spelling used in the respective research sources, this paper adopts the *hanyu pinyin* system which is standard in China today.

2) Cheng Jingyi, untitled speech in *World Missionary Conference, 1910*, vol. 2, *Report of Commission II: The Church in the Mission Field*, (Edinburgh: Oliphant, Anderson and Ferrier, 1912), 352-353.

Speaking generally, denominationalism has never interested the Chinese mind. He finds no delight in it, but sometimes he suffers for it! [...] For after all it is not your particular denominations, nor even is it your particular Mission that you are working for, but the establishment of the Church of Christ in China [...].<sup>3)</sup>

The speaker was Cheng Jingyi(誠靜怡,1881-1939), then-assistant pastor at Beijing's Mishi Hutong(米市胡同) Church, associated with the London Missionary Society. The occasion was the World Missionary Conference, at which his speech was deemed by many as one of the most striking.<sup>4)</sup> The place was Edinburgh, Scotland, and the year 1910.

Establishment of the Church of Christ has made uneven progress, amidst periods of setbacks, in China during the intervening century and more. The early evangelical optimism of the last century, as expressed in the motto 'The evangelization of the world in this generation',<sup>5)</sup> would wane in the face of difficulties. Efforts to overcome divisions within Christianity also would yield only modest results.

Admittedly, Cheng was speaking most immediately of uniting Protestant denominational churches in a "Chinese Christian Independent Church (中華耶穌教自立會)," freed from direction by foreign missionary societies,<sup>6)</sup> not a communion of the entirety of worldwide Christianity. Call for an independent, indigenous Chinese Church of Christ was not identical with modern Christian ecumenism, so it would be unrealistic to expect such efforts to accomplish the goals of modern Christian ecumenism. Nonetheless,

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3) Cheng Jingyi, untitled speech in *World Missionary Conference, 1910*, vol. 8, 196-197.

4) Brian Stanley, *The World Missionary Conference, Edinburgh 1910*, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009), 108.

5) This was the watchword and title of a book by a World Missionary Conference organizer. John Raleigh Mott, *The Evangelization of the World in This Generation*, (New York: Student Volunteer Movement for Foreign Missions, 1900).

6) Peter Tze Ming Ng, *Chinese Christianity: An Interplay between Global and Local Perspectives*, (Leiden: Koninklijke Brill, 2012), 134.

speaking generally, Christians cannot forget that Jesus prayed to God, the Father, for his followers: “that they may all be one. As you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me.”(Jn. 17:21)<sup>7)</sup> The Gospel call to communion continues even as it confronts various challenges in different places and historical periods.

In China, the first half of the Twentieth Century was marked by continuing divisions, especially with rapid growth of independent Christian movements under local Chinese leadership. As one scholar observes: “It is indeed ironic that these indigenous churches and independent preachers, opposed to foreign denominationalism, insisted on maintaining their own separate identities.”<sup>8)</sup> After established foreign mission societies had dominated Church development in China throughout the Nineteenth Century, the Twentieth Century opened with greater growth by independent Chinese Protestant churches.<sup>9)</sup> Despite the desires of some Chinese Christians to overcome divisions, spread of the Gospel did not necessarily imply or culminate in greater Christian communion.

The second half of the Twentieth Century witnessed China’s expulsion of foreign missionaries, followed by political efforts to coopt and control religious elements and, subsequently, outright religious persecution during the Cultural Revolution(1966-1976). Driven underground, new indigenous denominations splintered.<sup>10)</sup> Along the way, all Protestant denominations were abolished officially in China, and all religions were required to register with

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7) All Bible citations are taken from the New Revised Standard Version.

8) Rolf Gerhard Tiedemann, “Comity Agreements and Sheep Stealers: The Elusive Search for Christian Unity among Protestants in China”, *International Bulletin of Missionary Research*, 36.1 (2012), 6.

9) Daniel H. Bays, “The Growth of Independent Christianity in China, 1900-1937”, in *Christianity in China: From the Eighteenth Century to the Present*, ed., Daniel H. Bays, (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1996), 308.

10) MJS and BAM, “Orderly Ritual vs. Uninhibited Religion”, *China Bridge*, July 2009.

the Three-Self Patriotic Movement, eliciting various levels of cooperation or resistance by Chinese Christians throughout the country.<sup>11)</sup> Whether deemed non-denominational or post-denominational,<sup>12)</sup> whether by choice or by political necessity, Protestant worship in China today is still far from united, with many more worshippers in independent Christian or ‘house church’ movements than in churches registered with the Protestant Three-Self Patriotic Movement Committee.<sup>13)</sup> Catholics in China have also suffered division, concentrated rather intensely around the issue of state intervention and the appointment of bishops.<sup>14)</sup> Catholics have not splintered into many independent churches as has been the case for their Protestant brethren, but then the latter has also increased in number even more rapidly. The 1980s and subsequent decades have seen an opening up for religion in China, with varying and shifting degrees of freedom as well as efforts to exert political control over faith movements. Nonetheless, the provocative call of over a century ago for a united Christianity seems no closer to realization today.

This present study intends neither to provide a comprehensive survey of Chinese mission history, nor to examine the current state of Church-State

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11) See, e.g., Peter Tze Ming Ng, “Church-State Relations in China: Three Case Studies” *International Bulletin of Missionary Research*, 39.2(2015), 77-80. For a historical narrative of the Catholic Church in China in the latter half of the Twentieth Century, see: John Tong, “The Church from 1949-1990”, in *The Catholic Church in Modern China: Perspectives*, ed., Edmond Tang - Jean-Paul Wiest, (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1993), 7-27.

12) See, e.g., Pilgrim W.K. Lo, “Luther and the Post-denominational Era of China” in 『神學與生活 (*Theology and Life*) 』, 25(2002), 41.

13) Estimates of the Christian share of China’s population vary greatly. Catholics total roughly 9 million, including 5.7 million people affiliated with the state-approved Catholic Patriotic Association and 3.3 million affiliated with unregistered Catholic congregations. Protestants total about 58 million, with roughly 23 million in churches aligned with the state-approved Protestant Three-Self Patriotic Movement and about 35 million independent Christians, according to *Global Christianity: A Report on the Size and Distribution of the World’s Christian Population*, (Washington, DC: Forum on Religion & Public Life, Pew Research Center, 2011), 98.

14) For a chronology of developments and survey of perspectives, see, e.g.: Edmond Tang and Jean-Paul Wiest, ed., *The Catholic Church in Modern China: Perspectives*, (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1993).

relations in China; such would be too complicated and not entirely relevant for present purposes. Rather, drawing inspiration from a striking impetus towards Christian unity in China at the dawn of the Twentieth Century, this study intends to draw insights from the role of ministry in building Christian communion.

The Lutheran-Roman Catholic Commission on Unity, in its report *From Conflict to Communion*, commends quincentenary commemoration of the Reformation. In this age of globalization: “the common commemoration must incorporate the experiences and perspectives of Christians from South and North, East and West.”<sup>15)</sup> In that spirit, the preceding admittedly-brief recollection of the experience of the Church of Christ in China raises some important issues for renewal of the Church of Christ, in China and throughout our increasingly globalized world.

## 2. Challenges to the Call to Christian Unity

Over two millennia after the birth of Jesus, five centuries after the rise of the Reformation, and about fifty years after the Second Vatican Council announced *aggiornamento* for the Catholic Church, Christianity has spread across the world, but significant obstacles still remain regarding growth towards fuller communion in Christ. Any serious reflection on renewal of Christianity toward the Church of Christ cannot but read the signs of the times and consider at least of some of the current challenges to Christian communion. The challenges to Christian unity today, while in continuity with the past, may not be identical with the obstacles to ecumenism of fifty years

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15) Lutheran World Federation, and Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity, *From Conflict to Communion: Lutheran-Catholic Common Commemoration of the Reformation in 2017, Report of the Lutheran-Roman Catholic Commission on Unity*(2013), no. 4.

ago or of five hundred years ago, much less those of two thousand years ago. For the sake of focus and without claiming any comprehensiveness, three challenges stand out: divisions which go *beyond doctrine*; divisions which go *beyond denominationalism*; and divisions which are bound up with the *shifting nationalism* and related political developments. In each case, the challenges today are not quite the same as the corresponding challenges of the past.

Today, divisions within Christianity do not necessarily develop primarily from disagreements over doctrine. As was the case with Cheng Jingyi and the Chinese Christian Independent Church, independent local church movements may arise independently of any substantial disputes over the content of faith. Historically, most major schisms within Christianity centered on different understandings or, at least, divergent expressions of specific theological issues, even if mutual animosity may have been influenced, more or less, by other factors and manifested in matters of ecclesiastical polity. For example, disagreement over understandings of and formulations regarding the doctrine of justification, along with condemnations of competing views, occupied an important place in the division in western Christianity five centuries ago.

While occasioning much polemics, such doctrinal issues also offer obvious, specific focus for ecumenical exchange and search for common ground. Despite the differences which may remain after such theological dialogue, open and productive exchange may also offer the potential for identifying a consensus regarding basic commonly-accepted truths and may, especially with the passage of time and pacification of tempers, clarify mutual misunderstandings. An outstanding example would be the *Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification*, by the Lutheran World Federation and the Catholic Church, in 1999. Without denying that full Church communion has not yet been realized, such discussions do provide opportunities for concrete progress in ecumenism.

Yet, as one recent study observed: “doctrine always had a low profile in Chinese Protestantism.”<sup>16)</sup> Where congregations are founded by a lone pastor, conscious understanding of doctrine, much less of doctrinal differences, may play a modest role in the establishment and identity of the congregation, whether as a force for division or for communion. The definition of credal statements typically demarcates the limits of faith communities, as well as providing discussion content for overcoming those demarcations. Conversely, the absence of disagreements over credal statements –or even the absence of the centrality of credal statements– may signal a shift in discussions from the content of Christian faith, which ostensibly would unite all Christians at some level, to issues of administrative and economic autonomy, for which there may not be much common ground to be found. Even if there may be some interest in connecting with the larger Christian community, the focus of an independent congregation may rest primarily on the personality of the pastor or the style of worship. Without dismissing their relevance, such factors offer less promising hope for ecumenism.

In addition, divisions today are not necessarily primarily a matter of denominationalism, or of the Reformation era rupture between Catholics and Protestants, or of the even earlier split between Eastern Orthodoxy and Roman Catholicism. Independent Pentecostal and local movements, as well as small house churches, are increasingly part of the face of Christianity today. Widening dispersion among Christian communities makes ecumenical efforts more difficult and complex.

Established mainline denominations bring their own respective internal unities, as well as well-defined identities to dialogue. In contrast, local, independent churches, practically by definition, are not significantly invested

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16) Miikka Ruokanen - Yongtao Chen - Ruomin Liu, “Is ‘Postdenominational’ Christianity Possible?: Ecclesiology in the Protestant Church of China” in *Ecumenical Review*, 67(2015), 79.



in efforts for Christian unity, whether within a given denomination or across the broader spectrum of ecumenism. Undoubtedly, there are hopeful signs for progress in Christian ecumenism among established churches. The World Council of Churches facilitates far-reaching fellowship among 348 member churches<sup>17)</sup> along with limited participation by Roman Catholics in its Commission on Faith and Order. There are also established, ongoing conversations between Lutherans and Roman Catholics, between Anglicans and Orthodox, between Baptist and Reformed, and among many other Christian traditions.<sup>18)</sup> Recently, the Holy and Great Council of the Orthodox Church gathered 10 of the 14 autocephalous, Orthodox churches. Although attendance was incomplete, the 2016 synod was still a historic step in Orthodox Christianity. The growth of non-denominational or independent Christian congregations means that many Christians are not part of such established ecumenical efforts. The Pew Foundation estimates 28 million Christians in the world do not belong to the major Orthodox, Catholic, or mainline Protestant traditions in Christianity.<sup>19)</sup> Affiliation with denominations and established Christian traditions does not necessarily imply support, whether active or passive, for ecumenism. Nonetheless, in contrast, non-denominational or independent Christians in many cases lack any substantial impetus toward unity within any given denomination as well as, in many cases, also lack institutional structures for engaging in such ecumenical conversations. In short,

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17) World Council of Church, 'WCC member churches', Retrieved 2016. 7. 15, from <https://www.oikoumene.org/en/member-churches>

18) Harding Meyer - Lukas Vischer, ed., *Growth in Agreement: Reports and Agreed Statements of Ecumenical Conversations on a World Level*, (New York: Paulist Press; Geneva: World Council of Churches, 1984) lists the following relations and conversations: Anglican-Lutheran, Anglican-Old Catholic, Anglican-Orthodox, Anglican-Roman Catholic, Baptist-Reformed, Disciples-Roman Catholic, Lutheran-Roman Catholic, Lutheran-Reformed-Roman Catholic, Methodist-Roman Catholic, Old Catholic-Orthodox, Pentecostal-Roman Catholic, Reformed-Roman Catholic, and the WCC Commission on Faith and Order.

19) Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life, *Global Christianity*, 35.

developments in the mainstream ecumenical movement have very limited influence on members of most independent Christian congregations.

Thirdly, the shifting politics of nationalism also complicate efforts for fostering world Christian unity. Complicated relationships between Church and State are, of course, nothing new. Throughout Christian history, politics and religion have influenced one another and not necessarily in ways salutary for faithful growth of the Church of Christ. In different historical periods, political unity promoted Christian unity, and in other periods political divisions likewise incited or exacerbated disunity within Christianity.

In addition, imperialism and colonialism played substantial, even if in ways regrettable, roles in the spread of the Gospel throughout the world. With the ebb of European influence, independent nations rose up in Asia, Africa, and across the globe. The Churches originally established by European and North American missionary societies were inevitably affected. Some local Christians continued to identify with Western Christianity, whether or not that facilitated local acceptance or evangelization. Others, following political developments, inclined to independence from Western centers of Christianity. In some cases, independent national churches arose. In other cases, local independent congregations arose, casting aside both international Christian affiliation as well as nationwide identification. In yet other cases, post-colonial nationalism has meant trading foreign ecclesiastical administration for domestic political domination. The testimony of Cheng Jingyi, as cited earlier, is just a single historical example, in China's distinctive context. Others would follow, not necessarily all following the same path. In this third millennia after the birth of Jesus Christ in the area now known as the Middle East, world Christianity continues to struggle with what qualifies as authentic and acceptable inculturation, including establishment of local church, while remaining in

faithful communion with the one, holy, catholic, and apostolic Church of Christ.

### 3. Ministry in the Church of Christ

Outside of traditional institutional churches, charismatic pastors may play increasingly pivotal roles in the establishment and development of local Christian movements. With the diminishing influence of doctrine and denominationalism, as well as the shifting role of nationalism in establishing local churches, the role of ministers in Christian congregations may merit more attention. The Faith and Order Commission of the World Council of Churches, has declared: “If the divided churches are to achieve the visible unity they seek, one of the essential prerequisites is that they should be in basic agreement on baptism, eucharist and ministry.”<sup>20</sup>) Ministry plays a pivotal, albeit by no means exclusive or even all-important, role in Christian communion and, also, division. Nevertheless, that continuum of baptism, eucharist, and ministry reminds Christians of all churches, whether or not they actively seek unity, of the importance of ministry for Christ’s Church. Some clarification of terms, in summary fashion, may be helpful before proceeding further.

First, *ministry*, especially *ordained ministry*, is properly understood only in the context of the community called Church.

In a broken world God calls the whole of humanity to become God’s people [...]. The Holy Spirit unites in a single body those who follow Jesus Christ and sends them as witnesses into the world. Belonging to the Church means living in communion with God through Jesus Christ in the Holy Spirit.<sup>21)</sup>

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

The Holy Spirit bestows on the community diverse and complementary gifts [charisms]. These are for the common good of the whole people and are manifested in acts of service within the community and to the world [...]. All members are called to discover, with the help of the community, the gifts they have received and to use them for the building up of the Church and for the service of the world to which the Church is sent.<sup>22)</sup>

The word *ministry* in its broadest sense denotes the service to which the whole people of God is called, whether as individuals, as a local community, or as the universal Church. Ministry or ministries can also denote the particular institutional forms which this service may take.<sup>23)</sup>

The term *ordained ministry* refers to persons who have received a charism and whom the church appoints for service by ordination through the invocation of the Spirit and the laying on of hands.<sup>24)</sup>

This study focuses on *ministry* primarily as *ordained ministry*. Whether characterized as *priests*, *presbyters*, or *pastors*, such ordained ministers play important roles in the building and guiding of Christian communities. In various ways, ministers represent or symbolize the unity of their respective communities, as well as the relationship between those communities and the larger Christian communion.

All members of the believing community, ordained and lay, are interrelated. On the one hand, the community needs ordained ministers. Their presence reminds the community of the divine initiative, and of the dependence of the Church on Jesus Christ, who is the source of its mission and the foundation of its unity [...]. On the other hand, the ordained ministry has no existence apart from the community.<sup>25)</sup>

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21) *Ibid.*, I.1.

22) *Ibid.*, I.5.

23) *Ibid.*, II.7.b.

24) *Ibid.*, II.7.c.

25) *Ibid.*, II.12.

The chief responsibility of the ordained ministry is to assemble and build up the body of Christ by proclaiming and teaching the Word of God, by celebrating the sacraments, and by guiding the life of the community in its worship, its mission and its caring ministry.<sup>26)</sup>

How ministers are called, how they are ordained, and how they exercise their respective ministries all express how the given communities which they guide may or may not keep communion with other Christian communities in other places and also in other historical periods. Thus, reflections on ministry are very much reflections on the nature of church.

#### 4. Renewal of Ministry for Communion in the Church of Christ

Jesus Christ called his followers together in community, with some members called to a special ministry in service of communion. A young Chinese church leader once observed: “The main obstacle to our church unity is the absence of common understanding of the church and of the ministry”.<sup>27)</sup> Ecumenical consultations have also noted: “the office of ministry presents both considerable obstacles to common understanding and also hopeful perspectives for rapprochement.”<sup>28)</sup> In the current context, what may be said about ministry and communion in the Church of Christ, in China and throughout the world? What hopeful perspectives may renewal of ministry offer for communion in the Church of Christ?

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26) *Ibid.*, II.13.

27) Gao Ying, as cited in Miikka Ruokanen - Yongtao Chen - Ruomin Liu, “Is ‘Postdenominational’ Christianity Possible?”, 91.

28) *From Conflict to Communion*, n. 194.

#### 4.1 Ministry for Communion: beyond doctrinal differences

Today, with a diminished role for doctrinal issues in divisions within Christianity, ministry may be invited to renewed and faithful service of the Word of God, which calls followers of Christ together to proclaim that Gospel, in Word and deed, to the whole world. In Christian communities which lack developed doctrine or magisterium, typically the Bible remains an important font and focus for followers of Jesus Christ. Indeed, in the absence of a well-defined body of interpretation of the faith, in general the Bible becomes even more central. The Word of God is a fundamental force for communion in the Church of Christ.

In the Christian tradition, ordained ministers do not enjoy absolute authority, nor do they unilaterally decide the shape and direction of Christian community. The content of the Christian message is passed down through the Word of God, and, even across the sweeping diversity of world Christianity, it is difficult to find any who ascribe to the name Christian but not affirm the Bible as a privileged instrument of Christ's message. Stated more emphatically: "the fundamental duty and intention of ordained ministry is public service of the word of God, the gospel of Jesus Christ, which the Triune God has commissioned the church to proclaim to all the world."<sup>29)</sup> Ministers are called to serve the Word of God.

Ministry is service to the gospel, which has two interrelated implications. On the one hand, the gospel is not at the disposal of the office. Ministry, if it is to fulfill its intention, can have no other purpose than to serve the gospel and assist it to prevail. On the other hand, the gospel encounters human beings in a concrete way in preaching and in the sacraments of the church. Both facets belong together, because it is the Holy Spirit who makes Jesus Christ and his deed of reconciliation of the whole world present in a saving way to all human beings through human words and actions.<sup>30)</sup>

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29) Lutheran-Catholic Commission on Unity, *The Apostolicity of the Church*, (2006), n. 274.

Thus, even if individual ministers may not be inclined to unity with other Christians, some respect may still be expected for Christ's Gospel.

Christ calls his Gospel followers to unity. Jesus gave his life: 'for the scattered children of God, to bring them together and make them one'(Jn. 11:52) His early followers emphasized communion. "All the believers were one in heart and mind."(Acts 4:32) The great apostle Paul exhorted: "I appeal to you, brothers and sisters, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you agree with one another in what you say and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be perfectly united in mind and thought."(1 Cor. 1:10) Paul explained further: "in Christ we, though many, form one body, and each member belongs to all the others."(Rom. 12:5) Christians, if faithful to this apostolic tradition, cannot be unconcerned with the cause of Christian unity, even if they continue to have significantly different views about how ecclesial polity should be organized and such unity pursued.

All Christians are called to serve the Gospel in Word and in deed. This mission involves evangelization of non-Christians and also building up of the Church of Christ. Especially when the foundation for ecumenical exchanges regarding doctrinal differences and commonalities may be lacking, it is important to remember that exchanges may take place in different and complementary forms: *life*, sharing joys and sorrows in a spirit of openness; *action*, collaborating for integral development and liberation; *theological exchange*, by experts searching for deeper understanding; and *religious experience*, sharing prayer and spiritual experiences.<sup>31)</sup> Discussion of doctrinal

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30) *Ibid.*, n. 278.

31) This four-fold framework is drawn from reflections on dialogue between religions, although it is also pertinent for ecumenical Christian exchanges. Pontifical Council for Inter-Religious Dialogue, *Dialogue and Proclamation: Reflection and Orientations on Interreligious Dialogue and the Proclamation of the Gospel of Jesus Christ*(1991), n. 42; Secretariat for Non-Christians, *The Attitude of the Church Towards the Followers of Other Religions: Reflections and Orientations on Dialogue and Mission*(1984), n. 25-35.

differences by theological experts is not the only –nor, even, the most important– forum of ecumenical exchange. Indeed, even when possible with the support of ordained ministers, such doctrinal dialogue, alone, is rarely sufficient, nor even the most effective starting point; shared life and action for the Gospel remain reasonable and hopeful avenues for independent Christian congregations and their ministers to work for Christian communion.

The Church of Christ may be very much in need of renewal. Faithfulness to the Gospel calls ministers to lead the faithful in reforming the one, holy, catholic, and apostolic Church of Christ. Even when it may be tempting to establish new, separate, ostensibly purer, ecclesial communities, Christ calls his followers to unity in His Church.

#### 4.2 Ministry for Communion: beyond denominationalism

In this age, with a diminished influence of denominationalism on divisions within Christianity, ordained ministers may be encouraged to consider more deeply the divine and ecclesiastical character which confirms, animates, and renews ministry. Lack of identification with particular denominations may imply increasing dispersion of Christianity, with more and more ministers leading independent congregations. How may such ministers be drawn towards unity, whether within groupings of congregations or within the larger communion of Christianity? A decade ago, a Christian unity commission declared regarding the Apostolicity of the Church:

Catholics and Lutherans affirm together that God instituted the ministry and that it is necessary for the being of the church, since the word of God and its public proclamation in word and sacrament are necessary for faith in Jesus Christ to arise and be preserved and together with this for the church to come into being and be preserved as believers who make up the body of Christ in the unity of faith.<sup>32)</sup>



That basic affirmation should receive a relatively ready affirmation among most ministers, whether Lutheran or Catholic, from traditional denominations or independent congregations. Ministry is instituted by God. Ministry is necessary for the existence and mission of the Church. Ministry arises in the context of a believing community united in Christ and sharing in Christ's mission.

In the Church of Christ, ministry is instituted by God, and those who are ordained as ministers are called by God. The Church is not simply another humanly instituted social organization which chooses its own leaders or in which leaders elect themselves. In the Christian tradition, Church leaders do not establish themselves in pastoral office. Symbolically, initiation into ministry takes place through some sort of ordination.

Ordination is an acknowledgment by the Church of the gifts of the Spirit in the one ordained, and a commitment by both the Church and the ordinand to the new relationship. By receiving the new minister in the act of ordination, the congregation acknowledges the minister's gifts and commits itself to be open towards these gifts. Likewise those ordained offer their gifts to the Church and commit themselves to the burden and opportunity of new authority and responsibility. At the same time, they enter into a collegial relationship with other ordained ministers.<sup>32)</sup>

Ordination expresses and acknowledges the roles of divine calling and the Spirit already at work in the congregation to which the minister is called to serve and lead. The God who calls this particular minister also calls many others, elsewhere, to minister in the Church of Christ. The Spirit at work in this congregation is also at work in many other congregations, in other places and throughout history. Such consciousness naturally orders ministry to communion, even if concrete steps to communion may proceed haltingly. The

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32) *The Apostolicity of the Church*, n. 276.

33) *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry*, "Ministry" n. 44.

human response in accepting ordination also implies the need for some formation. “Candidates for the ordained ministry need appropriate preparation through study of scripture and theology, prayer and spirituality, and through acquaintance with the social and human realities of the contemporary world.”<sup>34)</sup> Such study and formation in the Christian tradition is also ordered, to some extent or another depending on the particular programs, to placing ministry candidates in relationship with larger Christian communion.

In the Christian tradition, ordained ministry is both personal and collegial. God calls ministers in a larger hierarchical body of ministers for the Church in Christ. Ministers do not serve in isolation. The Gospel message transcends particular geographic places and historic periods. Similarly, Christian community and ministerial leadership span geographic, historic, and personal bounds.

Although there is no single New Testament pattern, although the Spirit has many times led the Church to adapt its ministries to contextual needs, and although other forms of the ordained ministry have been blessed with the gifts of the Holy Spirit, nevertheless the threefold ministry of bishop, presbyter and deacon may serve today as an expression of the unity we seek and also as a means for achieving it.<sup>35)</sup>

Undoubtedly, different understandings and practices of ordained ministry have played pivotal roles in many denominational divides within Christianity. Non-denominational and independent congregational ministers, more often than not, have not maintained the threefold ministry of bishops, presbyters, and deacons as distinct offices in the Church. Nonetheless, reflection upon the respective functions may still resonate with many Christian communities and their ministers. Diaconal ministry expresses the importance of charity, along with the interdependence of worship and service in the Church’s life.<sup>36)</sup>

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34) *Ibid.*, n. 47.

35) *Ibid.*, n. 22.

Presbyteral ministry is centered on proclamation of the Word and celebration of sacraments, preparing the community for Christian life and ministry.<sup>37)</sup> Episcopal ministry oversees the Church in an area larger than an individual congregation, serving the unity and apostolicity of the Church's teaching, worship, and sacramental life.<sup>38)</sup> Admittedly, disagreements over the practice of episcopal ministry may be most prominent among the divisions within Christianity.

Nevertheless, if any congregation is to grow, especially beyond any particular place or point in time, something like episcopal ministry inevitably arises to provide continuity of the community from one place to another and from one moment to the next.<sup>39)</sup> Evangelic preachers tend to desire that their independent congregation grows beyond the given moment and place, in which case that preacher may naturally assume a role which goes beyond sole leadership of any particular local congregation. Proclamation of the Gospel inherently strives for Church growth, which also involves growth in ministry. Across the Christian tradition, "a ministry of *episkopé* is necessary to express and safeguard the unity of the body. Every Church needs this ministry of unity in some form in order to be the Church of God, the one body of Christ, a sign of the unity of all in the Kingdom."<sup>40)</sup> That ministry is exercised at both local and also regional levels implies that the Church is also both a local and also a regional reality. Episcopal ministry connects the

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36) *Ibid.*, n. 31.

37) *Ibid.*, n. 30.

38) *Ibid.*, n. 29.

39) From Conflict to Communion, n. 172, cites Philip Melancthon, "Consilium de moderandis controversiis religionis", in *Corpus Reformatorum*, ed., C. G. Bretschneider, vol. II, (Halle: C. A. Schwetschke, 1895), 745f.; 1535, in making this point: "in the church rulers are necessary, who will examine and ordain those who are called to ecclesial office, church law observes and exercises oversight upon the teaching of the priests. And if there were no bishops, one would nevertheless have to create them."

40) *Ibid.*, n. 23.

individual pastoral minister and community to other Christian communities and historically to the Apostolic Age and the preaching of Jesus Christ. In turn, the individual pastoral ministry serves not only the immediate congregation but also the Church universal in both place and time.

Even if affiliation with traditional denominations may not hold sway to the same extent as in the past, the divine and ecclesiastical character of ministry remains a force for unity. Indeed, moving beyond denominational divisions, ministry and community may focus more on the one Church of Christ, present throughout the world and also throughout time, from the Apostolic Age to the present. The call to ministry places the minister within the Christian tradition, which does not deny the importance of immediate local congregations but rather affirms the significance of such participation in the one, holy, catholic, and apostolic Church of Christ, made present and new in every age.

#### 4.3 Ministry for Communion: beyond nationalism

Nationalism and (post-)colonialism, in their various and shifting forms, continue to complicate the mission of building local church and fostering Christian communion. Especially since these challenges often involve political matters which go beyond the primary scope of this study, in the present context it may be possible only to offer some initial reflections regarding the role of ordained ministry. Keeping in mind such developments, how may renewed understanding of the nature and significance of ministry contribute to building up the one Church of Christ?

Ordained ministry is intimately and inextricably related with the faith and activity of the Christian community. It is not possible to fully comprehend the significance of ministry without considering its relationship to the Church

of Christ. The call to ministry, which arises in the activity of the Spirit in the believing community, implies a communal character of ministry.

[T]he intimate relationship between the ordained ministry and the community should find expression in a communal dimension where the exercise of the ordained ministry is rooted in the life of the community and requires the community's effective participation in the discovery of God's will and the guidance of the Spirit.<sup>41)</sup>

The significance of ordained ministry is found in the Christian community, both in an immediate congregation and also more broadly, among all who follow Christ in every place and period. Even where union is not realized or actively pursued, ministry and Church are properly ordered to this greater communion in Christ. This faith reality transcends political and geographical boundaries. To limit faith communities within political realities is to deny the ultimate significance of faith in Jesus Christ who came for the salvation of all peoples, gathering them together into one. Such would also deny the ultimate significance of ministry in the Church of Christ. Called to proclaim the Kingdom of God, which challenges every social and political system, the Church and especially her ministerial leaders are most free to carry out this mission when they are not controlled or coopted by political forces, whether at the national or other levels. Ministry serves the local church, and ministry also serves the church universal.<sup>42)</sup> Ministry serves Christ who is human and divine, incarnate and eternal.

Christian ministry is ordered to the Church of Christ, encompassing all who follow the Gospel. Ministry is for the service of all Christians, in Word and sacrament, and for the service of Jesus Christ.

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41) *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry*, "Ministry" n. 26.

42) *From Conflict to Communion*, n. 186.

Among the most important characteristics of this ministry are its *public* nature and its ordered institutionality. Its specific task is the public proclamation of the gospel in word and sacrament. The administration of the sacraments is one of its specific tasks because, by their nature, sacraments are public enactments. This ministry is directed to all. For that reason one of its essential tasks is fostering the unity of all those who are priests by the priesthood of all the baptized.<sup>43)</sup>

Ministry does not exist for itself, but for the Church and for Christ. The public sacramental and Eucharistic character of ministry also orients the Church to broader communion.

Eucharistic celebrations always have to do with the whole Church, and the whole Church is involved in each local eucharistic celebration. In so far as a church claims to be a manifestation of the whole Church, it will take care to order its own life in ways which take seriously the interests and concerns of other churches.<sup>44)</sup>

Admittedly, in the larger Christian tradition, attitudes toward the Eucharist are at the center both of unity and also of divisions within the Church. For the sake of the present reflections on ministry, it may be enough to recognize: “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.”<sup>45)</sup> Although disagreements over the Eucharist remain, remembering that the minister is at the service of the Eucharist may be of, at least, some service in locating ministry in service of a communion which is greater than the individual minister. Renewal of the communal and sacramental character of ministry finds its greatest significance in the communion of the one, holy, catholic, and apostolic Church of Christ.

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43) *The Apostolicity of the Church*, n. 254.

44) *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry*, “Eucharist” n. 19.

45) *Ibid.*, n. 29.

Although realization of this vision is difficult and incomplete, ultimately Christian ministry finds its greatest significance in such communion.

## Conclusion

By way of conclusion, an aforementioned observation bears keeping in mind: “the office of ministry presents both considerable obstacles to common understanding and also hopeful perspectives for rapprochement.”<sup>46)</sup> In ecumenical exchanges, ministry may be cause for conflict as well cause for communion. Established Christian traditions have come to this conclusion after exchanges on matters of faith, baptism, and eucharist. After recalling the Chinese call for a united Christian Church, reflection on emerging challenges to unity in world Christianity also point to the pivotal role of ministry if there is to be progress in ecumenism.

These common conclusions need not be surprising. In the study of the theology of Church, the special topic of ministry pays particular attention to how members respond to Christ’s call, cooperate with Christ’s work, and lead Christ’s people in service. Human instruments are susceptible to sin, turning away from the Gospel message and striving to serve the self. Divisions follow.

Ministers working alone and relying upon human effort and ambition may be unable to overcome such disunity, so focus on ministry alone or, even, firstly offers little hope of overcoming challenges and realizing communion. Ministry is about the call and working of the Holy Spirit in human instruments. Hope comes from the Spirit who calls Church members to ministry. Thus, in the larger context of ecumenical exchanges, ministry deserves attention. Human participation in building the Church of Christ

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46) *From Conflict to Communion*, n. 194.

points hopefully to Christ, the one who calls and the one in whom unity is possible.

At the 1910 World Missionary Conference, in Edinburgh, reflecting upon divided Christianity, the prophetic Cheng Jingyi also declared:

This is the partial ideal Church. The Church of Christ is universal, not only irrespective of denominations, but also irrespective of nationalities –‘All one in Christ Jesus’. The world is, to use a Chinese expression, one family, and China is a member of that family.<sup>47)</sup>

Our world is increasingly complex even as it is increasing interconnected. In the family of world Christianity, the members and especially ministers are called to continue work for renewal of the Church and realization of that ideal of communion in the Church of Christ.

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47) Cheng Jingyi, untitled speech in *World Missionary Conference, 1910*, vol. 8, 197.



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**Ministry and Communion in Christ:**  
**Reflections from the Experience of the Church of Christ in China**

Jeffrey Chang S.J.

After recalling the historic appeal, at the 1910 Edinburgh World Missionary Conference, for a united Christian Church in China, this essay reflects upon challenges to Christian unity. In world Christianity today, doctrine, denominationalism and nationalism no longer exercise the same roles as in the past in precipitating or in overcoming divisions within Christianity. Consideration of these developments suggests the importance of renewal of ministry for promoting communion in the Church of Christ. Ministry is ordered to communion by proclaiming the Word of God, building up the body of Christ, and serving the faith community.

**Key Words:** Ministry, Christian Unity, World Christianity, Church in China, World Missionary Conference

**그리스도 중심적 직무와 친교:**  
**중국에서의 그리스도교 체험에 기초한 고찰**

제프리 창

중국 그리스도교 교회의 일치를 위해 1910년 개최된 에딘버러 세계 선교회의에서 있었던 역사적 호소를 상기하는 가운데, 이 논문에서는 그리스도교의 일치를 위한 도전에 대해 성찰하였다. 오늘날 전 세계 그리스도교에서 교리, 종파주의, 국가주의는 그리스도교 안에서 분열을 촉발하거나 극복함에 있어서 이전에 해왔던 역할을 더 이상 하지 않는다. 본 논문에서는 이러한 변화를 고려하면서 그리스도의 교회 내 친교를 증진시키기 위한 직무 쇄신의 중요성을 제안하였다. 직무는 하느님의 말씀을 선포하고, 그리스도의 몸을 건설하며, 신앙 공동체에 봉사함으로써 친교를 이루도록 세워졌다.

**주제어:** 직무, 그리스도교 일치, 전 세계 그리스도교, 중국 교회, 세계선교회의

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