

Kansas District Theological Convocation
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The Service of Lay Leadership Graduates in Ministry
By Toby Cook

Dear brothers and sisters in Christ Jesus, members of the Kansas District of our Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod.

I bring you greetings from my home congregation, Bethany Lutheran in Overland Park, serving Jesus now at two missions. Our senior pastor, Ed Trost, associate pastor Mark Schultz, and our chief theologian, Pastor Bryan Drebes, who's here at the conference and really in charge of the operation there.

I also bring you greetings from my home away from home, from the souls at First Lutheran Church in Paola, where I serve very part-time as a worship leader and Bible study leader on occasion for Pastor Jerry Peck. Pastor Peck and I hooked up on the day President Kohlmeier was elected to serve the Kansas District at our 2003 convention, our own little version of the "unbroken succession." At least, one that goes back to the 1800's.

My dear friends, I have been selected to give you a short presentation on the role of the laity as it relates specifically to a small but very impressive group of men and women who have graduated from the district's lay ministry (now known as lay leadership) institute. I say small, because those folks make up just a fraction of the 50,000-plus in the District. But they are a significant lot, and one that wishes to serve the Lord, and serve you, well. I give this presentation in the strong and holy name of our Living Lord, the Father who created us, the Son who redeems us from our sin, and the Holy Spirit, who is with us even today as we gather.

Just a few short miles from here, in what might have been the described as the epicenter of Kansas Lutheranism a few years ago, my parents, Thurman and Dolly Cook, named me after a football player in 1967, Tobin Route. I was baptized Tobin Matthew Cook at Trinity, Winfield -- Dad, a former teacher at one St. John's College; Mom, a former student who fell in love with a soon-to-be balding public school administrator. My oldest brother, Ted, became the first four-year graduate at St. John's in 1982, just six years before its closing, also the year of my high school graduation in Independence, my home since 1972. Ted, as many of you might know, is pastor Zion in Pittsburg. Over the course of studies at Independence Community College, the University of Kansas and Pittsburg State (home of the only collegiate Gorillas in the country and only four blocks from Zion), God led me to visit Concordia Seminary, St. Louis, in March 1991. I prayerfully investigated that weekend whether He was calling me into the ordained ministry like Thurman and Dolly's first child. As I drove to back to Pittsburg on I-44, the answer became clear: No. God wanted me to pursue the career I had been preparing for for years: broadcast journalism.

I can breeze through the next years quickly to make my 12-minute deadline today by saying, wonder of wonders, God knew what He was doing. I've had a very fulfilling career as a TV anchor and reporter at four different stations, mostly in the mornings and mostly with the requirement of an afternoon nap. I wouldn't trade my experiences for anything, and God knew that would be the case. I have a very interesting job, and on most days, I like it.

So how did I get here? To be a presenter to you all? Well, God again. You see, in following my childhood dream of broadcasting, God kept stirring inside me a desire to serve the Church in a meaningful way. I don't say this in a proud manner. It's just the truth. I can't seem to escape the draw to proclaim the Gospel, for it is the power of salvation for those who believe. And it is my only hope in a poor, miserable, sinful life. And I just happen to dig the lectionaries and liturgies, the Word and Sacraments, that make up the experience of the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod.

So it was -- my wife, Barbara, and I found ourselves at Our Savior Lutheran Church in Lynchburg, Virginia, back in 1996, a year into our experience in that town that is known more for local resident Jerry Falwell than the small LCMS parish on Link Road. With about 50 worshipers a Sunday. I had taken a job as a morning anchor and reporter at the ABC affiliate in Lynchburg after three years of the same at KOAM-TV in Pittsburg. [Please let me stop here and say that there's a reason for all of this autobiographical information, and it's not because I'm too terribly self-centered; the stories of what led many of us into the Lay Leadership Institute are similar, a convergence of our professional lives and our lives in the Church].

Our pastor had left Virginia in '96, and we had one string of retired or pulpit-supply guys in robes after another. One day, the man leading worship had a "Mr." in front of his name, not "Rev.". Hmmm, I wondered. What's this about? Mr. Gene Fleischman was a retired AAL rep and a "lay minister." The Southeastern District had a few those guys helping out in an area of the country where you couldn't always find retired or available pastors to fill in. I started thinking, "I wonder if the Board of Elders would consider letting me lead worship when a pastor wasn't available? They took me up on the offer before I could get the words out. And truth be known, the empty-pulpit syndrome led the district president at the time, Roy Maack, to basically bless my work as a "lay minister" over the phone. So, for the last year and a-half of our time in Virginia, I served two Sundays a month at least, as a lay leader, all the way co-hosting a television morning show five days a week.

Let me fast-forward to present day. I couldn't be happier that former President Gene Schmidt, along with others, decided to investigate the historic role of the "deacon" the Church and look for ways that other lay leaders -- men and women -- could serve. The two years I experienced in Topeka, in training for that program to become a credentialed deacon, were two of the best years of my life, in terms of spiritual growth and excitement about God's Kingdom. I think a lot these days about President Schmidt's successor, Howard Patten, who encouraged me, and President Kohlmeier, who signs my credentialing papers.

But it comes down to this. As a credential deacon in the Kansas District, I know the joy of service, and I know the confusion that comes with an identity crisis.

If the district's lay leadership program isn't one of the best in the Synod, then I'd like to meet the people who 'have' put together a better one. We learned the Holy Scriptures from beginning to end. The history of the Church. The Lutheran Confessions. Worship and liturgy. Exegesis. Homiletics. The art of human care. And each one of us who left the program in May 2004 knew that we were joining an excited group of lay men and women who went before us and would go after us, servants who wanted to strengthen and fortify Christ's Church. If there would be a downside to the experience, it would be that more people in the district did not know about the program and exactly what credential deacons and lay ministers were supposed to do.

President Schmidt wanted to train and empower the good lay people of Kansas to step up to the plate and help the congregations and pastors they adored. The former director of the program, Dr. Jim Jorns, who did one incredible job in getting the program off the ground and making it fly, promised us one thing: that, at very least, we would enjoy a tremendous spiritual experience. Beyond that, it was up to congregations we serve to use us in a powerful way.

At first, that took the form of men filling pulpits, leading worship, and -- all under the guidance and counsel of an ordained pastor -- even administering the Sacraments when appropriate. These first "deacons" in the district served as a shepherd to congregations who had no hope of being led by a pastor, especially in areas -- like Lynchburg, Virginia -- where the ordained were few and far between. Gradually, as pastors and congregations contemplated the historic and Scriptural role of the deacon, some of these men served as pastoral assistants in their own congregations. And some even served as pulpit supply, when pastors and congregations asked them to serve.

Presidents Schmidt, Patten, and Kohlmeier were insistent during our training that the congregation -- as an autonomous body -- has the right to bring on (I hesitate to use the word "call") the person it sees fit to serve as its shepherd. And they were equally insistent that we realize these congregations have a voluntary and loyal affiliation with a greater Synod, who has instituted ways that leaders be trained for Word and Sacrament ministry, primarily through our seminary training and the call process. Hallelujah to that. I don't know one graduate of the Lay Leadership Institute who wants to, as a credentialed deacon especially, supplant or "take the place of" an ordained pastor. Or who wants to lead a congregation in worship, Word and Sacrament ministry, and human care by skirting the seminary and call process.

These people simply find themselves, prayerfully, in a position where -- and I'll use the word here -- they feel "called" to their vocation, during the week, as a teacher, business associate, banker, TV reporter, butcher/baker/candlestick maker. And they want to serve the Church in a special way. So these very pro-pastor people enrolled in a program and spent more than 350 hours over 20 extended weekends in a two-year period to learn Scripture, Confessions, and Care. And they want to serve.

I think the district is absolutely on the right track in expanding the original scope of the Lay Leadership Institute. Many of the courses and emphases early-on made it seem like we were all being groomed to be worship leaders, preachers, many of the attributes found in those holding the Keys to the Kingdom. As the program evolved, and the desires of the enrollees became clearer, the current staff decided not only to change the name from Lay Ministry, to Lay Leadership, Institute. They also massaged the coursework to better reflect the folks attending those long weekends at the Lutheran Center on 10th Street, just down from the Capitol Building. Again, hallelujah. This is how programs like this survive and thrive, by being sensitive to the needs of people they serve, the people who want to serve. But in making this shift to accommodate, it is my hope and prayer that the district will pull off another "favorite" of the Schmidts, Pattens, and Kohlmeiers of the Synod: a both-and scenario.

I believe that we need to not only lift up and affirm those men and women who received lay training for numerous tasks in the church. I believe that we should, as a district at least and as a Synod one day, affirm the work of credential deacons as they were trained, to perform Word and Sacrament ministry where asked, under the direction of an ordained pastoral supervisor. And to make this something that everyone in Kansas understands, whether they agree with the program or not.

What I don't want to see (and I speak for myself here but have heard similar concerns from others) is credentialed deacons falling into a no-man's land, somewhere between the original training in Topeka and a possible move away from their use. Now, if that's what the leaders, pastors, and congregations decide they want to see happen, then so be it. But I have personally witness how effective and beneficial credentialed deacons can be to Pastor and People. If the need really is there -- and I believe it is -- it's important that we educate the whole district about their role. What if the congregations have a problem with the program itself? I can respect that. But I think the clergy/laity of the Kansas District are better served to know the program is affirmed and is being used. The worst thing we can do is establish and support this program and let it wither, if it has a chance to succeed by our reaching out to all 160-plus parishes in the district and affirming it to them.

Please allow me to make a few points before I conclude:

-- I have not gotten into important questions about the diaconate. Namely, should the LCMS adopt the role of deacon as a recognized position in the Church, just as pastor, teacher, and DCE are?

-- More specifically, should deacons be put into a semi-clerical category as Roman Catholics and Anglican/Episcopalians traditions have? Or should deacons be ordained? If so, at the congregational, district or synod level?

-- I have not delved into the Scriptural, doctrinal, or Confessional arguments for against the use of deacons, in the LCMS or otherwise. I've done research on findings from people I respect, including Pastor Al Hoyer of Wichita and my friend, Walt Snyder of Emma, Missouri, who have had honest disagreements with the ideas and terms found in the lay ministry idea. Or the study of Michigan District President who wrote a paper on why the

deaconate is fully Lutheran and appropriate. I simply found that each side cites Scriptural, doctrinal, and Confessional reasons to make their case.

I simply stand before you as someone who humbly loves his work as a credential deacon in the Kansas District, asking the good people of Kansas to make this program well-known and well-debated. I believe the more we study in Christian love, the more the program will be accepted. And I'm willing to be proven wrong.

I don't know if God will one day call me into the Holy Ministry, to pack my bags and take my family to St. Louis or Ft. Wayne. In the meantime, I'm delighted to be a fisherman/carpenter during the week and help my church nights and weekends. I like my day job. And if I ever do put a collar 'round my neck, I hope to use a credentialed deacon to help me and my congregation carry out the Great Commission.

To God be the glory alone. Amen
Thank you.