



Retrieving Ministry

If “ministry” means what the mass media takes it to mean, it has come on hard times. The term is routinely applied to those corporate empires which sponsor electronic religious programming. Each superstar has a “ministry” that is measured by the ratings and the support it receives.

But the word does not fare well in the church either. When everything Christians do is labelled “ministry,” and every Christian is called a “minister,” the words can become pale in meaning. Given the usage in the media, and the vagueness of the term in the church, the question whether “ministry” can be retrieved as a viable term is timely.

Going back to the sources, the writings of the New Testament, we find that things are not as clear there as we might hope either. While not everything is ministry, a lot is. There is, of course, the “ministry of the Word” (Acts 6:4), the “ministry” of Jesus (Luke 3:23), and the “ministry” of Paul (Rom 11:13). Recognized church leaders are involved in ministry (2 Tim 4:5). But “ministry” (*diakonia*) is the term applied also to the rendering of service to “the saints” (1 Cor 16:15) and to fund raising for the church at Jerusalem (Rom 15:27).

Yet, although many things (activities, functions) can be given the label “ministry,” there is a norming of the concept of ministry in the New Testament. Ministry has been given its particular stamp by the ministry of Jesus, “who came not to be served but to serve” (Mark 10:45). And when the term is attached to believers, it is linked with love, faith, patient endurance, upbuilding of the body of Christ, and the work of reconciliation (2 Cor 5:18; Eph 4:11-12; Rev 2:19).

The attempt to broaden the concept of ministry beyond the work of ordained persons is salutary. The phrase “the ministry of the laity” has been coined for such a purpose. Another phrase, used as a theme for this issue of the journal, is “the ministry of the baptized.” The term is intended to be as comprehensive as possible, including the ministry of both the ordained and non-ordained. It recognizes that the ministry of Word and Sacrament is focal and essential for the community’s existence, but this ministry is shared in by clergy and laity alike. Those who preside and proclaim the Word are ordained, but their ministry is assisted by others not ordained (but who nevertheless read lessons, lead portions of the service, sing in choirs, etc.), and it is supported by the whole congregation. And out of that central event the community is empowered to do ministry among its own membership and within the larger social setting—both local and global.

The essays in this issue address various facets of ministry. *William Diehl* takes seriously the proposition that all Christians are called to service in the world. But conceptual barriers stand in the way of affirming such service wholeheartedly. He suggests ways that these can be

overcome in parish practice. *Patrick Keifert* asks about the distinction between the ministries of clergy and laity. Is it that only the former is “public” and the latter “private”? No, he says, there is a “public” ministry in which the laity is involved just as surely as in the case of clergy, and he shows how that is so. *Maxwell Johnson* maintains that the eucharist is the link between baptismal identity and service in the world. The ministry of the eucharist forms the church into a community for its ministries of service, healing, and sacrificial self-giving. *John Graff* discusses the confusion and disagreement concerning the meaning of the term “ministry of all God’s people.” While the church has no difficulty in speaking of ordained ministry as ministry, it doesn’t know whether this term fits in reference to most secular occupations. He shows why this is so and suggests that being engaged in ministry is not so much based on what we do, or how well we do it, but on whose we are through baptism. *Carol Mork* deals with the issue of how the ordination of women affects the understanding women might now have concerning leadership in the church. We are no longer in the situation where “men minister, women serve.” But does the new situation, in which women “minister” as ordained ministers, signal the end of traditional outlets for leadership and service for women (such as in women’s organizations)? She suggests some answers to the question. *Kathryn Baerwald* discusses the ministry of the baptized as envisioned in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America. This includes comment on the ministry of the laity in the world and, more extensively, its emerging and important roles in the structures of the church itself. *Brent Waters* discusses the problem which leadership in ministry faces in a technological culture. He suggests that ministry has fallen into dependence on secular sources of authority, which leads either to morally aggressive or to morally neutral styles of ministry. He calls for the recovery of an explicitly religious framework for ministry. Finally, *Gary Simpson* contends that the ministry of the gospel has been subverted by a society-wide managerial mode of authority. He reviews reasons for the present situation and suggests that it can be overcome by a renewal of an “evangelical” mode of authority, describing what that entails.

The Resources section opens with the “Face to Face” feature on the question of the historic episcopate. *Philip Hefner* and *Paul Berge* address the question from different perspectives. *Frederick Gaiser* takes up the issue of the place of the Old Testament in relationship to the gospel, giving a new twist by arguing that the Old Testament does not simply bear witness to important issues *for* the Christian faith, but to central issues *of* it. This is followed by an essay in which *George Bass* discusses the role of preaching in the recovery of the meaning of baptism, and he offers suggestions on how to introduce baptismal themes into the context of the church year. Finally, the “Texts in Context” essay, written by *Wendell Debner*, focuses on the second lesson which appears in the lectionary for Pentecost 18 through 21 of the current church year.

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