



The Centered Life Initiative: Equipping the Saints

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The commitment to the vocation of the laity, the priesthood of all believers, is a centerpiece of the Lutheran tradition. Congregations are the best places for God's people to be inspired and equipped to live out their callings each day. The Centered Life¹ Initiative at Luther Seminary provides a framework for change, thereby seeking to ignite renewal in congregations, making them places where people gather, encounter Christ in word and sacrament, experience the support of Christian community, become equipped for everyday mission and ministry, and then are scattered to serve God in their many vocational settings.

THE PROBLEM IN CONTEXT

Peter Vaill, professor of human systems at the University of St. Thomas, says that we are living in a "world of permanent whitewater."² Everything in the world is

¹"Centered Life" is a registered trademark of Luther Seminary, Saint Paul, Minnesota.

²Peter Vaill, *Learning as a Way of Being: Strategies for Survival in a World of Permanent Whitewater* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1996) 4.

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speeding up—including our lives, which, at the same time, are becoming ever more compartmentalized. Many of us live in four to seven different communities, in most of which we are only partially known. People are in community where they work, where they work out, at their children’s schools, and in their many special interest locations. Often our community of worship is quite distinct from the community in which we live. People yearn to bring their many selves together into one place where they can be whole and where they are known well. People struggle to figure out how they can decompartmentalize their lives, recognizing without knowing it Augustine’s prayer that “our heart is restless until it rests in you.”³ Even businesses understand this yearning for a more holistic life. Companies realize that they need to care for more than the bottom line for their employees to be productive. Laura Nash and Scotty McLennan note that fifteen hundred websites pop up when you search on spirituality and business.⁴ They observe that the heightened public yearning to fill a clearly felt void corresponds to a decided lack of interest in the church as the place where that yearning can be satisfied. People are “making it up” and creating their own spirituality programs from a smorgasbord of options, and they are spending three billion dollars a year on religious books.

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Meanwhile, people sit in the pews of churches all over the country trying to make a connection between their experience on Sunday morning and the complicated lives they live in their homes, workplaces, and communities. But the church, instead of being a resource of empowerment for the whole of people’s lives, has become yet another competitor for their time. Church leaders reinforce the Sunday-to-Monday disconnect by focusing on internal maintenance, church growth, and in-house programs instead of equipping people for work and ministry in God’s world.

MEANING, BELONGING, AND LUTHERAN THEOLOGY

God has placed within each person the desire to experience a sense of belonging and to make a difference in the world. “How do I know what I am created to be? Where do I belong? How can I make a difference in the world?” These are uni-

³Augustine, *Confessions* 1.1 (this translation by John K. Ryan [Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1960] 43).

⁴Laura Nash and Scotty McLennan, *Church on Sunday, Work on Monday: The Challenge of Fusing Christian Values with Business Life* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2001) 4.

versal questions, and the need to answer these personal and fundamental needs has exploded now in this chaotic society. People are searching for belonging in their many communities so that they can make a difference and leave a legacy. The title of Bob Buford's book *Halftime* derives from his contention that we spend the first half of our lives striving for success only to discover that success doesn't necessarily bring us significance, so in the second half of life we strive to make a difference.⁵

These yearnings for belonging and meaning have their theological roots in the doctrines of justification and vocation. Both Calvin and Luther were deeply committed to these two major pillars of the Reformation. In breaking down the hierarchy between priest and laity, both Reformers emphasized that God calls us all equally at our baptism. At that moment of absolute helplessness, God chooses us unconditionally and graciously gives new life. Justified by God's grace through faith, we can do nothing to contribute to our own salvation. Baptized, we belong to God and to a community of God's people that propels us into loving and serving our neighbors. God calls us into the world to become God's arms, legs, and mouth-piece, and each of us possesses a unique bundle of strengths that allows us to make a difference in the world.

It is a pure invention that pope, bishop, priests, and monks are called into the spiritual estate while prince, lords, artisans, and farmers are called into the temporal estate. This is indeed a piece of deceit and hypocrisy. Yet no one is intimidated by it, and for this reason: all Christians are truly of the spiritual estate, and there is no difference among them except that of office....We are all consecrated priests through baptism.⁶

But the church, in its concern to emphasize that we are not working our way to salvation, has often been better at clarifying the doctrine of justification than it has been at understanding and articulating the doctrine of vocation. The church has been better at gathering people, proclaiming Christ in their midst, caring for them, and talking about faith than it has been at setting people free for the ordinary activities of life in which God finds us, and in which—knowing God from word and sacrament—we can find God also at work. Consequently, the people in the pews have not clearly heard their vocation to be salt, light, and leaven in the world.

At the same time He [the Holy Spirit] confirms all crafts, classes, and trades existing under such secular governments, regardless of name, insofar as they are honest and praiseworthy according to their own law. They may be citizens, farmers, shoemakers, tailors, clerks, knights, masters, servants, etc.; for without such, as Ecclesiasticus says, no city or country could exist (38:36). One must recognize that in themselves such occupations are not contrary to God; and if one wants to serve God, one should not turn up one's nose at them and creep away

⁵Bob Buford, *Halftime: Changing Your Game Plan from Success to Significance* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994).

⁶Martin Luther, "To the Christian Nobility of the German Nation concerning the Reform of the Christian Estate" (1520), in *Luther's Works*, 55 vols., ed. Jaroslav Pelikan and Helmut Lehmann (Philadelphia and St. Louis: Fortress and Concordia, 1955–1986) 44:127 (hereafter, *LW*).

into a monastery or set up some other sect. Yes, these are all estates established by God to serve Him according to the words of Gen. 3:19: "In the sweat of your face you shall eat bread."⁷

We have learned that as pastors begin to visit their members in their workplaces, their preaching and teaching and their understanding of their members' lives are completely changed. Pastors discover that people are indeed being faithful in their workplaces, but that no one has helped them name their God-given gifts at work. People can speak about how God is at work in their congregation, but they cannot name how God is present in their workplace or in the rest of their lives. Yet vocation, a key corollary to the priesthood of all believers, is at the heart of the Reformation, a gift that has too often been left unopened in our concern to clarify the doctrine of justification.

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The Reformation speaks to people's deep needs to be centered, to belong, and to make a difference. Christian theology, especially in its Lutheran emphases, has an answer to those broken, compartmentalized lives that are trying to be centered, whole, and known. God made our faith personal through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus, and God made our faith communal so that we nurture one another in this faith. We have something to offer those who are yearning for wholeness. When people discover Christ's daily presence and their own unique pattern of strengths, when they learn to make connections between their faith and the whole of their lives, they experience a deep sense of belonging and are confident that they will make a difference in the world. This leads to fulfillment and, as Frederick Buechner writes, to "the place where your deep gladness and the world's deep hunger meet."⁸

CONGREGATIONS IN MISSION

The Christian church is not an end in itself, that is, merely a place to be baptized, confirmed, married, and buried; it is God's mission for the world. The missional congregation needs to free God's people for their work in the world and in the many communities in which they find themselves. A community without mission produces self-absorption. A mission without community produces exhaustion. But a community with a mission can change the world and be a source of fulfillment for its members; then the Christian church will grow through God's activity in the lives of people.

⁷Martin Luther, "Psalm 117" (1530), in *LW* 14:15.

⁸Frederick Buechner, *Wishful Thinking: A Theological ABC* (New York: Harper & Row, 1973) 95.

Vital congregations will be those who set a high priority on equipping their members for the movement from Sunday to Monday and on setting them free to interact with people in the world. The Reformation dialectic between the two doctrines (justification and vocation) is played out practically in congregations when we gather as communities of faith and then are sent into the world to live out our callings. We have mistakenly concentrated on the individual's call to the congregation rather than inspiring people to see that God is calling them to ministry in the many communities in which they live; we have emphasized God's presence in worship alone rather than also awakening and empowering people to see God at work in their everyday lives.

When we focus on the internal work of the congregation rather than on its people, we compete for the members' time, energy, and money. But if the church equips its people to do the work of God, to take their ethics into the world, and to pour out their lives of faith into those places, the power of God's people will be unleashed. Poverty, for example, will never be defeated inside our congregations, but it might be in the boardrooms of our community as individual people live out their faith in the world. A life centered in Jesus Christ gives identity and a place to stand in a compartmentalized and chaotic world.

LUTHER SEMINARY AND THE CENTERED LIFE INITIATIVE

Historically, Luther Seminary has always demonstrated a deep commitment to congregations. Currently, the seminary's mission statement, redefined curriculum, and strategic planning process place the congregation clearly at the center of the seminary's work. The faculty established the support of the ministry of the laity as a key initiative in the seminary's 2000 strategic plan.

As we have worked through the strategic plan for Centered Life over the past five years, we have deepened our understanding of congregations and how to help them effectively equip their members to practice their faith in daily life. We have talked to hundreds of pastors and laypeople, visited dozens of congregations, and surveyed thousands of people about their congregations' efforts to equip them for their work in the world. Our designated research and design congregations are teaching us what works and what does not. They have shared their creative ideas with us so that we can share their work with the whole network of Centered Life congregations. Today, we have a well-defined seven-phase congregational process including a reliable assessment tool, proven resources, relationships with over one hundred congregations, and a clear sense of what Centered Life is and how it benefits congregations.

What do we mean by a "centered life"? For individuals, a centered life is a life of belonging, identity, and meaning lived in community and centered in Jesus Christ—the life of a person awakened to God's presence, called to live out her faith in every situation: in workplaces, neighborhoods, communities, homes, and congregations, set free to contribute his unique gifts to God's work in the world, nur-

tured and supported by a community of faith. A centered life is impossible apart from a community of faith. Our congregations proclaim the saving grace of Jesus Christ and teach us God's wisdom and what it means to be faithful in daily activities.

Research with congregations by Seeing Things Whole⁹ and Andover Newton Theological Seminary in the early 1980s indicated that forces exist in every congregation that either encourage or hinder members from being awakened; feeling called and set free; being nurtured, equipped, and validated for the world with the same enthusiasm that they are called into the congregation.¹⁰ These forces include:

- *Raising awareness.* The congregation helps people see that they can carry out the mission of the congregation and the mission of God each day as they live out their callings at home, in their workplaces, and in their communities. A simple question like "Where did you see Christ at work in your world today?" can lead people to increased awareness of God's presence in the everyday. Robert Benne notes that the Holy Spirit works through all believers to serve others in their particular places of responsibility: marriage and family life, work, public life, and religious life. But many people and congregations mistakenly believe that God's work happens only at church, associating God's work with activities in the congregation or through volunteer work with charitable organizations.¹¹ Pastors are all too aware that only a small fraction of church members are significantly touched by a given congregational program. What about all those who are left uninvolved?

"Where did you see Christ at work in your world today?"

- *Strengths and abilities.* The role of the congregation is to provide support and accountability, probably through small groups, that will encourage the discovery of each person's strengths and affirm the value of each member's gifts and calling. What if every person in the congregation knew what they excelled at and were celebrated and valued for their work—both inside and outside the congregation? What if members could clearly see how their gifts were necessary to the health of the body of Christ, and each person's strengths were valued? What if the full power of the people of God were unleashed through knowledge of their unique gifts and abilities and a clear sense of God's call for their lives? When the gifts and calls of all the people of God are not affirmed, the congregation is weakened. If members do not feel valued they are less likely to donate time, talent, and abilities. Members can become competitive and uncooperative. The church can become susceptible to judgmental attitudes, jealousy, and misunderstandings. Members partici-

⁹For more information, see www.seeingthingswhole.com.

¹⁰Richard R. Broholm and John Hoffman, *Empowering Laity for Their Full Ministry: Nine Blocking and Enabling Forces*, rev. and ed. Janet Moore (Newton, MA: The Center for the Ministry of the Laity, 1985).

¹¹Robert Benne, *Ordinary Saints: An Introduction to the Christian Life* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2003) 67.

pate in the work of church out of guilt or obligation rather than out of a desire to share their gifts.

- *Meaningful worship.* The congregation provides worship that reorients, restores, and renews for work in God's world. When the gospel is faithfully proclaimed, God's good news for each person is connected to their family, home, community, and workplace. What if the congregation prayed for people while they were alive, healthy, and working, not just when they were dying, sick, or unemployed? What if a worship service celebrated with a new sixteen-year-old driver by blessing her in her new role and reminding her of the responsibility that comes with that new freedom? What if we commissioned the work of all students, teachers, and school workers at the beginning of the school year instead of just the congregation's Sunday school staff? When pastors spend time in the community, homes, and workplaces of members of the congregation, they reflect a better understanding of the daily joys and challenges of all people in prayers, sermon, and liturgies, and pastors and lay members plan and engage in worship together.
- *Spiritual disciplines.* Congregations help people who are unsure of God's presence outside of Sunday morning by encouraging members to practice their faith in their everyday life through prayer, scripture reading, and meditation. We were created with an inner hunger and a need for God. When pastors share their own vulnerabilities and are willing to discuss their doubts and feelings about God, members will be set free to express their own concerns of faith. As pastors share how specific spiritual disciplines shape their faith, they create a climate that encourages the development of spiritual discipline among the members of the congregation. The congregation can then support and teach practices that help members to develop appropriate spiritual disciplines and to reflect on their faith daily. Often the lack of spiritual formation in congregations is related to the fact that no one is formally assigned responsibility for it. Members don't know how to fit spiritual disciplines into their daily lives and don't understand that these disciplines can be a powerful way to help them claim their own ministry and remain faithful.
- *Roles and structures.* The congregation's foundational roles and structures are oriented toward mission rather than maintenance. The congregational structures equip and support faithful living, identifying and adjusting institutional habits that detract and distract from the work of God's people in the world. Pastors and lay leaders evaluate congregational effort and activity by asking whether a particular meeting, budget, or process equips the saints for ministry and builds up the body of Christ (Eph 4:12). The work of all people in the congregation is seen as complementary and interdependent. Their daily ministries are recognized, encouraged, and supported. When the congregation hinders its members from being awakened, set free,

feeling called, nurtured, and supported, the negative ramifications are considerable:

- existing roles and structures imply that God’s work occurs only inside the church
- people are led to believe that the church is only a place for worship and that commitment is measured by the amount of time and money contributed to its programs, functions, and maintenance
- people are led to think that the job of members is to help the pastor run the congregation, and full-time secular ministries are not acknowledged
- pastors feel overburdened in a ministry defined only by what happens through the formal structures of the church; pastors appear entirely responsible for the congregation’s success or failure rather than sharing responsibility with the whole congregation
- members who are called to significant involvement in the church may feel angry at those who are less involved, and feel that their own contributions are not appreciated; members who are engaged in service in the secular world may feel that their efforts are neither understood nor valued.

THE CENTERED LIFE PROCESS

Centered Life provides an overarching vision for the congregation that offers proven strategies and multiple programs, resources, and networks to help congregations build their capacity to support the vocations of all members of the congregation. Using the research noted above, Centered Life has created an architecture for change to strengthen God’s people in their work in the world and to help create stable, sustainable, long-term change in congregations. The process allows congregations to start with short- and long-term activities, nurturing and employing pieces of the vision that suit the context and culture of each individual congregation.

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Centered Life has established partnerships with ten faith-based networks, nine ELCA synods, and seven ELCA colleges to provide resources and services to potential Centered Life congregations. An assessment tool has been developed, tested, and refined through actual use in 83 congregations and by more than 6,700 individuals.

Becoming a Centered Life congregation begins with a seven-phase process that revolves around this congregational member assessment tool. The survey, developed in collaboration with the Wilder Research Center, is designed to determine how members perceive the congregation’s ability to provide them with

effective resources for their callings in the world. The second part of the survey measures how the members understand themselves to be centered in Christ—awakened, called, set free, and nurtured and supported by the congregation. The data, once analyzed, shows the congregation how its members understand their lives in Christ, their calling, and their perceptions of how well the congregation equips them for ministry. It serves as an educational tool, raising awareness of vocation, as well as a diagnostic tool, providing feedback on the congregation's effectiveness in equipping its members.

Orientation and pre-assessment phases of the process guide congregations as they recruit and engage a vision team and plan for the assessment event. After the assessment, members of the vision team reflect on their own calling and vocation as they prepare to receive the assessment report. Once the report is received, the vision team reviews the findings with the congregation. The report, based on the congregation's strengths, is meant to ignite the congregation's imagination and lead them toward discussion of the implementation phase in which they will select appropriate Centered Life activities and begin their work. At the end of two years, the congregation takes the assessment again to see if their efforts have made a difference and to celebrate what is happening in the lives of the people.

Each Centered Life congregation can access planning materials and activities and communicate with other congregations and Centered Life staff online. Centered Life congregations support one another, sharing resources and ideas, thus affirming each other and gaining resources for themselves.¹²

JESUS AND PETER

Martin Luther did not fabricate the doctrines of justification and vocation. He found them in scripture. The one calling is always Jesus, full of grace, who justifies and makes us whole, and Jesus' promise is always a calling to, in, and for the world.

The story of Jesus and Peter in Luke 5 illustrates the radical transformation of individuals and congregations that Centered Life envisions—even for those who are not, like Peter, called to leave the workplace behind. Peter remained the fisherman as he heard Jesus preaching and teaching from his fishing boat. Peter grumbled when Jesus told him how to do his business. He knew the lake, knew his boat and nets, knew the weather. Who was Jesus to tell him to try again? But Peter came to see that he was confronting more than just a teacher right there in his workplace. Suddenly Jesus became relevant to his life, and Peter fell to his knees. Jesus then used Peter's role of fisherman to define for him a new dimension to his work. The texts do not tell us how often he was able to return to his occupation, but now Peter saw that fishing had more purpose than he had thought. That is what it means to have a Christ-centered life. The encounter with Jesus as Lord, whether it happens

¹²For more information on Centered Life, see the interactive website at www.centeredlife.org.

in a fishing boat, a factory, an office, at home, or in worship, changes everything—including fishing, work, home, and worship. Some, like Peter, will hear in the encounter a call to leave behind their previous work and enter a new form of discipleship, perhaps temporarily, perhaps permanently. Others—like, say, Zacchaeus and countless others—will remain at work or at home, but at work and home transformed.

This understanding is at the heart of the Centered Life initiative. The gospel sets people free by making them servants of God in Jesus Christ. Most of us are more like Zacchaeus than like Peter, called to lives and work transformed because we have been touched by Jesus. We find our whole identity now in Christ. We find meaning and belonging in the context of a community of faith, and we are set free to live in the world.

At Centered Life, we believe it is the mission of congregations to nurture people in naming their gifts, to provide them with ways to live their faith in every situation and the confidence to make their unique contributions to God's sustaining work. Congregations can become places where God's people come together to be equipped for their callings in the world. Centered Life congregations help people experience God's presence as they go about their daily lives in their homes, workplaces, and communities.

Loosening the grip on laity and helping them discover their capacity for discipleship in the world opens them to bring their experiences of the world back into their congregations with a new enthusiasm and a new agenda. People look at the congregation differently once they see that God is present in their daily lives and recognize that the church is as interested in how God is at work in those lives as it is in asking them to leave their work to attend to congregational concerns. Once members feel the congregation's support of their vocation in the world, they return to the congregation more boldly, with a new interest in the real needs of the community both inside and outside the congregation.

We believe that God's Holy Spirit is stirring the church to renewal for powerful witness and service in the world that God so loves. The people of the church are God's gifts, and we are called to do all that we can to support their service in Jesus' name. We believe that Centered Life is a response to this marvelous stirring of God's Spirit among us. The power of our congregations will multiply as members become equipped to bear Christian witness in all parts of their lives, twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week. ⊕

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