



To Expand Our Ministry

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“How does one communicate a theology of grace in a world of works?” That is a question I always ask pastors when I meet with them to discuss the ministry of the laity. My recent experience of working with a group of thirty of them was rather typical.

We sat in a circle of chairs in a bright sunny room of one of our church-related colleges. My assignment was to lead a two-hour, afternoon seminar on the ministry of the laity. It had been billed as a time for discussing ways to equip members of the church for their ministries in and to the world.

I began the seminar by handing out a case study which I called “A Theology for Supervisors?” In it, I described an actual situation in which four members of our congregation who worked at Bethlehem Steel met with our pastor in the company cafeteria for lunch. The issue being discussed was: How does the theology of grace, as proclaimed on Sunday, translate into actions of a supervisor on Monday? Each of us had a troubling personnel problem in which an employee we supervised was not performing satisfactorily. One employee was a schizophrenic. Another had been promoted by previous management into a position beyond his abilities. A third’s performance had deteriorated as a result of a crushing family disaster. We talked about imperfect people. We talked about how much imperfection a manager should tolerate. And we talked about the fact that God loves us and accepts us without any merit of ours. Through grace we are forgiven for our failures and imperfections. Through grace we start each day with a clean slate. We asked the question, If God is so graceful to us, should we not be equally graceful to all God’s children? Yet we know that supervisors have the responsibility of being just and that they have to deal with unsatisfactory performance. And so the troubling question kept coming back: What does it mean to bring the grace of God into our place of work?

I asked the pastors at the seminar how they would respond to this question. There was a long period of silence. Then one of the pastors spoke. “I’m afraid I don’t understand your problem,” he said. “If people don’t perform up to requirements, then management must do something about it.”

“That is the commonly accepted principle in business,” I replied, “but is that what the gospel of grace is all about?”

“It’s got nothing to do with the gospel of grace,” he replied.

“Well,” I asked, “are you then saying that Christians cannot be the bearers of the gospel of grace in their work world?”

“No, I am not,” he replied. “But it seems to me you are not talking about a grace issue

when you talk about work performance.”

“It is law you are dealing with and not grace,” chimed in another pastor.

“O.K.,” I said, “but then please give me an example of how a supervisor or manager is the bearer of God’s grace in the workplace.” Again there was silence.

“Let me try again,” I said. “The most important message I have received from God through the church is that, without any merit of my own, I have been called as one of his children and am assured of his love and acceptance. I did not have to measure up to any performance standards. As I confess my shortcomings and imperfections, I am assured of God’s forgiveness. The slate is wiped clean. As Luther said, ‘I rise up each day renewed in my baptism.’ That is the message that comes through loud and clear on Sunday mornings. It is a terribly important message. It is gospel.”

I continued, “I get another message on Sunday mornings. It is that I am to be a bearer of the gospel in the world. It goes beyond telling people *about* the gospel; it involves living that gospel. Luther used the term of being ‘little Christs’ in the world. In fact, the last words I hear from my pastor in the Sunday worship service are ‘Go in peace; serve the Lord!’ But just what does that mean in a Monday world of performance requirements?”

The first pastor responded, “I can’t answer that question because I’ve never worked in business.”

“I have,” chimed in another pastor, “and frankly I don’t have an answer. I worked in industry for twelve years before going to seminary, and I know exactly what Mr. Diehl is getting at. We pastors make it sound all too simple. It is a very difficult question he is asking, and I think we do a lousy job of dealing with it.”

It isn’t often that I’m lucky enough to have a pastor in the audience who has had significant experience in business or industry. This one went on to say that too often the church forces its members to become dualists because it is unable or unwilling to deal with the application of Sunday’s theology in the Monday world.

I. BLOCKAGES IN OUR WAY

It is true. The overwhelming majority of members of our churches are dualists. We speak of things sacred and things secular, of body and soul, of spiritual and material, of Sunday and Monday. In spite of everything Luther said about the universal priesthood of all the baptized, most of us are convinced that to be a clergy person is more pleasing in the eyes of God than to be a layperson. And, I might add, unfortunately there are some clergy who share that conviction.

If all God’s people are called into Christian service, then we must find ways to break down the walls of dualism and equip and support our members for their ministries in and to the world. But there are some real blockages to deal

with. The pastor who said, “I don’t understand your problem,” describes the first one to be faced. As I see it, the first step is to help pastors understand that there *is* a problem.

When I am asked how pastors respond to the concept of the ministry of the laity, I usually answer by drawing a typical bell curve on the blackboard. On the left hand side of the curve is a small percentage of clergy who are opposed to and offended by a doctrine of laity truly being in ministry. Either it is because of a different theological position or because they are threatened by

the principle. On the right hand side of the bell curve is a small percentage of clergy who are terribly excited about helping to bring about a ministry of the laity. But in the central part of the bell is a large percentage of clergy who support the principle of the universal ministry and who sincerely feel they are encouraging it, but who really are not, because they “don’t understand the problem.”

I do a lot of conference work with Lutherans who are in business and industry. The most frequently voiced complaints I hear from them is that “the church” is antibusiness, or doesn’t understand business, or is naive about the real world. The business persons’ solution to this is to urge that seminaries offer courses in basic economics. Personally I think it is an unrealistic expectation for the pastor to get a well-rounded foundation in economics at the seminary. If we are expecting our clergy to know enough about economics to relate reasonably well to business people, then why shouldn’t we expect political scientists, lawyers, elected officials, or research scientists to have some type of preparation for their interaction with pastors?

The seminary cannot be in the business of teaching economics, farm management, or political science even though some of the pastors may end up in congregations where there is a high percentage of businessmen, farmers, or public officials.

My expectations of my pastor are these: That he or she be very well versed in theology, be well trained to communicate to the congregation through sermons and teaching, be capable of providing worship experiences which relate to peoples’ lives, be skilled at listening and counseling and, finally, be able to interact with laypeople so that, together, they can search for the connections between the faith as professed on Sunday and the world as encountered on Monday. That last expectation is the one which is seldom being fulfilled. It does not happen as a result of preaching a sermon. It can happen only through dialogue, the sharing of experiences, and a shared search for ministry in specific situations.

The pastor in our seminar who said he couldn’t answer the question of how one communicates the gospel of grace in an environment of performance requirements “because I’ve never worked in business” is absolutely correct. He can’t. But what he can do is talk with his people about what they are doing in the world, listen to the problems and decisions they face, suggest some theological perspectives which might apply and then, as a co-seeker (*not* the authority figure), arrive at some tentative suggestions for ministry which can be tried out in the Monday world, reported on, and recycled again and again. *Any* business executive would welcome and respond to that kind of an approach from his or her pastor. And it doesn’t take a seminary course in economics to pull it off.

This also suggests that our clergy need to weigh carefully the public positions they take on issues that their lay members may be struggling with. Don is a senior vice president of one of America’s largest corporations. I was meeting with him and two other corporate officers regarding a shareholder resolution which the Lutheran Church in America had filed regarding the company’s presence in South Africa. Much of our two-hour conversation dealt with the issue of whether the presence of American corporations in South Africa was helping to bring about change or whether it was helping to support the system of apartheid. Don, who has been visiting South Africa at least once a year for the past seven years and who regularly visits in the homes of some of their black employees, spoke with passion about the terrible injustice of that society. In

response to my question about whether the company was considering leaving South Africa, the three men said that the subject was continually being reviewed. However, they were not yet convinced that the company should pull out.

As I was about to leave, Don said, "Do you have a minute? I want to show you something." We walked down the hall to a large room in which was displayed the broad variety of products made by this huge company. He led me to a section of the room where the firm's medical products division had its display. "You see this?" he said, pointing to a grey, plastic-like form in one of the cases. "That's the artificial heart we manufacture. Over here are the other products we produce for surgical procedures on the heart. And here," he continued, walking to another display case, "is the product we produce to stabilize the heart beat."

"I'm an Episcopalian," he said, "and my bishop has publicly stated that we should get out of South Africa. If and when we do, I will have to recommend to management whether we should discontinue everything we are doing in South Africa or whether we should at least continue to service the medical equipment we have sold there." He continued, "I went to see my bishop and asked him about the ethics of discontinuing the servicing of life-maintaining equipment we have sold versus the ethics of announcing we were leaving South Africa but continuing our service functions there. You know what he said?" "No." "He said, 'I'm not a business ethicist; I'm a theologian.' Period." Don smiled and slowly shook his head.

If the bishop is going to pronounce that Don's company should get out of South Africa, then, at least, he owes it to Don to share the struggle of the ethical implications of implementing such action. If it was theology which led the bishop to make his broad pronouncement, then there must be a theology which relates to Don's dilemma. To minimize the problem, as Don's bishop seemed to do, is to deny his own ministry.

II. OVERCOMING SOME HURDLES

The first hurdle for our clergy brothers and sisters to overcome, then, is to understand how difficult it is for committed Christian laypersons to translate the confessed theology of Sunday into a specific operational theology on Monday.

For most of us the center of the universe is that place where we commit the greatest amount of our time and energies. I see that so clearly in my management consulting work with various types of organizations. I recall that, as Manager of Sales at Bethlehem Steel a number of years ago, I frequently fell into the trap of we-they thinking. The "we" was our corporation and the "they" was any group or organization which exerted any external influences on us. It could be a competitor, or the labor union, or the government, or an environmental group.

William String fellow and John Howard Yoder have written extensively on what they call the demonic nature of all our institutions. They point out that there is something inherent in every organization of society that so possesses the lives of those who serve in it that they lose sight of the broader picture and, instead, become very narrowly focused. This narrowness of focus is something we all share. To say that it exists within the church is not to single out pastors for criticism. It is simply to recognize that our clergy are no less captivated by the institution in which they serve than are the businessmen I consult with on a daily basis.

For the parish pastor, the congregation is the center of his or her universe. Sunday, the

day when the people of God “congregate,” is the high point of the week for the pastor. It is then when the greatest fulfillment of parish ministry can take place. The more we are able to gather together the members of our congregations—in Bible study, in committee work, in choirs, in fellowship groups—the greater is the potential for the pastor’s ministry to be effective. But unless the activities of the people gathered relate directly to the activities of the people scattered, we will end up with Christian laity who are dualists.

The second hurdle to overcome, once we recognize the basic problem, is to find ways to develop intersections between the universe of the pastor and the universes of the people. How can those people who experience a relationship with God on Sunday morning experience a relationship with that same God on Monday morning?

Paul Tillich said, “There is no faith without participation.” And “participation” for Tillich was not limited to experiences of faith on Sunday morning.

George Gallup, who spends half his time on religious polling, came up with a startling fact in his 1986 survey. In every annual Gallup survey since 1973, there was a question which measured the confidence of Americans in “church or organized religion.” During all those years, about two thirds of Americans expressed a great deal of confidence in them, with the returns always being within the 62% to 66% range. But in 1986 the confidence response dropped sharply to 57%. Gallup says, “I was so amazed by the drop that we repeated the question a month later—which we do not often do. But the result was the same.” The drop cannot be attributed to a disillusionment with all institutions, for in the same year that confidence in churches dropped by nine percent, it increased with respect to public schools, the Congress, newspapers, unions, and the military. What’s going on?

Between 1980 and 1985, the population of the United States increased by 5.4%. In that same period, Sunday attendance within the Lutheran Church in America decreased 1.8%. Why?

Between 1981 and 1985, the Lutheran Church in America added nearly 700,000 confirmed members to its rolls, but suffered a net loss in membership of 1/2 of 1 percent. More were going out the back door than were coming in the front door. How can this be explained?

I recently completed the manuscript for a new book, entitled, *In Search of Faithfulness*, which will be published by Fortress Press later this year. Based on extensive interviews and surveys of my own, it is clear to me that persons who are able to experience God in their daily lives have had significantly greater faith development than those who have not. The responses of persons who felt a sense of ministry in their occupations were dramatically more positive on other questions about belief and practice than were those who felt no sense of ministry.

The failure of our clergy to see the importance of developing the intersections between their worlds and the worlds of their people is perhaps no better demonstrated than by the response to the LCA’s “Connections” program. Having been through the course in our own congregation, I can testify that it has been the best effort yet made in the LCA to help people make the connections between our teachings of the faith and our experiences in daily life. The reactions of clergy and laity who have completed the Connections course has been overwhelmingly positive. For some it has been a conversion experience. Yet, despite several years of wide promotion of the program, the response of pastors has been shockingly poor. Scholarship money for training to lead the course has gone unclaimed. In my own conversations

with pastors, the general reaction is that they do not have time for another program. Unfortunately, they simply do not understand.

My present parish pastor is ministering to our congregation in a most effective manner. He is a very good preacher and teacher. Our worship services are exciting and Spirit filled. He has a great skill in counseling. But his most outstanding attribute is the manner in which he is affirming, equipping, and supporting the ministries of the people of our congregation in their daily lives. He will be the first to say that his sensitivity for equipping the saints was not acquired in seminary. Far from it. But he was open to my urgings and suggestions. Together we experimented with ways to broaden the intersections between faith and daily life, and the more we got into it, the more excited he became about his own ministry.

It all began a number of years ago when I invited him to visit me in my office at Bethlehem Steel. Although he seldom wears his clerical collar, he elected to do so that day, and I think it was a wise decision. It was symbolic of the meeting of our two worlds of work. Upon his arrival, he was ushered into my private office, and for about forty minutes I explained what I did as a Manager of Sales. I kept my phone turned on so he could observe the kinds of problems and decisions I was called upon to handle each day. We did not talk about our congregation; we simply focused on my job. Now that we have completed the Connections course, I realize that his visit could have been even more effective if we had probed the ways in which we saw God's presence in my work. But, even so, his visit was a very affirming one for me. In the thirty-eight years that I have been an active member of six different Lutheran congregations, our pastors have

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visited in our home scores of times. Until Pastor Tom came, none had ever visited me in my world of work—the place in which I have invested the largest percentage of the waking hours of my life.

Following that first visit, Tom called upon others at their places of work. Without exception, the visits were enthusiastically received. For the one who was visited, it was an affirmation of a ministry which their church, in theory, advocated but, in practice, never fostered. For Tom, it was a learning experience which served to make his sermons even more relevant.

The one-on-one visits later broadened into group visits. In those companies or organizations where there were three or more members of our congregation employed, Tom sought permission from management to meet with them, on company property, during lunch time. The matter of "A Theology for Supervisors?" which was used early in this article came up at one such meeting in Bethlehem Steel's cafeteria. Pastor Tom has arranged group discussions at Mack Trucks, Air Products, Rodale Press, Lehigh Valley Hospital Center, and with groups of homemakers.

We have worked hard at providing small group opportunities for people to share their experiences of faith in the workplace. For several years there has been a program we call the "Monday Connection." We enlist about 14 to 16 persons who will agree to meet for breakfast at 7:00 a.m., the first Monday of each month, from September to June. At each session, one person presents a work-related problem he or she is facing. The group discusses each real life case study and suggests possible approaches to dealing with the problem. Each presenter is asked to reveal ways in which the worship service of the day before related to the problem. Was there something in the lessons, the sermon, the music, or the liturgy which connected Sunday to Monday? At each

of the breakfast meetings, one of our pastors or our Director of Lay Ministries is present to serve as a listener, questioner and, at times, a theologian.

Similarly our congregation provides for other occasions for people to meet to share their faith experiences: a six-week luncheon series during Lent; or a four-week adult study course that will specialize in particular occupational clusters for those members who work in these arenas. We call these sessions our “Ministry in _____” series and have offered them for those who work in the fields of health care, education, business, local government, homemaking, and others. Following the completion of each of these four-week series, there is a special portion of our Sunday morning worship service which publicly affirms the ministries of these members of our congregation.

When people of the faith are brought together in these settings to share specific problems and experiences, it is clear that faith and daily life are connecting. We live in a very complex world with increasingly complex problems and numerous dilemmas. Joseph Sittler, recognizing this situation, writes, “This all adds up to a new theological task for our time: to probe for ways of making morally responsible decisions in the midst of novel moral situations.” Recognizing that the Scriptures seldom offer specific guidance for the complex problems of our time, he adds, “We have no clear law to follow. We must make a judgment in the midst of an indeterminate situation without the serenity of knowing

we have made the right or the Christian one. That is the problem of the contemporary pastor, teacher, relative or friend.”* And, so it is.

The members of our Lutheran congregations *will* make judgments on the problems they face in their lives. The question is whether or not these judgments will be made in the light of the teachings of the church, with the benefit of the experiences of other Christians, with the support of their community of faith, and out of a clear sense that God has called them into ministry in daily life.

To the extent that we develop new and creative ways to broaden the intersection between our Sunday confessions and our Monday operations, the ministry of the whole church will be vastly expanded.

*Joseph Sittler, *Gravity and Grace* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1986) 89.