Nobody will dispute the fact that the church needs to be apostolic. We find this characteristic in the broadest ecumenical creed of the early church—the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed. But whether or not the ordained ministry has to play a role in this, and what that role should be has been a subject of disagreement for centuries—particularly in the Western churches. It is therefore not surprising that a separate chapter is devoted to this subject in this ecumenical discussion about ministry. In fact, it appears to be the most difficult element in the ecumenical discussion about ministry. Because this discussion about the apostolic succession has dragged on for such a long time, this chapter is longer than the others. It offers an opportunity to become better acquainted with the most important ecumenical documents about ministry in the 20th century.

The Preceding History

The Lambeth Quadrilateral of 1888

From the beginning of the ecumenical movement in the twentieth century, the theme of apostolicity was one of the most important aspects of the discussion about the ordained ministry. The first indication of this can be found in the Lambeth Quadrilateral of 1888, which cites the four pillars upon which, according to the Anglican understanding of unity, the unity of the church of the future would have to be founded. These four are the normative character of the scripture, the established formula of the rule of the faith as laid down in the Apostolic Creed and the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed, the celebration of Baptism and the Lord’s Supper, and as fourth point ‘the historic episcopate.’ This view of the church as an institution is strongly influenced by Anglican incarnational theology. Because it is defined by the normative tradition in scripture and the creeds and by the normative structure of the
sacramental actions and of the ministry, the church can—in a certain sense—be regarded as a continuation of the incarnation of Christ. As a result, a great emphasis on continuity in the history of the church from the beginning is characteristic for Anglican theology. In the historic episcopate, the ministry is approached from the point of view of continuity—from an authority passed on from generation to generation from the beginning. Difference of opinion remained over the question of whether the episcopal ministry should be ‘historical’ or ‘apostolic,’ but in the end the first formulation was chosen because in this way it would be possible to have a discussion with non-episcopal churches about the episcopal ministry as a leadership instrument in the church.¹

_The First World Conference of Faith and Order in Lausanne in 1927_

Paragraph 36 of section V, “The Ministry of the church,” sums up the following points about which there is still difference of opinion: “These differences concern the nature of the ministry (whether consisting of one or several orders), the nature of ordination and of the grace conferred thereby, the function and authority of bishops, and the nature of apostolic succession.”² Lausanne makes a clear distinction between the episcopal ministry with its authority and the apostolic succession, and—in doing so—it goes further than the Lambeth Quadrilateral. But what does not change is the strategy; namely, to make it possible to have discussion between the episcopal and the non-episcopal churches about leadership offices.³ For the Orthodox participants of the conference, for whom the apostolic succession is part of the essence of the episcopal ministry, this separation of points proved to be unacceptable. For this reason, they refused to approve the text about ministry and gave as their reason: “The Orthodox Church, … believing that the ministry in its threefold form of bishop, presbyters and deacons can only be based on the unbroken apostolic succession, regrets that it is unable to come in regard to the ministry into some measure of agreement with many of the churches represented at this Conference.”⁴ Within Western Christendom, comparative ecclesiology is used to identify differences of opin-

¹ See also Vischer, _Apostolischer Dienst_, 11–13, and Gosker, _Het kerkelijk ambt in het Limadocument_, 21–22.
² Bate, _Faith and Order_, Proceedings of the World Conference Lausanne, August 3–21, 1927, 468.
³ Vischer, _Apostolischer Dienst_, 51.
⁴ Bate, _Faith and Order_, Proceedings of the World Conference Lausanne, 470–471, italics mine.