



## **On Speaking of the Ministry of the Baptized**

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For those who have been urging the church to take a fresh look at the ministry of all God's people, these are exciting and encouraging times. The Evangelical Lutheran Church in America has written into its governing documents many instructions relating to the recognition and nurturing of the ministry of both the ordained and the unordained. There can be no doubt that if practice follows form, the new church will be giving more attention to equipping the people in the pews for their ministry and supporting them in that ministry than did the predecessor bodies. Many, if not most, other denominations are involved in various sorts of efforts to bring about new understandings of universal ministry.

What this amounts to so far, however, is a statement of good intentions. It is too soon to tell how it will play out in real life. The inability of the ELCA to write a statement on ministry at the outset of its life together is a troubling indication that giving life to what is in the documents with respect to ministry will be a slow and difficult task.

There is ample evidence of much confusion and disagreement within the church over what is meant by the term "ministry of all God's people." An incident occurring a few weeks ago illustrates this well.

During a congregational meeting the subject of adding an additional pastor to the staff was brought up. Opinion was divided. Some urged that hiring a pastor who could concentrate on evangelism would allow the church to grow. Others pointed to a slowly but steadily dwindling congregation and a church deficit as evidence that hiring another pastor was untimely, if not unwise. Still others said that if there was money for another salary, that money should be given to benevolences.

After debate was cut off, but before the vote was taken, the pastor asked for a point of personal privilege to say, "I want to clarify something. We do not hire pastors, we call them. It is not like hiring someone to peddle goods or cut hair. A pastor is called to serve the Lord and his church."

In the total context of his remarks, this comment suggested to some that the pastor sees the ordained ministry as being on a loftier plane vocationally

than the work of a salesman or a barber, presumably because of this "calling," and that it is somehow improper to apply the ordinary criteria, such as need and ability to pay, to the process of bringing in a new pastor. He sat down to scattered applause, and the vote was taken to call the new pastor.

The incident left some bruised feelings, not so much because of the abuse of

parliamentary rules but because of the attitude the comment seemed to betray. That pastor mostly surely did not intend to demean the labor of the salesmen and beauticians in his congregation. He would probably agree with the statement that we are all called in our baptism to God's service—to his ministry.

It seemed, however, that the pastor did not see the occupations of his parishioners as being anything like his own. His is a calling. Theirs is a hiring. He serves the Lord with his salaried labor. They serve those who need haircuts and trombone oil. It is hard to avoid the conclusion that for that pastor, at least, there are not only different kinds of ministry, but different levels. He may even believe that some jobs are not ministry at all. They are just...well...jobs.

Many Christians, lay and clergy, share this view. Those who object to it must admit that constructing a theory of ministry which encompasses both the ordained and the unordained within a single definition is not easy. Whatever we may be saying about the priesthood of all believers and the baptism of all into God's service, it can hardly be gainsaid that most Christians have a bifurcated view of ministry with the clergy being clearly the predominant actors. Before we arrive at anything like a consensus, a lot of history must be overcome and a lot of emotional baggage discarded. To repeat a much-quoted observation from Mark Gibbs, that devoted Anglican commentator on the ministry of the laity, "We have the theology right but we do not have the psychology right."

What are some of the issues on which we get hung up?

*The Call Test.* One is the matter of "call." It is a term which has largely been preempted by the church to refer both to the motivation for entering the ordained ministry and to the process whereby a pastor is brought into the service of a local church.

We ask candidates for the seminary whether they feel they are called to the ministry of word and sacrament. The answer had better be yes. Never mind that if you ask ten different persons what form that call took, you will perhaps get ten different answers. It is a serious concern if they cannot discern in whatever it was that brought them to the seminary door a "call" from God.

The term is not often used when describing how people come to be attorneys, cab drivers, or ballerinas. Could it be? People get into jobs for all manner of reasons. In explaining why they got into a particular line of work some may sound very much like seminarians. A commercial pilot may say that he always had an irresistible urge to fly. Someone else says that all the aptitude tests she took pointed to a career in the computer sciences. A well known diva explains, "God gave me a voice to sing and a single dream—to sing in the Met." There is suggested in each of these explanations the work of an unseen matchmaker, someone urging or equipping a person to a particular task.

Of course many, if not most, people would be unlikely to explain their occupational circumstances in terms of "call." The man who, desperate for money, takes the first job that comes along and ends up being cleanup man in an

abattoir for thirty years is not apt to see in this a "call." Is the Wall Street dealer who may be primarily motivated by the desire to make big money "called" to a career in brokerage? Is the practice of law a ministry if I feel it is what I was meant to do, but not a ministry if I went into it only to avoid a life of physical labor?

There is nothing wrong with conceding to the church and the ordained ministry a corner on the use of the term “call.” It would probably be an inappropriate and unpopular usage in much of the business world anyhow. However, until we have a better understanding of “call” and its significance, or lack of significance, in defining and identifying specific ministries, it will be difficult for many people to see themselves in ministry, at least in any very real sense.

*The “Advancing the Kingdom” Test.* What the people who work in the institutional church do is called “ministry” because it represents an attempt to advance the kingdom of God. Never mind that they may be less than effective at it, ill-informed, silly, or even counterproductive. It is ministry. When one does a bad job as pastor in a congregation, we do not say that his or her vocation has ceased to be ministry. It may be very hard to see how what is being done is advancing the kingdom, but the ministry goes on.

One of the difficulties in talking about non-church-related occupations as ministry, and of those who work at them as ministers, is that corporate goals and political objectives are not presented in the language of kingdom enhancement. In truth, of course, much of what goes on by way of production, distribution, communication, and public service is very vital to human well-being. That fact is not often communicated to employees from within the company, and it is just as seldom celebrated in the church.

One of the goals of the laity movement is to foster a greater appreciation within the church of the ways in which secular vocations fit into God’s ongoing creative process. Because the efficient and effective distribution of health care services is so obviously a form of healing, few people have much difficulty seeing that as a ministry, even though those who provide the service are not ordained.

But is not the distribution of food by truck drivers and grocery clerks just as vital a service in a complex and cosmopolitan society like ours? Why is it then so hard to see those people as being engaged in a ministry? Is not the man who protects our health by carting away the garbage each week ministering to my needs?

But what of the professional football player, the factory worker who turns out golf clubs, the garment worker who stitches together six hundred dollar blouses for the chic shops on Rodeo Drive? We have trouble seeing ministry in this. It doesn’t fit the requirements of advancing the kingdom, at least not in readily apparent ways.

One writer, trying to identify the parameters of ministry, drew the line at writing commercials. He said that if your job is producing ads for deodorant, you should think about getting into something else.

To be sure, there are many jobs which would seem to be so lacking in real social value or utility that those who perform them, if they have an option,

should perhaps ask themselves if they are being the best stewards of their talents. We can never be so sure of this, however, as to declare that such people have no ministry. We can only hope to get them to question whether it is the best arena for their ministry.

The ELCA will be in trouble if, in order to give effect to what its governing documents mandate with respect to nurturing ministry, it must sort out, according to the “advancing the kingdom” test, those of its members who are in ministry and those who are not.

*The Ethics and Morality Test.* Bill is employed with the U.S. Drug Enforcement Agency.

To be effective in his job, he must spend long hours “undercover.” He frequents bars, consorts and drinks with people of questionable reputation, and talks their rough language. Although he has not yet had to shoot anyone, Bill knows that the time may come when he must do so. Bill has sat in on long discussions about the ministry of all God’s people. He is unconvinced that what he does is ministry. His reason? Because to do his job well, he must do things that are “bad” and “immoral.” Bill sees his ministry only in terms of what he does when he is off duty, helping others, teaching church school, and conducting himself as a responsible citizen.

Many articles have been written by and about those who work in defense plants and laboratories which test weapons of death and destruction. Some of them are able to talk of what they do in terms of ministry. Others, viewing it as Bill does his work, wonder whether one can be in ministry in such settings. If ministry can only be carried on in jobs where one is not called upon to make choices or perform acts which may be ethically or morally perplexing, the deodorant salesman may be one of the few whose work qualifies as ministry.

So it is not just some clergy persons who have difficulty seeing their parishioners as ministers and what their parishioners do for a living as ministry. It is not, as some have suggested, primarily an identity crisis affecting the clergy. Many lay persons are unaccustomed to such usage of the terms and are not sure they should, or want to, be considered “in ministry.”

Yet it seems imperative that if the church is to overcome what many have said is an increasing irrelevancy, there must be a much greater awareness by both the clergy and the laity that God’s ministry to the world is one that is fully and equally shared by all of us. Shared ministry cannot mean only that we have a common responsibility to see that the institutional church holds services regularly and gives a respectable share of its resources to promoting justice and feeding the poor. Nor can it mean only that the laity must clean off its social calendar and find more time after work in the evenings and on Saturday to devote to ministry. There must be a common understanding that there is only one ministry. The ministry is, to put a little twist on a phrase of Flip Wilson, the ministry of what’s happening now.

Redemption and creation are what is happening now. Redemption is entirely God’s work and gift which the church can only proclaim and rejoice in. But creation is what we are involved with. God’s world is being shaped and formed. Systems are devised to subdue the earth and improve the life of humanity.

In baptism we are all called to make those systems work. Not just the church systems whereby humankind shall know the Truth about who is behind the creation, but systems whereby water is piped to cities, crops are grown and peas are delivered to the table in Cleveland, garbage is disposed of, political decisions are made, people are made smarter and healthier and perhaps more likeable to each other.

Some tasks in this scheme appear to be more important than others. Some servants do seem to be more serious about their calling than others. The scientist working to find a cure for cancer or AIDS may wonder how others in his discipline can spend their time researching chemical weapons. The manufacturer of mechanical hearts may ask what contribution to the well-being of humankind is being made by the maker of electronic video games.

Still, we ought not let our own ideas of what is good and desirable be the test by which we determine whether others are engaged in ministry. It may indeed be a misuse of one’s talents,

silly and even poor stewardship, to spend time and resources making perfume when one could be making baby formula or antibiotics. But it may be just as silly and just as poor stewardship for a congregation to spend its money to improve the comfort of the pews in the church when ten miles down the road people are hungry.

The institutional church and those who labor in it have often been as irrelevant, stupid, hurtful, destructive and misguided as any other institution or people on earth. Through it all, the church is justified in claiming to be the body of Christ ministering to the world.

Can we say any less of those whose labor takes other forms and is carried out in other arenas? Anyone of us could perhaps be doing better than we are, or doing something else, but our claim to being engaged in God's ministry is based not on what we do or how we do it. It is based on whose we are. In baptism we became God's ministers. What we do, from making widgets to teaching natives to grow corn, whether we do it well, poorly, or indifferently, is our ministry. We will be held accountable for it.

What the church can do to facilitate that accountability is to recognize the ministries of all its people for what they are, equip them for those ministries, support them, hold before them the vision of faithful ministry and lovingly help them to see when their ministry is not going well or seems irrelevant. Finally, it can speak a word of grace to all, realizing that the best of what we do is poor stuff indeed.