Classroom and Pulpit:

Reflections on Ordination by a Teacher of Religion

By The Rev. Dr. Edward LeRoy Long, Jr.

On May 14, 2023, I will have been an ordained clergyman for seventy-five years, longer in a productive retirement than in all my active professional roles put together.

I now look back on my life, especially the ways being ordained has played a role in what has been a learning experience. This account says less about my activities as a scholar, author, and social witness work, which are also important.

Part One: Biography

I was first baptized and later catechized when very young in what were then Methodist Episcopal Churches. I don't remember the first and only vaguely remember the second. The deaconess who taught the catechism class took pains to be sure we knew the Lord's Prayer and learned the Apostles Creed. She probably taught us more than I now recall.

I also remember attending Sunday School in the Dutch Reformed Church closer to the house into which we moved when I was in third grade. The attendance at its Sunday School was almost as large as that at the morning service. It opened with a ceremony at which the local alderman gave a talk. We then broke into classes according to our grade in elementary school. Those groups were taught by volunteer adults from the congregation who inspired us as much with their quality of life as with the content of what they taught.

My faith formation was more decisively shaped while in high school and college during World War Two. America was experiencing something of a religious boom. Churches were full; several prominent preacher/theologians were looked upon as public intellectuals, and a movement called the Christian Student Movement, which existed on many campuses as the YMCA and YWCAs, was very active. In both high school and college I was a member of a youth group that met at a church Sunday evenings. In high school we sometimes took tours sponsored by the Fellowship of Reconciliation that opened our eyes to other traditions and to conditions of human need. In college we attended conferences with students from other schools that were addressed by invited speakers. Those were formative events that eventually led me to enter seminary after completing an engineering degree. I was persuaded that a world that had just agonized through a major conflict needed moral wisdom more than technical know how. Although, then as now, Christianity was divided about what it considered moral wisdom, there was sufficient public interest in religion to warrant confidence that it mattered and could play a key role in improving human affairs. That perspective, then called modernism to distinguish it from Fundamentalism, would probably be referred to now as progressivism. It was the grounding for my own early faith development and vocational decisions.

I entered seminary with the view that the role of religion should be mainly, even solely, to be an encouragement for moral idealism, of which adherence to nonviolence was a prominent feature. That view seemed to me to stay clear of doctrinal convictions that

were the cause of disagreements among Christians and of little interest to outsiders. My outlook was challenged in seminary by what was then called neo-orthodoxy, of which Reinhold Niebuhr was a prominent American spokesperson. Niebuhr knew full well the ambiguities and ironies that affect human life. He advocated temporarily suspending moral idealism to overcome threats from without. Today we may very well focus attention on the moral imperatives and procedural integrity needed to overcome threats from within. The examination of foundational commitments must be ongoing. No one should try to function well as a religious leader without being aware of the often unstated assumptions that drive social behavior.

Immediately after receiving the seminary degree I was ordained a Minister of Word and Sacrament even though I was planning to go on and study for the Ph.D. degree. That would be much less likely to happen today. Now, most mainline denominations will ordain a candidate only if the candidate has a call to a position for which ordination is necessary. Being a minister appeals to some people as a kind of status. To avoid that tendency there has been a trend to ordain only candidates with a clearly church related position firmly in hand. This trend also has a weighty reason behind it. Ordination involves both the commitments of the candidate and the felt needs of the people. Both should have a say in deciding when it should be done. There was, however, a little benefit from that early ordination. It enabled me to do supply preaching in churches with vacant pulpits and to show up at an entirely new location dressed as a clergyman.

The only employment possibility I had when I finished earning the doctorate was to serve as the Minister to Students at the Presbyterian Church in Blacksburg, Virginia and simultaneously begin to teach philosophy and ethics at Virginia Tech. That was not the setting that I felt best suited my vocation. Nevertheless, I accepted the challenge. For reasons I can hardly do justice to here, I was prompted to shed a Yankee prejudice that the South was a monolithic collection of moral and religious Neanderthals. I encountered persons whose views were thoughtful, many similar to mine. They worked for social justice just as vigorously as many in the north, often at greater personal cost. I found many of them to be collegial associates. I also encountered a culture that was more favorable to the practice of religion than any I had previously known.

The first two and a half years of that time in Virginia I was based at the Church and I participated in many aspects of its leadership, These involved preaching about once a month and offering the pastoral prayer on other Sundays; attending meetings of the session and local ministerial association, and interacting pastorally with many adult

members of the Church as well as with students. The senior pastor treated me as an equal colleague in practically every aspect of parish life. Meanwhile my teaching bore fruit and I was ready to move over to the College full time as was intended. In some ways those years were the most significant period of my life.

While there, I was invited to give a talk at the Christmas vacation meeting of what was then called The National Association of Biblical Instructors, which in those days consisted of just a few members in contrast to its successor, The American Academy of Religion, with a current membership in the thousands. Clyde Holbrook, the chair of a recently formed department of religion in Oberlin College, resonated with my contention that fairness in treating issues is a crucial measure of intellectual integrity, more important than holding any one particular view with zealous rigidity. He asked me to consider being a candidate for appointment to teach religion at Oberlin. My reaction was, “Wow, that is the kind of opportunity I had always viewed as ideal.” So I came for an interview, which was with a group of faculty responsible for evaluating candidates. Their views about religion were unknown by the candidate, but one of the interviewers was obviously a highly motivated secularist. He asked me with a slight bit of scorn, “What do you think of Reinhold Niebuhr?” My answer was that my approach was more compatible with the irenic style of John Bennett, Niebuhr’s colleague in teaching ethics at Union. That answer probably had something to do with receiving an invitation to the position. That interview should have alerted me to the cultural differences that would be involved in changing positions.

When I arrived at Oberlin, Christianity still had a visible priority. Many students came to local churches. The First Church's choir loft was filled by them every Sunday of the school calendar, and social service activities of many churches benefitted from the participation of students. What I did not realize, but eventually learned, was that the establishment of a college department of religion to take the place of having religion courses for college students offered by some of the Faculty of the Theological School, did not have the full support of the undergraduate faculty. Oberlin was slowly moving away from considering itself a religiously oriented institution and becoming a secular one. In response, the academic approach to religion was increasingly becoming a humanistic study rather than a confessional related undertaking. Clyde Holbrook was pivotal, both locally and nationally, in facilitating a change that was guided by standard criteria in the world of education rather than church life.

This development had many implications for places like Oberlin that were engaged in

both the liberal arts and the study of religion, or had theological schools as part of their program. Would this mean that the teaching of religion would change from being viewed as a form of ministry to being an alternative to ministry? Would it create a chasm between what colleges and what seminaries were about? Would it make ordination, not only indifferent to, but a cloud over, scholarly study? What did this mean for churches near the campus? My time at Oberlin was much concerned with trying to answer those questions.

My life in the First Church at Oberlin differed to some extent from that in Blacksburg. It included some ministerial roles such as occasional preaching, especially during pastoral vacancies, but it also involved membership on committees of lay persons, such as the building committee, serving as the go-between between church, architect, and contractor during extensive renovations, and also came to include membership on the Board of Trustees. Under the bicameral governance then in effect the Trustees dealt with financial matters while the deacons concerned themselves with other aspects of church life. There was a little initial twitter when I began. How well can a preacher handle money?

During the years I was involved in both the work of the department and the life of the Church, I responded to unsolicited requests that came from three seminaries to consider joining their faculties. Two such inquiries came to naught. The trustees at one decided to disapprove the recommendation of the faculty that I be invited because in my meeting with them I raised the issue of salary, since taking the position involved a cut. In the other case a faculty minority opposed calling me because I would not say that opposition to the war in Vietnam, which I did share, was an obligatory matter of faith, that is a *confessionis.* A third theological seminary, to which I went for more than one conversation, had no such pious preconditions and offered me a position; it was difficult to ignore its appeal.

In the position to which I went at Drew University's School of Theology, ordination was normal but not mandatory, clearly not something secular faculty might view as a bar to scholarly objectivity. Seminary students were generally committed to a vocation as Christian leaders, not merely fulfilling a curriculum requirement, and many understood why they needed to study religion, both its importance and its problems. They were searching for a faith related foundation for moral action. That did not eliminate questions or differences of opinion, but it altered the dynamics in which a vocation to teach was exercised. And it proved congenial with my own sense of role and function.

Dealing with questions of ultimate concern is central to theological education at its best, especially for those whose job it is to conduct it. Answers to the questions presented to us by experience do not come only from mastery of subject matter. Participation in practice by engaging with communities of faith, is essential for dealing with them--both in order to understand the nature of such communities and also to better understand their potential foibles. Throughout everything I have already mentioned I was active in some ecclesiastical context. However up to this point almost everything took place in mainline non liturgical Protestant communities that would be characterized as progressive.

Upon arriving at Drew my wife and I responded to the invitation of the church of the denomination to which I belonged to become members. It had a strong adult education program to which we both contributed. But it also had just recently concluded a long pastorate of a senior minister who had a background as a Quaker, whose piety is grounded in listening. Under new leadership the Church was trying out the practice of having the Prayers of the People carried out as part of its regular worship. These two approaches do not fit together easily–one emphasizing listening, the other petitioning. The result was that the so-called prayers of the people consisted of merely hearing members of the congregation express their felt needs, almost all related to the medical conditions of individuals. These were simply shared and almost never formulated into what would be considered articulated prayer. The contrast between these and the beautifully articulated pastoral prayers of Joe King, pastor of the Church in Oberlin, disturbed me.

It was just a few months later that my wife Dorothy, my partner during all the years of professional activity up to this point, died of cancer. I was feeling the need for a deeper kind of worship. Unexpectedly, I was invited by the Canon Theologian of the New York Cathedral to participate in the life and work of what was called “The Institute of Theology.’ Before becoming an Episcopalian he had taught religion in the Colleges at Drew. The Institute met Saturdays at the New York Cathedral of Saint John the Divine to provide training for church leaders. I was asked, not only to teach classes but to assist in the leading of worship. That turned out to include occasional preaching, one instance of which was the Easter sermon at the nine o’clock chapel service, and several other times at the Saturday meetings of the Institute.

His invitation prompted me to recall that several of my seminary classmates, particularly those from the typical non liturgical parishes in middle America, had become Episcopalians after studying worship. I had not done that because I felt adequately

nurtured by outstanding churches in New York City belonging to the Reformed strand of Christian identity, and also by the worship services in both Blacksburg and Oberlin. However, given my feeling about the worship I was attending, having a role in The Institute of Theology appealed and was the start of what turned out to be almost two decades during which I worshiped as an Episcopalian in a variety of settings while remaining a Presbyterian Minister of Word and Sacrament and teaching in a Methodist seminary.

For the next year or two my life had Episcopal Saturdays and Presbyterian Sundays. I then married an Episcopalian and the Sundays changed. We started to attend the Episcopal Church in Madison while my wife worked to finish her degree. This led in time to opportunities for her to fill two interim appointments on the West Coast that turned out to be two years each, but separated from each other by a year back in Madison. While out there we attended an Episcopal Church that had a reputation for appealing to academic types, We both offered some adult education sessions.

Upon returning from the second of these times away we decided to move to Virginia so as to be closer to my wife's family during the winter months and to spend summer months at my cottage in the Berkshires. Summers we attended an Episcopal parish in Western Massachusetts and winter months an Episcopal parish in the Tidewater part of Virginia. I was asked to preach occasionally in both and in Virginia to be something like an assistant minister, doing so at the invitation of the Rector. There were many things I could do in that role, but there was one that I could not, namely, consecrate the elements in its Eucharist. That is because the Presbyterian and Episcopal churches, despite years of talks, have been unable to work out a mutual recognition of ministries. I was very careful not to violate the restriction that was imposed. Even so, in varied ways I was gradually becoming increasingly familiar with Episcopalian ways of doing things and adapting to the ethos. When the rector asked the bishop about ordaining me as an Episcopal priest, the curt reply was “Tell him he has to go to seminary.” We dropped the matter.

When my second wife left me living alone in Williamsburg, Virginia, I ran into a graduate of Oberlin who had taken the course on the History of Christian Thought and Action I taught at Oberlin. He invited me to attend a group in which he participated at the Presbyterian Church. That group met weekly to discuss the relevance of religious faith to almost every kind of concern, individual and/or social. The members of the group engaged in genuine and productive dialogues about the relationship of faith and societal responsibility..

The group met between the two fully attended and almost identical Sunday services, so I regularly went to one of them. Unlike being left wanting as had happened in the Church near Drew, I felt nurtured by this Church's rich grasp of the Reformed tradition, both its doctrine and its piety. Its services included a robed choir that sang without arranging itself as performers. The clergy wore gowns associated with the Reformed heritage. Much more significantly, the structure of the service, as almost all services rooted in the Christian tradition should, contained a confession of sin, assurance of forgiveness, and a unison affirmation of faith. But unlike liturgical services, which are built on repetition (as is the use of the Lord's Prayer in almost all worship practices) the several parts of the service were composed by the minister to say things in a fresh way almost every week. In that service the people acknowledged their need for and experience of God's continuing grace. Although I was never invited to participate in a Sunday service in that church, that did not prevent me from feeling part of it. That ended my ecclesiastical AWOL. No Court Martial followed.

It was not very long before I came back to Oberlin to spend the final years of my life in a retirement community of unusual quality. I returned to the Church in whose life and work I had been deeply involved during my years of teaching at the College. It has always supported me warmly in humanly valuable ways but since returning has gradually moved to a style of worship that seems to me to be closer to the worship that I remember from Sunday School than any others I had attended since. That feeling may have been based too much on visual aspects of the service than on the substance since the attire of leaders was increasingly casual. But that was not the major change. Except when Communion is celebrated or some other special reason calls for doing so, there is no deliberate confession of sin or declaration of pardon, no affirmation of faith. It has taken a long time for me to feel nurtured by the more innovative services, even though I have come to acknowledge the care with which they are planned. Perhaps this is God's way of indicating that no version of ecclesiastical practice deserves to be honored either completely or indefinitely, and that all forms of Christian practice are humanly devised to be pointers toward divinely given truths. If that is the message I should be getting then, of course, none of those patterns for being church that I had come to find so meaningful should be looked upon as complete and permanent ways of experiencing God's Word. I should adapt to the practices of the community of which I am a part.

Part Two: The Implications

That long account of being both in and out of ordained activities in quite different settings has caused me to reflect about what ordination means, not necessarily in the way any one of them think of it. Ordination derives much of its meaning from the way Christianity is understood by particular communities that bestow it. There seem to me several (or more) possible ways of doing that.

If a community understands Christianity mainly as an institution to be supported and protected, it will look on ordination as something like an administrative office, with a focus on church logistics and maintenance. Yes, there are books that contend ordained ministry is best described as a version of management.

If a group thinks of itself as the custodian of sacramental grace, ordination will be regarded as the power to perform a sacrament. That view has many proponents.

If a group understands Christianity to be a social cause, it will view ministry as a form of leadership for what needs to be accomplished. One can see that work out symbolically in the practice of those ministers who would never vest for services but wear clergy collars at demonstrations..

If a congregation thinks of the church as a place to offer solace to people hurting, it will think of ordination as certifying the capacity to help persons who need healing. That model is implicit in what has recently come to be called the chaplaincy movement, which thinks of ministry as service to individuals within a sponsoring organization.

If the congregation views the church as a community that comes together to hear and embody the message of the Gospel, it will look at ordination as the act of commissioning messengers gifted and trained to be interlocutors who can facilitate spiritual growth with learned interpretation.

Every church and every minister has to decide which of these, or other options best describes its priority. The freedom of religion we enjoy in our nation allows each group to make its own choice. But that freedom is not exercised without consequences. It may make moving from a group with one priority to a group with another formidable. Moreover, it can be difficult to enforce public policy about the status of clergy. There is no bar to buying an ordination certificate on the Web for a pittance. Finally, it is also

impossible to function with high success in all these ways even though many clergy suffer burn out trying to do so.

Given the options I have become convinced that the model of the messenger best fits a career such as mine. It allows for doing things that bring the best of pedagogy and the best of preaching into a synthesis that can make them meaningful in unique ways. Despite a few lapses I would not have done anything differently. I am grateful for and recognize that much of this was possible in the congregation in which I have spent more time than anywhere else.

This means I have come to understand my calling more explicitly now than when I started or even when I was initially a member of First Church. The denomination with which this Church is associated now uses as a mantra the phrase "God is still Speaking." It seems this phrase is commonly employed to emphasize the importance of being a church that is committed to the kind of Christianity that defines itself in terms of something very close to moral idealism. This may be a legitimate use of the phrase, but only if it is not the only use. Change in and by itself is always ambiguous, never salvific. It will not satisfy the longing that we all yearn to have, to know that our acceptance by God is the final benediction. To say God is still Speaking can also be a way of providing assurance of God's saving work as forever ongoing and indispensable. While we are in need of hearing the mandate to improve the human condition we must not assume that the effort to do that is an adequate or only valid understanding of the Gospel. Social progress will never be sufficiently perfected to eliminate the need for the assurance that what we do is a service to God rather than our achievement. This is how it should be. It provides a basis for hope in the face of a nihilistic realism that rules out all sense of hope. Just as the fact we are mortal beings that must pass along the possibility of life to generations which come after us on a planet with limited capacity to sustain life, so the fact we cannot achieve terminal perfection means that those who follow will struggle, as we must, with what it means to be faithful under less than ideal conditions.

This gives the Christian promise of salvation primary importance. It offers good news about what God has done in Christ for our benefit. The need to be assured of our acceptance is an ongoing work of the Spirit. Any church that becomes overly absorbed with institutional self maintenance or merely visionary progress can easily forget to witness to God's steady unwavering assurance that we are treated as worthy even for what we only imperfectly achieve. We must learn that living the Christian life is not primarily a self achieved success story, however well grounded in a sense of the divine

imperative, but involves a deep trust in the ongoing nature of God that is the life blood of fidelity. That is the substance of a conviction that I have come to. Everything else–fellowship. benevolent outreach, and social witness, valuable as they surely are–flows from that conviction but can never be a replacement for it. That is the message that being ordained commits me to keep trying to convey. It is My Apologia pro Vita Sua for those who wonder what I am all about.