



Lay Presidency: Serving the Gospel

STANLEY N. OLSON

Prediction: The world's need for the gospel will push the church toward authorizing lay presiders for the foreseeable future.

Assertion: Gospel need is a strong argument for this practice in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America and in many Protestant churches. Christ's mission in the twenty-first century needs lay presiders to preach and teach and preside at the sacraments.

The office of word and sacrament was instituted by Christ to obtain faith (Augsburg Confession, Article 5). A faithful church body provides word and sacrament ministers so that the gospel can actually work forgiveness in human hearts. Normatively, by ecumenical consensus, these ministers will be ordained, set apart by the church with prayer and the laying on of hands. However, the office of ministry precedes and exceeds all incumbents. It is created by Christ's sending, not by the apostles Christ sends (Matt 28:18–20). Thus, while strongly affirming the ministry of the ordained, church bodies can also fill this evangelical office when necessary by authorizing a layperson.

The world's need for the gospel persistently runs ahead of institutional ability to respond. In location, aptness, and numbers, our cadres of ordained ministers will not fully match our opportunities to proclaim the faith and administer the sacraments. The gospel cannot always wait for ecclesial systems to produce pastors. Nor can ecumenical partnerships meet every need. The systems and partnerships are good and must be honed to work ever more effectively, but there will always be need for options. In March, 2005, the bishops of the ELCA, with apparent unanimity, supported the continuance of lay presidency. Many of them would prefer it were not necessary, but they see the compelling need.

There are collateral benefits with the practice of lay presidency. Notably, it can help sustain clarity about ordination. Since laypersons may be authorized to preside, ordination is demonstrably not necessary for the power of the word or the efficacy of sacraments. It is a tool with a purpose—making the gospel available. By pursuing ordination's purpose by other means when necessary, a church body affirms that which makes ordination essential. Ordination is apostleship, but there are other sendings in Christ's name.

A second collateral benefit of allowing lay presidency is that in conversation with the larger church a local congregation may see its mission more clearly. Every

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TO FACE

Lay Presidency: Meeting the Challenges

MONS A. TEIG

Ordained pastors normally preside in the office of word and sacraments. That is a centuries-old pattern that the church has affirmed in its practice and confessions. The Augsburg Confession, Article 14, states: “Concerning church government it is taught that no one should publicly teach, preach, or administer the sacraments without a proper [public] call.”

Why then are we considering laypersons presiding in the public ministry of word and sacraments? What situations call for this innovation? How do we surround such persons and congregations with the support and guidelines that we normally provide for ordained presiders? Those are a few of the questions I briefly want to address.

First, what gives rise to the question of lay presidency? Underneath that question is perhaps a deeper question. If a congregation does not have access to an ordained pastor for any number of reasons for an extended period of time, does a congregation’s need for the means of grace through word and sacrament call for an interim way of filling this “office of preaching, giving the gospel and the sacraments” precisely for the sake of the gospel? (Augsburg Confession, Article 5).

The question arises in settings where a full-time ordained pastor is not available because of lack of financial resources, size, an ethnic congregation’s language needs, a new mission start, or geographic setting. Fifty years ago many were touting worker priests where one’s financial support came from work outside the congregation. In some places, that may still be one alternative, but it will not meet all situations. Another factor that presses this issue is the stated goal of word *and* sacrament of Holy Communion every Sunday instead of word *and* occasional sacrament. Is a congregation deprived of regular access to the sacraments because there is not an ordained person available?

The Evangelical Lutheran Church in America provides a nuanced permissive answer to the above questions. “Where it is not possible for an extended period of time to provide ordained pastoral leadership, a synodical bishop may authorize a properly trained lay person to preside for a specified period of time and in a given location only” (ELCA’s *Use of the Means of Grace*, 45). The Division of Ministry on the ELCA’s website provides a detailed outline of how to implement and support this alternative. I will highlight several of the issues and their implications.

Authorization is given by the synod bishop annually and for a specific loca-

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congregation deals with the temptation of sin, turning in on self. If there is only one means to an end, it is easy to mistake the means for the end. “How shall we meet our mission of providing gospel proclamation in this community?” is a more faithful and world-oriented question than “How can we get a new pastor for our church?”

Third, using lay presidency to meet emergent needs has the benefit of reminding the church that it must constantly call forth women and men to prepare for ordained ministry in diverse settings.

Gospel purpose must guide the use of lay presidency:

- In word and symbol, authorization by a judicatory must be sufficiently clear and public to connect the person’s ministry with the whole church. The office of word and sacrament is not a private possession or power to be claimed by pastors through ordination, nor by individual believers through baptism, nor by congregations as gathered in Christ. It belongs to the church, for faith.

- Careful choice of individuals to authorize is no less essential than the choice of persons to be ordained. All ministers of word and sacrament must adorn the gospel with their lives and work. Lay presidency is never a matter of simply standing in the chancel and speaking words. It places a person, at least temporarily, into the pastoral role for a congregation, a role inevitably connecting to the person’s past, present, and future life.

- Similarly, though people authorized for lay presidency should be well prepared, it is not preparation that gives them authority to serve. Authority comes through the church’s call and the commitment to mutual accountability. Proper authorization and adept supervision are essential.

- Need for lay presidency is not determined by the size or location of a congregation. A lack of ordained ministers to meet gospel need often occurs in small and isolated congregations, but also in new mission starts or in ethnic-specific ministries. It may occur even in larger, well-established congregations.

- Ordination remains the norm and passing time allows movement toward it. When gospel needs are leading to frequent or long-term authorization of a particular person or for a particular congregation, it is vital to find an appropriate candidate to prepare for ordination by one of the church’s normal routes. Christ’s church will need the gift of lay presidency for the foreseeable future, but no particular congregation should have to do without ordained ministry for an extended period.

Providing for lay presidency is not a *legitimizing* authorization. It is an *evangelizing* authorization. It is not fundamentally to legitimize a person but to evangelize the world. In that sense, authorized lay presidency is precisely parallel to ordained ministry. It serves the gospel. ⊕

STANLEY N. OLSON is executive director of the Division for Ministry, Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, Chicago, Illinois.

tion. This authorization properly reminds congregation and lay presider that this is a public office that reflects our belonging to the “one, holy, catholic and apostolic church.” In order to support such a person who does not have today’s full seminary training, continuing education opportunities are essential. As we do with seminary interns, such persons are to be supported by a supervising pastor appointed by the synodical bishop. Lay presiders, like ordained pastors, must always be reminded that this is not an office of individual power or status but serves and engages the ministry of the whole congregation.

Accountability for this public office is stressed in the promises and commitments made by ordinands at their ordination. When laypersons are authorized for presiding in this public office of word and sacrament, they too must understand and make commitments to churchwide standards that express and support this gospel ministry in the congregation. Misconduct and liability must be monitored in lay presiders as well as the ordained. If psychological testing is important for candidates for ordination, perhaps a similar testing should be required for the sake of the congregation and the person, even if authorization is for a limited time and location.

The time and location limits do serve as prods to encourage some of these lay presiders to discern a call toward ordination or to encourage others to offer themselves for ordained ministry.

This question of lay presiding has also encouraged congregations to think about shared ministry with ecumenical partners. Such cooperation may stimulate communities of faith to think in new ways about a shared and common mission.

In global mission settings, lay evangelists and teachers have served God’s gospel mission in powerful and imaginative ways. There may be new possibilities that arise out of this present question. Hopefully this will not result in a clericalization of the laity, but rather underline the mission of the whole people of God with all their varied gifts especially for Christ’s mission to the entire world. This could provide new impetus to theological education for all God’s people about this common mission to God’s world that we all share.

Ultimately, this is not an issue of what is legal, but rather what serves the church in its gospel mission and its ministry to the whole creation and in all circumstances of life. It is about the Spirit’s leading all of us through the Spirit-empowered means of grace to discover ways to minister responsibly and imaginatively in new and challenging situations. The question about lay presidency is not really about limitations or exceptions, but rather about how the whole church can work together to fully receive, embody, witness to, and serve God’s gift of the means of grace for the life and salvation of the world. ☩

MONS A. TEIG is professor emeritus of worship at Luther Seminary, St. Paul, Minnesota.