



Laity in the World: The Church at Work

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“The word *ministry* in its broadest sense denotes the service to which the whole people of God is called.”¹ In these words from *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry* are echoed meanings which the church of this time is recovering. “Ministry of the whole people of God” and “ministry of the laity” are phrases found in almost every current discussion of the nature of the church, whether the discussion be denominational or ecumenical.

Writers such as Hendrik Kraemer, Hans Ruedi-Weber, Elton Trueblood, and Mark Gibbs, among others, have given us a rich ecumenical reservoir of books and articles on the ministry of the laity. The Evangelical Academies of Europe as well as *Kirchentag* events, rising out of the debris of World War II, continue to explore connections between Christianity and culture and provide models for us in North America. Almost every religious group in the U.S. currently has special emphasis on Christians in the world, from *Sojourners* to *The 99 Percenter*, a publication of the Episcopal Church, so-called because 99% of the people of God are lay persons.

In the past the term “lay ministry” too frequently has meant a kind of “clericalizing the laity” to assist the pastor. Such a view only confuses the tasks of pastor and people, and still more seriously, neglects the mission of the church: to be Christ’s living body in the world. What needs to be absolutely clear is that the ministry of the laity involves an understanding of the nature, purpose, and mission of the church. What we are talking about is not simply what lay people can do or should do: teach Sunday School, usher, sing in choirs, assist in communion, or even occasionally pray and preach. Important as each of these activities is, and they must continue to be nurtured, the major focus of this discussion will be on the laity in the world, in those arenas of faith and daily life outside the congregation. To relate one’s faith in Christ to living in the ordinary, the mundane, the secular, the suffering world—that is what the people of God are called to do.

¹*Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry* (Geneva: World Council of Churches, 1982) 21.

Therefore the question on which I intend to focus in this essay is: What kind of understanding and practice is needed in order to nurture the ministry of the whole people of God in the world? I would posit three statements, each of which will be a springboard from which to explore directions for answers: (1) the whole church is the people of God; (2) the whole church is the body of Christ in the world; and (3) the whole church is in ministry.

I. THE WHOLE CHURCH IS THE PEOPLE OF GOD

The People of God—in those four simple words are contained perhaps the most dramatic

of ideas in church history in the twentieth century. For these four words are used as the controlling image of *Lumen Gentium*, the Dogmatic Constitution on the Church set forth by the Second Vatican Council. Instead of opening with a discussion of the structure and government of the church—as Vatican I did—Chapter 1, “The Mystery of the Church,” begins with the ringing note, “Christ is the light of the nations,” and goes on to speak of the church as the people to whom God communicates himself in love. The groundwork is then laid for devoting the second chapter to the description of the church as “the new people of God.” And this term refers to the total community of the church, including pastors as well as other faithful.

Of course the understanding that the community of believers is the people of God is not new; it is rooted in the biblical witness, particularly in 1 Peter: “You are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God’s own people” (2:9). This passage has certainly been used, misused, and abused in the history of Christendom in order to prove that everyone has the same authority and responsibility (“Everybody’s opinion is as good as everyone else’s” and “Nobody can tell me anything”). But neither egalitarianism nor self-centered individualism is upheld by the passage from 1 Peter. The people of God, the priesthood of the baptized, is corporate and communal. These phrases do not imply a leveling; instead, they underscore that the whole people of God is elected into the holiness of the believing community.

Our calling to be a part of the people of God takes place in baptism. There is no other place to begin than with those we are. The church is a community, a fellowship of those who have been promised forgiveness of sins and newness of life through baptism into Jesus Christ. Such a community of believers, such a priesthood of the baptized, lives in the awareness that the cross was the place at which the Good News was revealed most clearly, and the community is therefore challenged to live in suffering love for the neighbor.

We are called in the intersections where one’s faith in Jesus Christ meets and confronts the concreteness of daily living: in making decisions, in relating to others, in doing justice within our communities, in working to change the corporate structures of society, and in being part of a global network of interrelationships. In all of these arenas we are sustained and strengthened by the knowledge that God has called us through baptism out of darkness into his marvelous light.

And yet the baptized people of God do not often see themselves as the church. Recently a participant at a retreat on faith and daily life, which I was

leading, told of a church member who had reported at a church council meeting on a Fair Housing Task Force in a medium-sized midwestern city. As chairperson of the social ministry committee, the member recounted the struggle and wrestling going on at the downtown session of the Task Force. He said that government and city officials and local lobbyists were present. Then looking directly at the pastor he added, “But the church was not there.” Another member of the council finally broke the silence by saying, “But you were there, Ed! You are the church! You know the housing problems in this city; you have a deep commitment to your faith. You are the only church there is!”

II. THE WHOLE CHURCH IS THE BODY OF CHRIST IN THE WORLD

The church exists not for itself, but on behalf of the world. We are called, all of us, to be the salt of the earth, not to be the salt of the salt. Only by not being an end in itself is the church

faithful to Jesus Christ. “The church assembles,” writes Aidan Kavanagh, “to do the world, as the world’s source and the world’s redeemer would have the world done.”² A truckdriver at a LAOS in Ministry retreat which I led last spring put it well in the last session: “I guess what I’ve learned this weekend is that I always thought I was in the world to go to church; now I see what I should have seen a long time ago, that I’m in the church in order to go into the world.”

To curve in on itself—that is what sin is not only for individuals but also for institutions, including the church. Congregational report forms which inquire only of numerical increases of dollars and bodies and do not raise the question, “How *in the world* are you doing?,” or pastors who act as if the parish is their world rather than the world is their parish, or lay people who think that meaningful Christian ministry can take place only in church buildings, or seminarians who enter *the* ministry because in their previous so-called secular activity they did not feel they were “in full-time Christian service”—in such particulars, the body of Christ distorts its mission. The *laos*, the people of God, both clergy and lay, must help one another to be liberated from the captivity of the institution turning in on itself. We tend to lift up those doing church work in the sense of institutional involvement more than those who are out there doing *the* church work, which is the church at work, the body of Christ in the world. The church building is not first of all a shrine or an assembly hall, but in Elton Trueblood’s words, the church building is the “headquarters” of the army of the committed.³ The building in its worship, education, and fellowship is the base of operations. The field is the world.

But a good number of Christians believe that the presence of God is limited to certain times and certain places: Sunday morning, yes, of course, but not on Monday in my business or on Saturday in my recreation and leisure. God may be present in my decision-making about the use of my income, but not in my political or sexual decisions. God may be present in the shop of the indepen-

²Aidan Kavanagh, “Christian Ministry and Ministries,” *Church and Ministry* (Valparaiso: Institute of Liturgical Studies, 1982) 20.

³Elton Trueblood, *The Company of the Committed* (New York: Harper and Row, 1961) 72-75.

dent storekeeper, but not in the corporate boardroom or the union hall. God may be present with the nurse and the teacher, those helping professionals, but what about the UPS truck driver or the kid pumping gas? Of course, God is present, his presence is in the beauty of the sunset and in the walk by the seashore, but what about in the grime of the factory or in the hectic tension of the computer center? Church spires point to the heavens, but what about the skyscraper of glass or the garish neon of used car lots and fast food places?

And so the schizophrenia grows. The world is, at worst, the domain of evil and endless confusion; at best, the world is neutral. We may sing “This is my Father’s world” and “Beautiful Saviour, King of Creation” with great vitality, but that is not the way it strikes us on Monday morning. Out of fear, vulnerability, and a deliberate protecting of self, we believe too frequently in the doctrine of the Real Presence at the altar, and in the doctrine of the real absence at the desk, assembly line, and kitchen sink.

A Lutheran Listening Post survey conducted within the Lutheran Church in America in 1982 confirms such bifurcation. Fully 91% of the lay persons answered “yes” to the question, “Do you understand any part of your *own* life as ministry?” But the response to another question

was extremely revealing: “Which, if any, of the following activities would you consider a form of ministry?” Church activities were high, such as being an usher in church (71%), teaching Sunday School (91%), and supporting the church financially (85%). Except for helping a neighbor in crisis (93%), activities outside the church building were not seen by many as ministry: serving on a jury (48%), paying my taxes (32%), and—almost alarming—working at my job or at school (44%). A sense of one’s life as total ministry or as being a member of the body of Christ in the world was not affirmed.

Present church structures sometimes seem to echo such compartmentalization. Evangelism committees define their task as getting persons involved in the church, while social ministry committees tell church members to get involved in the world. We have tended to privatize evangelism so that it loses its responsibility of making the gospel live in the world. The members of the body of Christ at St. John’s by the Gas Station—whether they are actively involved in the church, or inactive, and therefore objects of the evangelical concern—do not see themselves as already in ministry in the world. Have we really heard what the Evanston Assembly of the World Council of Churches said some thirty years ago?

The time has come to make the ministry of the laity explicit, visible and active in the world. The real battles of the faith today are being fought in factories, shops, offices, and farms, in political parties and government agencies, in countless homes, in the press, radio and television, in the relationship of nations. Very often it is said that the church should ‘go into these spheres’; but the fact is, that the Church *is* already in these spheres in the persons of its laity.⁴

In order to nurture an understanding of our total lives as the ministry of the body of Christ in the world, I would submit that we must underline the doc-

⁴*Evanston Speaks* (New York: World Council of Churches, 1955) 64-65.

trine of creation. The created world is not a lower order of being but is itself the, instrument of divine goodness. When God now chooses to reveal himself, he does so in and through the creation itself. The finite is capable of revealing the infinite.

Martin Heineken, in discussing “the orders of creation” in Luther, notes that creation must be dynamically conceived:

Creation is not an act of the past but it is God’s activity now. It refers to the creative way in which God brings forth all things out of nothing constantly and continues to sustain them so that they do not disappear into the nothingness from which they came, like the light of a candle when it is extinguished by a vagrant breeze.⁵

He adds that creation also refers to the way God brings order out of chaos, governs his world, and makes it possible for us to live together in community. The whole creation is upheld by the Word of God. God is throbbingly alive in his world.

And the world is the arena for our ministry, for our various callings. The earth is the

Lord's; there is no sacred and secular division. Try a simple experiment sometime. Ask Christians to select photographs which show God's presence. The choices will more likely than not be of soaring mountains and of idyllic streams. But God is a God not only of nature, but of history. The seemingly ordinary and the allegedly mundane in which women and men cultivate fields, design computer programs, empty bed pans, and vacuum carpets—this world is the *locus* of where we are in God's creation, and where we are to be participants in the on-going and interdependent work of his creation.

The doctrine of the ministry of the whole people of God therefore is undergirded and strengthened by the interpenetration of creation and redemption, or, in more traditional theological language, by the intersection between law and gospel, by the interplay between the two kingdoms. The world, the arena of God's activity, always speaks with ambiguity and opaqueness. This means that motives are mixed; compromises must be struck. Yet it is in the very stuff of life that God calls us to be partners and colleagues to participate in the care and nurture of our life together as humankind in creation.

Perhaps one of the most important learnings which I have acquired in the last several years of working with lay persons in conferences and retreats is to begin inductively, concretely. Start where they are. Out of the cauldron of actuality come questions such as: What challenged you last week? What haunted or bugged you? What sustained you, gave you joy? At what points and in what ways did your daily living *intersect* with your Christian faith? How do the words and feelings of daily living (pressure, tensions, competition, success, compromise, conflict) intersect with the language of faith (discipleship, prayer, the presence of God)? What did your life tell of the gospel yesterday? What will it mean to live by grace tomorrow? For you are already in ministry. You are already part of God's intricate network of creation.

⁵Martin J. Heineken, "Luther and the 'Orders of Creation' in Relation to a Doctrine of Work and Vocation," *Lutheran Quarterly* 4 (November, 1952) 399.

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III. THE WHOLE CHURCH IS IN MINISTRY

Luther spoke in the Smalcald Articles of the "mutual conversation and consolation"⁶ which the Christian community of believers experiences and lives. That is the difference between seeing the congregation as a group of persons gathered around one minister or as a ministering community, both to one another, and to those around them. Ministry is here limited not only to certain times and places, but only to certain persons. Instead of the church itself being the "ministry of reconciliation" in Christ to the world, the church shrinks to a sort of support group for its ordained clergy, who are seen as *the* "ministers of reconciliation."

The whole ministry is given to the whole church for the whole world. A commission within the Lutheran Church in America on the Comprehensive Study of the Doctrine of the Ministry opened its report of 1970 with these words:

One biblical affirmation has governed our thinking: all Christians are ministers. Therefore the word "ministry" cannot be reserved for the work of ordained clergy. Ministry is the task of the whole people of God (Matthew 5:13-16, Romans 12:1-8, I Peter 1:9-10, 2 Corinthians 5:18-21).⁷

Another LCA document, *A Study of Ministry*, 1980, put the matter succinctly in its key sentence: “Ministry is God’s Word in action through the whole people of God.”⁸

In the same year, The American Lutheran Church chose as its general convention theme “The Unfinished Reformation.” Bishop David Preus commented that, although the Reformation principles of justification by grace through faith in Christ and the principle of the authority of the Scriptures have continued to be crucial in modern Lutheranism, the third fundamental Reformation principle of the priesthood of all believers “has not claimed the same loyalty from Lutherans.” He concludes:

We understand that the clergy have a ministry, but we are not accustomed to the idea of the ministry of the laity. The Church will operate on less than full power until all its members understand themselves to be called by God to full-time ministry.⁹

But passivity is a mark of many members of the laity, and its causes are various: a docility which accepts the meaning of “lay” as second rate, as a lower status; an apathy which sees the church as a volunteer organization (“Who? Me? A minister? I’m not into that!”) rather than as an army whose members are already drafted by the mark of baptism; a lack of commitment to the power of the Christian faith which sees the church only as a comfort station; a deferring excuse which loads all the ministry on the pastor (“After all, he or she gets paid to do it.”).

⁶Smalcald Articles, Part Three, 4, *The Book of Concord*, ed. Theodore G. Tappert (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1959) 310.

⁷LCA *Minutes*, 1970, 428-429.

⁸LCA *Minutes*, 1980, 141.

⁹David Preus, “Why ‘Unfinished Revolution’ as General Convention Theme?,” *The Lutheran Standard* 20/16 (September 16, 1980) 45.

What each of these causes of passivity has in common is that many lay persons, in Hendrik Kraemer’s words, see themselves and are seen by others as objects, not as subjects and agents.¹⁰ Too often the emphasis of the church is primarily on ministry *to* the laity rather than on ministry *of* the laity. Ministry *to* the laity implies that ministry is a set of skills certain professional people have who perform them on non-professionals. The result is listless resignation (someone has called it “a taming of the pew”) and a spiritlessness which denies the living freshness of the Holy Spirit working within the body of Christ, who bestows all kinds of gifts among the people of God. Ministry *to* the laity can be labeled and packaged, but ministry *of* the laity understands ministry more like an adverb than a noun, a thing. The servanthood which I have received from Christ influences the *way* I approach everything in my life. Ministry *of* the laity is a way of living in which attitudes, perceptions, and behaviors are informed by faith.

If passivity is rooted in an understanding in which lay persons say of ministry, “It’s yours, not mine,” another obstacle is to perceive ministry in terms of power and status with clergy saying: “It’s mine, not yours.”

The ministry of Jesus Christ in all its forms is not one of worth, power and status, but that of calling, gifts, response, and responsibility. Some clergy still live out the “Herr Pastor” roles in

dictatorial ways. And some lay persons are obstreperous in their dealings with clergy. But much more frequent are the many clergy who are uncertain of their identity and lay persons with great doubts about living out their faith. At its worst, the church is frequently both clerical and anti-clerical at the same time, failing to meet the actual needs of the laity, but also failing to be supportive of the clergy. For ministry is not only total (our whole lives are Christ's), but also mutual and shared (all of us together are Christ's). One wonders what the church would be like if half of the time, energy, and money spent on studies to define the distinct differences between clergy and laity were channeled into encouraging our mutual ministry in Jesus Christ.

In addition to the doctrines of baptism (whose we are) and creation (where we are), we need to accent the meaning of gifts. If baptism emphasizes our relationship to Christ, and the doctrine of creation gives prominence to the First Article of the Creed, then the teaching of gifts stresses the Holy Spirit.

Out of the Spirit's infinite imagination come the kaleidoscopic variety of gifts which the community of Christ possesses. St. Paul's imagery of the church as a body with many members, as well as his celebration of the rich abundance of gifts portrayed in 1 Corinthians 12, point to the fact that the gifts are so varied that there is no need to exclude. The ministry of the people of God is the use of our gifts to strengthen and support others for the sake of Christ.

A vital church identifies, affirms, encourages, and exercises the gifts which the Spirit has given the members of the body. Such an evoking of gifts has nothing to do with cheap flattery, self-aggrandizement, or pride. The church is healthy when every cell, every person, is at work sharing his or her gifts to meet the needs of others.

¹⁰Hendrik Kraemer, *A Theology of the Laity* (London: Lutterworth, 1958) 18-19.

“God is a great lord and has many servants,” said Luther once.¹¹ Would our discussions of bishops, lay professionals, ordained and commissioned ministries, lesser orders, and all such matters be different if we put such discussions within the framework of the multitude of gifts within the body of Christ? Would our examination of the functions of the laity be different if the stress were placed on the many callings the Spirit presents to us? “The vocation of the Church is to sustain many vocations,” writes Richard Neuhaus.¹² No number of committees and no amount of studies will once and for all delineate with perfect clarity the relationships of the ordained and laity, bishops and pastors, the distinctive nature of each, let alone all the other callings within the church. Living persons within a living church cannot be so circumscribed. For the nature of the Spirit's richness is to bestow an abundance of variegated gifts to God's servants.

IV. CONTEXTUALIZING THE GOSPEL

In his provocative book, *The New Reformation?*,¹³ Bishop J. A. T. Robinson points out that the resource for theology in the twentieth century is precisely that: the church as the people of God in the world. He traces the sources of theology in the history of the church: in the early church after the New Testament, episcopal theology—the feeding and nurturing of the flock—was central. Later, monastic theology emphasized the contemplative, and medieval theology with its university setting focused on scholastic theology. Since the Reformation, the training of a professional clergy has meant a centering on pastoral theology, the development of skills of the ordained. His point, and mine, is that each of these strands can and should continue to be sources

for theological reflection. But the church today must find new ways of thinking about the power of the gospel in the context of the lives of the people of God in the world.

Theology of the laity certainly does not mean anti-clericalism nor theology made simple and easy. Rather, theology of the laity will take seriously such difficult words as experience, contextual, and *praxis*, among others. It will bring to expression the life of the people of God as they express the body of Christ in the world.

The ministry of the whole people of God, the body of Christ giving itself in the name of Jesus Christ—that has been, is, and will be the mission of the church.

¹¹Cited in Paul Althaus, *The Ethics of Martin Luther* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1972) 36.

¹²Richard John Neuhaus, *Freedom for Ministry* (New York: Harper and Row, 1979) 203.

¹³John A. T. Robinson, *The New Reformation?* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1965) 60-63.