



The Ministry of the Baptized in the Vision of a Renewed Church

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On January 1, 1988, the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America will officially begin its life as a Lutheran church body in the United States. Many people's hopes, dreams, and fears will take more concrete shape as of that time. There are high expectations for the life of that new church by its members, its recognized congregations, and the Christian community at large. One area that has garnered much attention has been the ministry of the laity within this new Lutheran church. From this vantage point, almost one year before the establishment of that church, what kind of vision can be seen about the ministry of the laity in that new Lutheran church?

Perhaps the first place to look at the vision of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America is to look backward at the Commission for a New Lutheran Church. The CNLC was established by the Association of Evangelical Lutheran Churches, the Lutheran Church in America, and The American Lutheran Church at the respective church body conventions in August, 1982. At the same time the three church bodies approved the planning process for what was then called the "New Lutheran Church." The commission was comprised of 50 percent lay persons and 50 percent clergy members. Among the entire composition of the CNLC members, 40 percent of the members were women and one-sixth of the members were persons of color or persons whose primary language is other than English. Thus the group itself was a representative body of the church, although not totally reflective of the population of the church as a whole. However, it became evident early in the life of the commission that there was a strong commitment to the ministry of the whole people of God throughout the life of the new church.

The commission set out upon its task of bringing recommendations back to the three church bodies for the proposed structure of the new Lutheran church, which in 1986 was given the name of the Evangelical Lutheran Church

in America (ELCA). The report of the task force on theology strongly affirmed the ministry of the whole people of God as the context within which all particular or specialized ministries within the church are considered. The stance of the report of the task force on theology is strongly echoed in the statement of purpose which was recommended by the CNLC and ultimately adopted by the three uniting church bodies. The first section of the Statement of Purpose of the ELCA speaks clearly and simply of "The Church as a people created by God in Christ" (ELCA Constitution, 4.01). Although referring to the church universal in this particular statement, the documents of the ELCA assert at the outset that the church is a people, not an institution, although the people may be organized together by means of structure "to bear witness to God's creative, redeeming, and sanctifying activity in the world" (Section 4.01).

The statement of purpose then goes on to particularize the mission of the ELCA. Clearly, the first mission of the ELCA is to “proclaim God’s saving Gospel” to the world (4.02.a). The statement of purpose also recognizes the need of the church to:

Nurture its members in the Word of God so as to grow in faith and hope and love, to see daily life as a primary setting for the exercise of their Christian calling, and to use the gifts of the Spirit for their life together and for the calling in the world (4.02.e).

The ministry of the laity is affirmed, and it is recognized that the living out of that ministry in daily life is the primary setting for most members of the ELCA. However, this purpose does not negate the calling of the laity within the structure of the church itself. Instead, the need is clearly recognized for the church to upbuild and to strengthen the ministry of all the believers.

The final section of the statement of purpose becomes far more specific in the way in which the ELCA is to carry out its purposes. Two sections in particular address the issue of the ministry of all of the members of the body of Christ. The first specific goal of the church is to “receive, establish, and support...congregations, ministries, organizations, institutions, and agencies” that are necessary to assist the ELCA in carrying out God’s mission (4.03.a). The second specific goal of the church is to “encourage and equip all members to worship, learn, serve, and witness; to fulfill their calling to serve God in the world; and to be stewards of the earth, their lives, and the Gospel” (4.03.b). Interestingly, the goal of the church to equip all its members to serve in the world and to worship, witness, serve, and learn is placed prior to the goal of the church to set apart certain persons for the ordained ministry of Word and Sacrament. It would appear significant, in terms of the order of the goals of the church, that equipping all the believers to participate fully in the church and the world is stated before the particular and specialized equipping of some of the members of the people of God as called or appointed persons.

The constitution of the ELCA begins by saying that the church is a people created by God in Christ. However, there is the clear recognition that the people of God must be organized in some fashion, in a human institution, in order to carry out God’s activity in the world. Chapter 6 of the constitution defines the membership of the ELCA: “The members of the church shall be the baptized members of its congregations” (6.01).

This definition is significant in several respects. First, it recognizes that the members of the church are the baptized people of God. The American Lutheran Church, one of the predecessor church bodies of the ELCA, has its membership constituted by the congregations of the ALC. The individual baptized members hold membership in The American Lutheran Church only derivatively through their membership in ALC congregations. In the Lutheran Church of America, membership is defined as the congregations of the LCA as well as the ordained clergy members. In the LCA therefore, there is a mixture of corporate and individual members, but the membership definition by its very terms excludes most of the baptized members except by derivative membership through congregations. The Association of Evangelical Lutheran Churches has a membership definition which is similar to that of the ALC, defining membership

as the congregations of the AELC. The definition of membership in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America is a radical departure from the predecessor three church bodies and is based squarely on the report of the task force on theology of the CNLC which recommended that membership be defined as the baptized members.

The membership definition found in Chapter 6, however, recognizes that the membership of the ELCA cannot be simply individuals. The membership definition goes on to require that the individual baptized members be members of congregations recognized by the ELCA. This definition of membership recognizes the necessity for the baptized members to be gathered into community, the community of a congregation. It also recognizes that the baptized members, while being members of the local congregation, are also members of the larger church which extends beyond the community of the local baptized members. In my opinion, this definition of membership strikes the proper balance between the recognition of all of the baptized members of God as well as the necessity for the gathering of the baptized members into community. It does not discriminate between all of the baptized members and those who are called to some particularized service within the church. Rather, it recognizes all baptized members as members of the church.

The ELCA has also started several principles of organization on which the entire structure is to be grounded. One of those principles of organization that has received much attention in the establishment of the ELCA has to do with the inclusiveness of the new church. Much discussion and debate has been heard about the principles of organization related to men and women and to persons of color. Interestingly, very little discussion has been heard in terms of the principle of organization related to lay members and clergy members. In Sections 5.01.f. and 5.01.g., the constitution of the ELCA states that, "At least 60 percent of the members of [ELCA] assemblies, councils, committees, boards, and other organizational units shall be lay persons." A similar provision applies to the synodical structure.

In the predecessor church bodies, when such statements as to the ratio between lay and clergy members were stated, it was for the most part an equal splitting of 50 percent lay and 50 percent clergy in such conventions, councils, committees, boards, or other organizational units. Since the ELCA provides for a minimum of 60 percent of the members of such groupings to be lay persons,

more than 60 percent lay persons is clearly permitted by the organizational principles. In terms of the official units of the church, there will be a greater representation of lay persons on those units than has been the case in prior church bodies.

Of course there may be some exceptions to a notable increase in lay representation. For example, the South Dakota District of the ALC consistently in its annual conventions has been comprised of more than 80 percent lay persons as representatives to the district conventions. There is nothing to prohibit the new South Dakota Synod, or any of the synods or organizational units of the new church, to state that at least 70 or 80 percent of the members of assemblies, councils, boards, and committees be lay persons.

There are other provisions within the organizational structure for the churchwide organization that indicate an increased participation of lay persons in the leadership of the church. The vice-president of the ELCA shall be a lay person (14.21). The vice-president of the

ELCA shall serve as the chairperson of the ELCA Church Council and shall also serve as the chair of the executive committee of the Church Council. The secretary and treasurer of the ELCA may be either lay or clergy. It is possible that of the four churchwide officers, only the bishop would be a clergy person. Similar provisions are contained in the constitution of the ELCA as applied to the synods.

Certainly one of the key issues that is facing the ELCA is the study of ministry that is to be held in the first six years of the life of the ELCA. The context in which that study is to be done is within the statement of the constitution on the ministry of the baptized people of God which states (10.11):

This church affirms the universal priesthood of all its baptized members. In its function and its structure this church commits itself to the equipping and supporting of all its members for their ministries in the world and in this church. It is within this context of ministry that this church calls or appoints some of its baptized members for specific ministries in this church.

By this statement, the ELCA has committed itself to upholding and supporting the life of all baptized members of the ELCA. Not only are lay persons to be equipped to carry out their ministry of daily life within the world, but lay persons are also equipped to live out their ministries within the church. This is a further recognition of the ministry of lay people within the ELCA as well as in the world. It is also an important statement in that it sets the context for understanding the ministry of those certain persons who have been called or appointed by the church to perform specific functions within the church.

One concrete way of supporting the ministry of all of the people of God within the church is the mandate given to the Division for Ministry of the churchwide organization. Three particular charges to the Division for Ministry are important in setting the context within which the Division for Ministry is to do its work.

This division shall be responsible for the programs and organizations of this church which affirm, develop, and support the ministries of the whole people of God, including recognition and support of the ministry of lay persons, ordained persons, and associates in ministry. (16.31.d87a)

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This division shall assist this church in reflecting on the ministry of the whole people of God and shall provide counsel and support to congregations, synods, and regional centers for mission in their work to support the ministry of the laity in daily life, including the development of such forms as centers for reflection and study of theology, other disciplines, and society. (16.31.d87b)

This division shall advocate the ministry of all the people of God among the agencies and institutions related to this church, and shall relate to and provide support services to movements such as LAOS in ministry and discipleship in society. (16.31.d87c)

The first charges given to the Division for Ministry are to support the ministry of the whole people of God in the church and in society. This is a departure from the charges given to the comparable organizational units in the predecessor church bodies which were primarily concerned with supporting the ministry of those persons called to specific ministries within the church. The charge of the Division for Ministry is wide ranging and requires it to understand its mission in the context of serving the ministry of all the people of God.

The governing documents of the ELCA contain the vision that the CNLC and the three church bodies have for the ELCA. The vision is clear in affirming the ministry of the laity. The question is whether that vision will be lived out. Just as we often hear the question whether morality can be legislated, the new church faces the question whether vision can be institutionalized. At the time of the writing of this article, the constituting convention of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America is a month away. The voting members of the constituting convention are yet to cast their ballots for the officers of the new church and the members of the various governing boards and committees. The constituting conventions for the synods will be occurring within several months. Similarly, the leadership of the synods is as yet unknown. Certainly the elected leadership of the new church will be greatly influential in setting the tone and capturing the vision for the new church. But finally it must be remembered that the new church is its baptized members gathered into community in congregations. It is there that the vision of the ministry of the people of God must be captured and lived out. Only time will tell whether the vision will become a reality.