



Lay Preaching: A Blessed Necessity

DIANE MELBYE

Due to a shortage of ordained pastors in our rural area in 2001, the bishop of the Western North Dakota Synod (ELCA) licensed me, a layperson, to conduct funerals, preside at Holy Communion, and preach at the worship services of three congregations. I worked under the supervision of a neighboring ordained pastor and in consultation with the councils of the three churches.

This temporary “pulpit supply” ended in 2003, when a full-time ordained pastor was jointly called by the three yoked congregations. Upon completion of this temporary licensure, the congregations presented me with a plaque of “heartfelt appreciation and thanks.” But it is I who should have thanked them, as one cannot wrestle so regularly with the word of God without being changed. As Isaiah writes, the word of the Lord does not return empty, but accomplishes that which God intends.

It is from this experience that I address the question of whether non-ordained ELCA members should be allowed to preach. In certain areas of the country, especially rural or remote areas, it is simply a matter of necessity. If the pulpit is to be filled on Sunday morning, a trained layperson must lead worship and preach the word. This is a daunting task until one remembers that Lutherans assert that the proclamation of the gospel is first and foremost a part of the calling of all the baptized people of God. Accordingly, the church, whenever compelled by necessity, has made exceptions to the practice of giving responsibility for public preaching to the ordained. Further, Scripture affirms that none of the original disciples had completed seminary training or been ordained prior to being sent forth to preach the gospel!

In countless areas where there is a shortage of ordained pastors, when a solo ordained pastor is ill, on vacation, or on sabbatical, or when a congregation is temporarily without a pastor, then, out of necessity, if the pulpit is to be filled week in and week out, a trained layperson must be given the responsibility of sharing the gospel message. Moreover, during the busiest times of the year pastors may preach three or even four sermons a week. With such responsibility, on top of all the other regular demands on a pastor’s time, congregations that rely only on their ordained leader may be flirting with pastoral burnout. Lay preachers can help alleviate some of that burden.

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TO FACE

Lay Preaching: A Mixed Bag

CRAIG BOEHLKE

Can one dare to speak a word of caution about the growing trend of using lay preachers to fill pulpits? Affirming the ministry of the laity is an important part of what pastors need to be doing these days. Too many congregational leaders have understood lay ministry as activity in the church and have failed to nurture the broader callings of all the baptized to a life of ministry in family, community, and workplace as well as in congregation. One of the most cherished assets today for professional leaders is having both passion and ability to work collaboratively with members of the church in service to the whole of God's creation.

Having made those important affirmations, are we really ready to yield our pulpits, as the growing trend in the ELCA and other denominations suggests? There are many positive reasons for the use of lay preachers. Most denominations are experiencing at least situational shortages of pastors in rural areas and other places where compensation is marginal. The costs of having a full-time pastor have become prohibitive as salaries and benefits have risen. Synod officials have tried to support struggling congregations, but dwindling populations challenge their viability.

Back in the 1980s, the North Dakota synods of the ELCA began addressing the combined issues of laity wanting better religious education and the need for congregational leadership by creating the GIFTS program (Growth in Faith to Serve). Among those involved in GIFTS, a number demonstrated willingness and skills for lay preaching and pastoral leadership. Many congregations have had very positive experiences of being served by these lay pastors, who are often longtime members deeply connected to the communities they serve. Since then, many synods have replicated the success of GIFTS, and a number of GIFTS leaders have gone on to seminary for training as professional lay or ordained leaders.

Further, lay preaching isn't a modern invention. In Acts 6 the church appointed deacons in response to the needs of the faith community. Although appointed to wait tables, Stephen is soon arrested for preaching. Interestingly, we have no account of Stephen as waiter—only as preacher!

But if we are to have lay preaching, what should our expectations be? Acts 6 suggests that these leaders are identified and appointed by the community rather than self-nominated. Whether clergy or lay, Lutherans believe that the inner call of the person of faith is tested and ratified by the external call of the community.

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Many laypersons have something of value to offer congregations through their preaching. Only recently I heard a laywoman preach a powerful message of grace at a synod assembly. Further, interested and able laypersons can avail themselves of training to assist them in preaching. For instance, present computer technology allows persons to receive online seminary training. Luther Seminary in St. Paul, for example, offers an online preaching course that requires students to prepare and deliver three sermons to a “live” congregation. Students thoroughly research the biblical passage before carefully writing out their manuscripts. After preaching, students not only receive structured feedback from members of the congregation, they also send a videotape of the sermon to the instructor to receive additional critical comments. In this way, even those non-ordained preachers laboring at a distance from any seminary can receive training in effective sermon preparation and delivery.

Although ordained pastors will admit that preaching is a trying, tiring, and time-consuming task, they also assert that such work is an incredible gift to them. If this is the case, and given our great need for more preachers, shouldn’t the church consider allowing trained laypersons, under the guidance of ordained leaders, occasionally to struggle with those same biblical texts? Some may worry that the word will get muddled if members of the laity are allowed to preach, and certainly that may happen. Yet even seasoned ordained leaders relate stories of missing the crux of the text on occasion. Highly acclaimed preacher and professor Fred Craddock recounts not only thoroughly misunderstanding the gospel message of a particular biblical passage during his study but also going ahead and offering a sermon based on that misunderstanding! If this can happen to someone like Craddock, perhaps the rest of us deserve some leniency! After all, we are called as the body of Christ to journey together *faithfully*, not *flawlessly*. We live, breathe, and journey together surrounded by God’s grace and we trust in God’s promises.

Given both the necessity and blessing of the need for lay preachers, perhaps we can trust more fully in the truth of Isaiah’s promise that God’s word will not return empty but will grow and take root, nourishing God’s people and accomplishing what God desires, not in spite of, but at times actually because of, the work of faithful and trained lay preachers. ⊕

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Some of the problems of lay preaching encountered by the church can be attributed to self-appointed volunteer preachers who try to correct the church for all its past errors.

The GIFTS program tied acceptance of a preaching assignment to a mentoring relationship and regular text study. Synod staff members have regularly reported a strong correlation between good lay preaching and excellent mentors. We encourage mentor relationships and continuing education for our newly called pastors, so it only makes sense to employ these opportunities for our lay preachers. Participation with other leaders also leads to a better understanding of the larger church. One of the bigger challenges is to nurture local lay leaders who understand the multifaceted ministries of a large denomination.

The Lutheran Church of Faith and Hope in Nicaragua, companion church to the South Dakota Synod (ELCA), is a young church working primarily with the poor and refugees. They have over forty worshiping communities and only two ordained pastors. They serve with twenty-five lay pastors who commit to a regimen of weekly study and living a sacrificial spiritual life as a leader. From within this group several are being supported in training toward ordination. Visiting the Nicaraguan church in the spring of 2003, I witnessed the importance of the worship, study, and community life of these lay preachers, who made amazing sacrifices in order to spread the gospel. The vitality of this young church grows from their dedication to Christ and to each other.

In contrast, some synods in the ELCA have tried to assist struggling congregations with lay preachers, only to watch congregational giving and benevolence shrink. There are anecdotal reports of loss of mission awareness and even moves to leave the denomination as a result of the work of lay preachers. The ELCA has a very finely crafted candidacy process for professional leaders. In contrast, lay leadership currently has no formal guidelines, and expectations vary from synod to synod. This must be remedied. In a nation of highly educated members who are part of a culture of very sophisticated communication and unlimited information, we cannot afford to provide anything less than the best possible gospel preaching. Quality may not be guaranteed by using trained clergy, but it will certainly not be served by employing inadequately prepared and unaccountable lay preachers. The current conversations of the Conference of Bishops regarding lay ministry are important and need to be expanded to the broader church. Our Lord and the church deserve our very best. ☩

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