

On the wall behind my desk hang seven framed objects. Two are famous prints of frescoes (the Last Supper and the Crucifixion) by Ben Long, the originals of which grace the walls of churches in the North Carolina mountains. Three are diplomas (college, seminary and doctor of ministry). Two are certificates (clinical pastoral education and ordination). The ordination certificate serves as a tangible reminder that on April 26, 1987, the good folks at my home church, University Hills Baptist in Charlotte, laid hands on me, and in that action I was “solemnly and publicly set apart and ordained to the work of the Gospel Ministry.”

Because of our radical interpretation of the Protestant doctrine of the priesthood of all believers, Baptists hold that all Christians are ministers (literally, “servants”) of Christ. All serve Christ and minister in the church and in the world. Even so, most Baptists have also supported the idea of an ordained clergy, whose purpose is to “equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ” (Ephesians 4:12).

Stanley J. Grenz, in The Baptist Congregation: A Guide to Baptist Belief and Practice, explains:

There are three aspects to the meaning of ordination. First, ordination is a recognition that the Holy Spirit has invested this person with certain gifts for ministry. The laying on of hands symbolizes in part the coming of the Holy Spirit on an individual to empower that person for the task to which that one has been called. Second, ordination is an act of commissioning by the church. Through this act the community places a person into a significant area of service within the body of Christ. Third, ordination is a public declaration of ministerial position. In our society clergy status is recognized in the civil sphere as well as the ecclesiastical. In ordination, public testimony is given to the fact that the candidate has been entrusted with this position and may be called upon to fulfill whatever functions society delegates to clergy (pp. 69-70).

While ordination is the prerogative and responsibility of the local church, Baptists have also encouraged the involvement of the larger community of faith in the ordination process, including examination and the ordination service. For Baptists in the South, this involvement has usually occurred, in a practical sense, through an Associational ordination council.

In recent years, some congregations have chosen not to involve such a council of persons outside their congregation because of the theological and political conflict that has engulfed us for almost three decades. (My ordination process, which involved the local Associational ordination council, was tainted because of such conflict).

Even so, I believe we eliminate the involvement of the larger body of Christ in the ministerial ordination process to our peril. When a congregation sets a person apart for the Gospel Ministry, it does so not only for ministry in that congregation, but also for ministry in other churches “of like faith and order.” Rarely will a person exercise his or her ministry in only one congregation. Most ministers will serve several congregations throughout a ministerial career. There are also non-congregational ministries that require or encourage ordination, such as chaplaincy. The involvement of the larger church community in the ordination process signifies that though Baptist churches are autonomous, they are not independent. Churches that cooperate together in mission will naturally cooperate together in calling, educating and ordaining the ministerial leaders they share with one another.

For these reasons as well as others (including the fact that we have four divinity schools in our state with which we closely partner, and who produce graduates needing ordination), the time has come for CBFNC to consider how best to assist congregations with ordination matters. Our assistance might cover a range of possibilities from providing or suggesting resources for congregations to creating ordination councils on a state-wide or regional basis. If you have ideas or feedback or input on this issue, I would love to hear from you (LHovis@cbfnc.org).

When hands were laid on my head in 1987, I had no idea of the road that lay ahead. Since then, my ministry journey has taken me through several congregations in two states, and now connects me to hundreds of congregations in North Carolina and the larger CBF family around the world. There is nothing I would rather be doing than serving as a Baptist minister. It is who I am and what I do. Thank you, Baptist family, for recognizing God’s gifts in my life and for enabling me to use those gifts. May we in CBFNC continue to be good stewards of those God continues to call to the work of the Gospel Ministry.



Larry Hovis

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