

Report and reflection on the CPCE Consultation on Ministry, Ordination, and Episkopé

Introduction

This paper consists of a report and a reflection on the CPCE Consultation on Ministry, Ordination, and Episkopé. The first section presents the report, which contains both analytical and reflective components. The second section offers a reflection in which I seek reflect and to propose a small number of forward-looking suggestions.

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Report

The following section now turns to the report itself.

Introduction

This report summarizes and analyzes the main lines from the CPCE consultation on Ministry, Ordination, and Episkopé held in Oslo in April 2026, with a view toward the continuing process leading to the meeting of church leaders in Wittenberg on July 2–3, 2027. The purpose is to formulate theological and ecclesial insights that may contribute to a shared understanding of how the member churches of CPCE should continue working with the ten recommendations from the document *Ministry – Ordination – Episkopé*.

The consultation takes as its point of departure that CPCE already adopted the declaration and recommendations in *Ministry – Ordination – Episkopé* in 2012, while the accompanying study material was recommended for further consideration. The document was not intended as a final solution, but as a common Protestant foundation for continued theological clarification and development of ecclesial practice. It is significant that the CPCE document both maintains a common Protestant understanding of ministry and at the same time acknowledges substantial differences in the concrete arrangements of the member churches.

The present consultation is therefore not only of historical interest. It addresses new challenges: shortage of ordained ministers, changing forms of church leadership, multiple types of ecclesial ministries, discussions on the diaconate, the ordination of women, authorization of lay persons, education, and the question of where the boundary lies between legitimate diversity and theological incompatibility. Körtner formulates this as a key hermeneutical question: CPCE's model of "reconciled diversity" requires not only recognition of differences but also a theological determination of the limits of diversity.

Background: The Status and Problem Field of the MOE Document

Ministry – Ordination – Episkopé was adopted by the 7th General Assembly of CPCE in Florence in 2012. The document continues the basic model of the Leuenberg Agreement: church fellowship is possible where the proclamation of the gospel and the administration of the sacraments are mutually recognized, even if differences remain in church order, liturgy, theology of ministry, and practice. The issue of ministry and ordination was already identified in the Leuenberg Agreement as an area where differences persist without necessarily being church dividing.

The ten recommendations of the MOE document may be grouped into five main areas: first, a critical self-examination of how systems of ministry may sustain or intensify divisions between churches; second, the development of a shared understanding of an ordering of ministries in which the ministry of word and sacrament, diakonia, and episkopé belong inseparably together; third, clarification of the relationship between ordination and other forms of ecclesial authorization; fourth, further investigation of the diaconate and episkopé; and fifth, difficult questions concerning the ordination of women, homosexual persons in ministry, and the limits of reconciled diversity. The ten recommendations explicitly mention the need for further studies

of the diaconate, episkopé, pastoral oversight, the ordination of women, and CPCE's model of unity in reconciled diversity.

It is crucial that these recommendations are not merely about internal church administration. They concern the visible unity of the church, its service to the gospel, and its credibility in an ecumenical context. Körtner emphasizes that the understanding of ministry and the understanding of ecumenism are inseparable: if Protestant churches are to speak with a common voice in Europe, they must be able to articulate what theologically unites them in their understanding of ministry, ordination, and episkopé.

Theological Main Analysis

From One Ministry to a Plurality of Ministries

A central theme of the consultation is the transition from a classical Lutheran “theology of office” (*Amtstheologie*) to a “theology of service” (*Diensttheologie*). Harald Hegstad's contribution from the Norwegian context illustrates this clearly. In traditional Norwegian Lutheran understanding, the pastor was the primary or sole ordained office-bearer, while the bishop was understood as a pastor with particular responsibilities, and other ecclesial functions were regarded as lay ministries. This was theologically linked to Article V of the *Confessio Augustana*, where ministry is understood in relation to the proclamation of the gospel and the administration of the sacraments.

After the Second World War, however, additional church ministries emerged: deacons, catechists, and cantors. This raised the question of whether these ministries should be understood as lay functions, as derivative parts of the pastoral office, or as independent ecclesial ministries. The Norwegian development shows that the issue is not merely terminological. It concerns the relationship between calling, ordination, charisma, education, ministerial structure, and ecclesial authority.

The statement of the Norwegian Bishops' Conference from 2010 was presented as a decisive shift: the ministry of the deacon is not derived from the ministry of the pastor but has its own theological foundation in the gifts of the Spirit. The ministries are different but not hierarchically ordered; there is not necessarily a need for a fixed number of ordained ministries. Ordination is understood as a liturgical act in which the church calls, blesses, and sends a person to a particular ministry.

This is a significant insight for Wittenberg 2027: CPCE should not force all member churches into one specific model of ministry. However, CPCE should require theological clarity regarding how different ministries relate to the proclamation of the gospel, the administration of the sacraments, diakonia, and episkopé.

Ordination and Authorization

The third and fourth recommendations of the MOE document address directly the question of who should be ordained and who should be authorized in other ways. Recommendation 3 states that persons entrusted with public proclamation and the administration of the sacraments should

be ordained. Recommendation 4 calls on churches to examine their doctrine and practice concerning which ministries are ordained and which are commissioned or otherwise authorized.

This point is particularly important because many churches already in practice employ persons in preaching, liturgical, or sacramental functions without a correspondingly clarified theology of ordination. The Methodist presentation illustrates the problem in a sharpened form: in practice, sacramental functions may be carried out by non-ordained or temporarily authorized persons due to a shortage of ordained elders. This raises the question of whether the church, through pragmatic solutions, gradually undermines the very meaning of ordination.

The Methodist objection, however, is not merely conservative. It also points out that sacramental authority should not be understood as an individual privileged power but as a collegial responsibility in the mission of the church. Leadership should therefore be capable of being personal, collegial, and communal at the same time.

The Diaconate as an Unresolved Key Issue

The diaconate emerges as one of the most central problem areas of the consultation. The MOE document recommends further study of the diaconate because it is understood and organized very differently across CPCE member churches.

The Finnish case illustrates the complexity. The Evangelical Lutheran Church of Finland has many professional ministries: pastors, deacons, youth workers, cantors, children's workers, and others. Pastors, deacons, and bishops are ordained through episcopal laying on of hands. At the same time, there has long been discussion about whether several church ministries could be gathered into a broader diaconate, inspired by BEM and the Porvoo Declaration's threefold ministry of bishop, priest, and deacon. Nevertheless, no solution has been found that satisfies all parties, partly because existing professional groups fear a lack of clarity regarding education, areas of work, and competencies.

This demonstrates that the diaconate cannot be treated as a secondary issue. It concerns the church's understanding of ministry, charitable practice, liturgical authority, professional identity, and the relationship between ordination and education.

Episkopé: Personal, Collegial, and Synodal Oversight

Episkopé is another main theme. The MOE document recommends that episkopé should not be presented as an exclusive task of bishops or solely of ministers of word and sacrament, but as a shared responsibility in which church councils, synods, and conferences participate.

This is a key Protestant position. Episkopé should ensure the church's faithfulness to the gospel, but must not be identified with a single person or institution. CPCE member churches have different structures: some have bishops, others presidents, synodal structures, or collegial forms. The difference is not in itself church-dividing. The decisive question is whether episkopé in fact serves the public proclamation of the gospel, the proper administration of the sacraments, the unity of the church, and its mission.

Körtner notes that the question of episkopé is ecumenically sensitive. In dialogue with Roman Catholic, Orthodox, and Anglican churches, it is not sufficient to state that Protestant churches

have “other structures.” A theological justification must be given for how episkopé is exercised visibly, responsibly, and apostolically in Protestant churches.

The Ordination of men and women

Recommendation 8 urges those CPCE churches that do not yet ordain women to take seriously the broad consensus within much of CPCE that the ministry of both men and women should be recognized as a gift of God entrusted to the church.

In the consultation, the issue did not appear primarily as a debate over whether women can be ordained, but rather as a question concerning the actual reception of women’s ministry in the church, including access to leadership, collegial recognition, and institutional integration.

It was also emphasized during the consultation that several participants wished to broaden the understanding of ordination beyond the specific issue of men’s and women’s access to ministry. The discussion highlighted the importance of recognizing ministry as a gift of God entrusted to all human beings, rather than framing the question primarily in terms of gender. In this perspective, the question is not merely whether men and women may be ordained, but whether the church fully recognizes the vocation, dignity, and participation of all persons in ministry

Hilde Marie Øgreid’s contribution sharpens the issue. It is not sufficient to ask whether the ordination of women is formally permitted. One must also ask whether women pastors and ministers are in fact recognized, protected, and integrated into the life of the church. Her material shows both positive experiences of calling, identity, leadership opportunities, and spiritual security, but also resistance in theological, institutional, and collegial forms. Some women encounter the attitude: “We are not against women pastors; we just do not want one.”

This constitutes a decisive corrective to a purely legal or formal approach. A church may formally open ministry to women while maintaining practices, cultures, and working environments that make women’s ministry vulnerable. The report’s recommendation for Wittenberg should therefore be that CPCE addresses the “reception” of women’s ordination as an ecclesiological issue: not merely access, but recognition, protection, participation, and leadership responsibility.

Education, Competencies, and the Future of Pastoral Ministry

The Hungarian case demonstrates that theology of ministry cannot be separated from education and competence development. The Reformed Church in Hungary has worked on a legal clarification of the distinction between *lelkész* and *lelkipásztor*, where the former term is more broadly connected to theological qualification, while the latter is more narrowly linked to ordination, registration, and active pastoral service. At the same time, preaching is defined as an ordered ecclesial act that normally requires a formal pastoral appointment.

The Hungarian development points to a broader European need: churches must clearly distinguish between theological education, ecclesial authorization, ordination, employment, actual ministry, and spiritual responsibility. If these levels are conflated, confusion arises for the church, for the office-holder, and for the congregation.

At the same time, the Hungarian competence model shows that theological education cannot be defined solely in academic terms. It must include biblical and confessional knowledge, homiletical and liturgical skills, pastoral care, ethics, congregational development, mission, diakonia, personal spirituality, and responsible autonomy.

Emerging Models of Ministry and Ecclesial Sustainability

Several discussions indirectly pointed toward the emergence of new ministerial models within European Protestant churches. Although these questions were not explored systematically during the consultation, they appear increasingly unavoidable in light of demographic decline, clergy shortages, and changing ecclesial realities.

Different churches have already begun experimenting with alternative pathways into ministry, including accelerated theological education, bivocational ministry, regionally restricted authorizations, lay preaching arrangements, and temporary sacramental permissions in areas lacking ordained clergy.

Such developments raise significant theological and ecclesiological questions. On the one hand, churches seek to preserve theological competence, sacramental integrity, and ecclesial accountability. On the other hand, rigid ministerial structures may become increasingly difficult to sustain in contexts marked by declining membership and reduced recruitment.

Future CPCE discussions may therefore benefit from distinguishing more clearly between ordinary and extraordinary forms of ministry. Temporary or emergency authorizations need not necessarily undermine ordination theology if they are framed within transparent ecclesial oversight and clear theological criteria.

Likewise, greater attention may be given to sustainable ministerial models combining academic theological formation with local ecclesial experience, supervised ministry, and ongoing formation. Such discussions may become increasingly necessary if Protestant churches are to maintain both theological credibility and practical viability in changing European contexts.

Consolidated Insights for the Church Leaders' Meeting in Wittenberg 2027

The first main insight is that CPCE should maintain the fundamental model of the MOE document: unity in reconciled diversity. However, this model must not be used as an excuse for lack of clarity. Reconciled diversity requires theological discernment. Some differences can be accommodated; others must be critically examined because they may undermine mutual recognition, the integrity of ministry, or the public witness of the church.

The second main insight is that CPCE should continue working toward a common, but not uniform, understanding of an ordering of ministries. The ministry of word and sacrament, diakonia, and episkopé should be understood as indispensable dimensions of the life of the church. However, they need not be organized identically in all member churches.

The third main insight is that ordination and authorization require renewed clarification. Where persons are regularly entrusted with public proclamation and the administration of the sacraments, the church should not rely on pragmatic authorization without theological grounding. The MOE recommendation concerning the ordination of those who exercise the

ministry of word and sacrament should therefore be reconsidered in light of contemporary ministerial shortages and new forms of ministry.

The fourth main insight is that the diaconate should be treated as a priority area of work. The diaconate is not merely a question of social work but concerns the church's structure of ministry, theology of ordination, and understanding of the embodied and societal dimensions of the gospel.

The fifth main insight is that episkopé should be described as shared, responsible, and visible. CPCE should formulate a stronger Protestant theology of oversight in which personal, collegial, and synodal elements do not compete but mutually correct one another.

The sixth main insight is that the ordination of women should be treated as more than access to ministry. It should also concern actual recognition, working conditions, leadership opportunities, and protection against theological or institutional marginalization.

The seventh main insight is that education and ongoing formation must be included in the outcome document. The future of church ministry requires academic theology, practical competencies, spiritual formation, leadership skills, and the ability to work within pluralized ecclesial contexts. Against this background, the outcome document from Wittenberg should remain concise, while carrying more authority than a simple conference report.

Conclusion on the report

The consultation demonstrates that the MOE document remains a necessary common reference point for CPCE, but also that new ecclesial realities require further theological work. The most pressing task is not to create uniformity, but to formulate a more precise theology of legitimate diversity. CPCE must be able to distinguish between differences that enrich church fellowship and differences that weaken mutual recognition, public proclamation, sacramental practice, or the calling of individuals to ministry.

Wittenberg 2027 should therefore result in an outcome document that both reaffirms the theological foundation of MOE and provides a clear working plan. The document should not close the discussion, but structure it. It should especially prioritize ordination and authorization, the diaconate, episkopé, the ordination of women, theological education, and the limits of reconciled diversity.

Reflection

The following section now turns to a reflection.

Introduction

The reflections should not be understood merely as organizational observations, but as ecclesiological questions concerning participation, authority, theological legitimacy, and the practical embodiment of ministry within CPCE processes.

Representation and Participation

A recurring issue throughout the consultation concerned representation and participation, reflected in significant demographic and vocational imbalances among participants. Of the 36 participants, 63.9% were men and 36.1% women. Only two participants (5.6%) were non-ordained, and only one participant (2.8%) represented the younger generation. Several groups central to the discussions were therefore either minimally represented or entirely absent. This imbalance constitutes both a methodological and ecclesiological limitation, as broader participation could have contributed additional perspectives and strengthened the legitimacy of the consultation process. In particular, the pluralistic ministries were not directly represented. Although these perspectives were occasionally referenced, there were no direct contributions from representatives such as deacons or catechists.

A similar pattern emerged in discussions concerning the recruitment of young people to theological study. While this issue was repeatedly emphasized, younger theologians themselves were largely absent from the discussions as active contributors. This reveals a structural challenge within ecclesial decision-making processes, where groups directly affected by questions of recruitment, education, and future ministry are not consistently included in conversations concerning these issues.

Two general recommendations follow from these observations. First, younger theologians should be more actively consulted regarding their experiences, needs, and expectations. Second, participation and decision-making processes should be made more accessible to younger generations, and their contributions should be met with genuine institutional openness. Such initiatives could support a more sustainable development of ecclesial structures by shifting attention beyond immediate crisis management toward cultivating institutions in which younger generations wish to participate and pursue long-term theological and ecclesial vocations. One possible initiative would be to invite younger theologians to contribute recommendations concerning the content, structure, and forms of participation at future consultations.

A related issue concerns the frequent emphasis on including different “voices” within the discussions. References to minorities, women, younger participants, and various ecclesial ministries cannot substitute for actual representation. Meaningful participation requires both presence and opportunities for active contribution within discussion and decision-making processes. These groups should therefore be regarded not merely as subjects of representation, but as active contributors and theological resources within the life of the church.

Inconsistency in Ordination Practices

This issue reappeared in discussions concerning alternative and extraordinary pathways to ordination introduced in response to increasing clergy shortages within several CPCE member churches. These arrangements may involve accelerated theological education, modified qualification requirements, or exceptional forms of ministerial authorization. Some participants expressed concern that such models risk weakening the theological and academic standards traditionally associated with ordained ministry, while others regarded them as necessary adaptations to demographic change and declining recruitment.

The discussions revealed an institutional tension between preserving established standards for ministry and addressing practical personnel shortages. Although these challenges were repeatedly identified as significant, they were not examined in substantial depth during the

consultation. One possible explanation is that the conference remained primarily focused on maintaining theological coherence within CPCE's existing framework rather than engaging more directly with structural reform.

The discussion therefore reflects a broader ecclesiological tension between normative theological understandings of ministry and the practical realities facing many European churches. Future CPCE processes could benefit from a more explicit discussion of sustainable pathways into ministry, including questions of theological formation, ecclesial authorization, and long-term leadership development within changing ecclesial contexts.

Overlooked Resources

The question of how to attract young people to the study of theology was repeatedly raised, although younger theologians themselves were only minimally involved in the discussions. This reveals a structural challenge within ecclesial decision-making processes, where groups directly affected by questions of recruitment, education, and future ministry are not consistently included in the conversations concerning these issues.

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Gender and Professional Roles

Questions related to gender and professional roles emerged repeatedly during the consultation. In several instances, female theologians appeared to be associated primarily with so-called "female topics," potentially narrowing perceptions of their theological expertise and professional competence. The distribution of speaking time and visibility among presenters also appeared uneven.

These dynamics raise broader questions concerning participation, representation, and authority within theological discussions. Issues such as feminism, equality, and ecclesial inclusion should therefore not be understood as concerns limited to particular groups, but as shared theological and ecclesiological questions relevant to the wider church. One possible response would be to develop more diverse panel compositions and discussion formats that integrate a wider range of perspectives and competencies. Such initiatives could also strengthen inclusion and engagement

within ecclesial contexts.

Another challenge concerned differing hermeneutical and contextual approaches within the discussions. For example, the significance of female bishops was not always interpreted in relation to the historical and ecclesial contexts in which these developments emerged. This suggests a need for greater contextual sensitivity and reflexivity within ecumenical theological dialogue.

Several participants also expressed concerns regarding the overall direction and structure of the consultation. This raises questions about leadership and facilitation within ecumenical conferences: how to create frameworks that support open dialogue, theological diversity, and sufficient structural clarity simultaneously. In this context, effective leadership should be understood less as unilateral control and more as the facilitation of constructive and attentive dialogue capable of engaging diverse perspectives within a shared ecclesial framework.

Culture

Several participants noted that limited time for questions and discussion contributed to experiences of insufficient participation within the consultation process. This relates to broader questions of dialogue culture, mutual curiosity, and the willingness to engage seriously with differing theological perspectives.

The discussions also highlighted wider issues concerning participation, authority, and communication within theological and ecclesial contexts. Productive theological dialogue depends on environments in which differing perspectives can be presented and critically examined without being prematurely dismissed or marginalized. Theological reflection and education therefore require ongoing learning, intellectual openness, and critical engagement regardless of academic seniority or ecclesial position.

Experiences of limited participation, dismissive communication, and occasional condescending remarks may indicate institutional challenges concerning authority, communication, and inclusion within theological discourse. This suggests a need for continued reflection on how authority is exercised within ecclesial and academic settings, and how dialogue structures can better support mutual listening, openness, and constructive disagreement.

More broadly, the consultation demonstrated the importance of fostering professional and ecclesial cultures in which differing vocational aspirations, theological perspectives, and forms of contribution are treated with respect and seriousness. These considerations remain particularly relevant in contexts where questions of representation, inclusion, and professional legitimacy continue to shape theological and ecclesial life

Outcomes

The discussions ultimately focused on critical engagement with the ten existing recommendations of the MOE document. Participants considered whether additional recommendations were necessary and how the current formulations might be revised, clarified, or further developed. Although several proposals for future work emerged during the consultation, their adoption and implementation remain dependent on subsequent consideration within CPCE's institutional structures. The outcome of the consultation therefore appeared

somewhat open-ended, as many contributions and proposals were deferred to future processes and possible consideration by the CPCE Council. References to limited time, ongoing procedures, and institutional workloads may reflect the practical realities of large ecclesial processes, but they may also create an impression of institutional caution regarding questions requiring clearer commitments or structural clarification. This raises questions concerning institutional prioritization, decision-making, and accountability within ecclesial contexts. The allocation of time, attention, and procedural focus reflects underlying institutional values and priorities. Greater clarity regarding both the aims of the consultation and the intended implementation processes could therefore strengthen transparency, coherence, and institutional credibility within future CPCE initiatives.

Central Problems Without Central Discussion

Although issues such as the shortage of young priests, forms of ordination, lay preachers, and other pragmatic responses were identified as significant challenges during the conference, they were not discussed in substantial depth. This raises an important question: why were these issues not explored more thoroughly despite being regarded as central concerns? The limited discussion may reflect a tension between recognizing ecclesial challenges and the willingness or ability of institutions to address them openly. These topics involve theological, ecclesiological, and organizational questions that challenge established structures and forms of authority. The absence of deeper engagement may therefore indicate a degree of institutional caution, in which attention is directed more toward practical adaptation than toward critical analysis of the underlying causes and long-term consequences of these problems.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the consultation revealed significant ecclesiological and institutional tensions within CPCE concerning participation, representation, authority, and sustainable forms of ministry. Although the discussions identified central challenges such as clergy shortages, alternative ordination pathways, inclusion, and recruitment of younger theologians, many of these issues remained insufficiently explored. The analysis demonstrates that meaningful ecclesial development requires more than procedural representation; it requires active participation from those directly affected by theological and institutional decisions. Furthermore, the consultation exposed tensions between maintaining theological continuity and responding to changing ecclesial realities across European churches. Questions of gender, professional roles, dialogue culture, and institutional leadership further highlighted the importance of transparency, contextual sensitivity, and constructive theological engagement. Overall, the consultation reflected both the strengths and limitations of contemporary ecumenical processes. Future CPCE initiatives may therefore benefit from broader inclusion, clearer institutional priorities, and more open engagement with the structural and theological challenges shaping the future of ministry and ecclesial life.

In closing, gratitude should be expressed toward the supportive environments (The Church of Norway), which facilitate participation in such contexts.