

## **The Role of Laity in Ministry**

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A presentation by  
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The presentation today on the role of the laity in ministry will dwell on three component points:

- 1) Contributions that each individual is equipped to make in the Christian church on earth,
- 2) Relationships between individuals within the Christian church on earth, and finally,
- 3) Roles of laity relative to the pastoral office.

As we consider the role that each Christian might assume in ministry, let us start with three scripture readings from Paul's letters to the Corinthians, Romans, and Ephesians.

In Ephesians chapter 4 we read "It was he who gave some to be apostles, some to be prophets, some to be evangelists, and some to be pastors and teachers," In the first epistle to the Corinthians, Paul writes, "And in the church God has appointed first of all apostles, second prophets, third teachers, then workers of miracles, also those having gifts of healing, those able to help others, those with gifts of administration, and those speaking in different kinds of tongues." Finally, from Romans chapter 12 we read, "We have different gifts, according to the grace given us. If a man's gift is prophesying, let him use it in proportion to his faith. If it is serving, let him serve; if it is teaching, let him teach; if it is encouraging, let him encourage; if it is contributing to the needs of others, let him give generously; if it is leadership, let him govern diligently; if it is showing mercy, let him do it cheerfully."

In these inspired texts Paul enumerates the special gifts that are given by God for the edification of his church on earth. I wish not to read too much into these texts, but will make a few observations. First, 'pastor' is listed as a unique gift [also translated as 'shepherd' or 'guardian']. There are some whom God has equipped to be pastors and has called them to serve Him in this role. But, many other gifts are listed; apostles (those who are sent), prophesy (to foretell or forth tell God's word), teaching, administration, healing, service, encouraging, contributing, leading, and governing. The gifts are separate and unique. The lists are also unique. Paul was writing to three different Christian communities that were separated both in time and in location. One interpretation of this observation is that the gifts that were manifested in each Christian community were appropriate to that community at that time. God gives to each Christian community people that have the gifts that are needed at that time and in that place. This is true also today.

The context for each of these epistle readings deals with order in the church. In Ephesians the reasoning is given, "to prepare God's people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up." And, in the letter to the Corinthians, Paul goes on to note that not everyone has all these gifts by saying, "Are all apostles? Are all prophets? Are all teachers? Do all work miracles? Do all have gifts of healing? Do all speak in tongues? Do all interpret?" At the extreme, these readings might even be construed to suggest that no one is endowed with more than one spiritual gift; certainly, no one is endowed with all gifts. The simplest interpretation of these verses is that just because you may be gifted as an administrator, it does not make you qualified to act as prophet or a pastor and vice versa. In fact, a trend that I find troubling is that lay persons are asked to conduct activities that have historically been reserved for pastors while pastors assume supervisory roles in administration and government. There are many edifying gifts given by God to build his church in an orderly way. The vast majority of these gifts are in addition to pastoral care.

To summarize the first point, the appropriate expectation for each layperson in ministry is to use effectively the gifts that God has given to them in the role that God has prepared for them.

Moving on to the second point, the context in which these gifts are used.

We frequently refer to fellow Christians as clergy or laity, parishioners, confirmed or baptized souls, but I prefer the term ‘member’. We are fellow members in the Christian church on earth. What does this mean? What does it say about our relationships? Rather than going to Webster or Oxford to get this meaning, let’s go to Luther in his meaning of the First Article where he indicates that God endowed him with “eyes, ears, and all my members.” This fits with the context that Paul used for our verses above when he said that the gifts were to build up the body of Christ, that is the church. Paul elaborates that “If the foot should say, ‘Because I am not a hand, I do not belong to the body,’ it would not for that reason cease to be part of the body.” A member is a unique and important part of the body that, when compromised, diseased, or lost, the body loses a portion of its functionality. Perhaps as bad a situation arises if one part of the body attempts to conduct the function of another body part. If my hand starts walking, my feet have no purpose and I would be unable to run – the whole body suffers. If I lose a member, I cannot function as well, even if other parts of my body can conduct the activity to a minimal level. So it is for the church. God gives people with unique gifts to serve in the particular setting at the particular time. If these members are compromised, lost, fail to function, or attempt to function outside of their gifted area, the whole body suffers. We must expect ourselves to use our God-given gifts fully and we must encourage, expect and allow others to serve the Lord with their gifts.

I want to carry this analogy with the body a step farther by noting that Paul indicates that some body parts are public and that some are private, but that all are necessary. If a member’s gift is leadership or administration, it is almost certainly a public gift. However, caring, or encouraging, or contributing, or healing are not by definition public. In at least some cases, these activities need to be private. As we look around our Christian community, we may see members that outwardly manifest no particular gift or activity. They seem to serve no special function. We should not, however, pass judgment, but must provide prayerful encouragement that their gifts are used wisely and fully.

Allow me to take the ‘body’ analogy to another level. In my regular job I study intestinal secretion [read that ‘diarrhea’] and so am keenly aware of the role that the most distal portions of the intestinal tract play in our daily lives. What would we be like without an exit route? Cranky, irritable, ill. So too in the church. There needs to be someone that is equipped to deal with our gas, to void our waste, and perhaps to remind us of the activities in which we participated yesterday or the day before. Wouldn’t you agree that every congregation seems to have one? I emphasize ‘one.’ The good Lord gave each of us just one – that’s sufficient – we don’t need two. But seriously, this person is equipped to perform a unique and necessary bodily function. As such, this member deserves our appreciation, respect, and our prayers.

To summarize the second point, the appropriate expectation for each layperson in ministry is to use effectively the gifts that God has given to them in the role that God has prepared for them in concert with those around them.

The third and final portion of this presentation is to define the roles of laity in ministry relative to the pastoral office.

It is difficult to define laity in the church in the absence of clergy much in the same way that it is difficult to define a wife without invoking the concept of husband or to define night without describing day.

Francis Pieper, in *Christian Dogmatics*, defines ministry as “... preaching the Gospel or administering the means of grace, whether by Christians in general, as originally entrusted with the means of grace and

commissioned to apply them, or by chosen public servants in the name and by the command of Christians. ... public ministry is ... the office by which the means of grace, given originally to the Christians as their inalienable possession, are administered by order and on behalf of Christians.”<sup>1</sup> This definition indicates that the pastoral office is an extension of the ministry of all Christians, that is, the laity.

The laity exercises authority in the issuing and defining of a call. The call is to provide spiritual care and doctrinal leadership. By issuing the call the laity are entrusting their authority to the pastor, who is to exercise this authority publicly on their behalf. The pastor is called to serve the congregation as a leader. He is commissioned to lead the congregation in matters of doctrine, to administer the sacraments, to preach the Word, and to provide for the spiritual care of the flock, both individually and corporately. Outside of this call, the pastor is given no authority and the laity rightly retains the responsibility for the exercise of all other activities within the church. The nature of the call establishes a tension regarding leadership and servanthood for both laity and clergy.

Lutherans experience a healthy tension as they consider the concept of priesthood. St. Peter writes that Christians are a “royal priesthood.” But, what is a priest? Someone who conducts sacerdotal acts. Someone who offers intercessions. Someone who offers sacrifices. Someone who can directly address God. Many of these actions are ascribed to the pastor, but every Christian is a priest in the most rigorous sense of the word. Christians are also among the nations described in Matthew 28 that are to be disciples. How can each person be both a priest and a disciple? This tension between being a religious leader and being a follower or supporter manifests itself in every aspect of Christian life, for both the laity and the clergy. However, Lutherans are well-equipped to deal with this tension because, according to Dr. Gene Edward Veith, we embrace paradoxes such as: “Law and Gospel; Christ as both true God and true Man; the Christian as simultaneously saint and sinner; justification by faith and baptismal regeneration; Holy Communion as the real presence of Christ in material bread and wine.” He states that “This explains why Lutherans can seem both inwardly focused and free and easy, why they seem conservative yet apolitical, and why they often have beer at their church dinners.”<sup>2</sup> While we might chuckle about these paradoxes, the key question for the current situation is, “Does the laity call a pastor to serve or to lead?”

The laity calls a pastor to serve the congregation with spiritual care. There is a need for order in the church and a need for leadership. Certainly Paul was pointing this out in the epistle segments that we read. Understanding and being comfortable with the servant nature of leadership is required of both laity and pastor. Whenever a pastor assumes, exercises, or usurps a ministry or leadership role that is outside of the call for spiritual care, the pastoral office suffers, healthy order is lost within the church, and there is a sense of betrayal in the laity because God-given gifts of the members are not being used. Likewise, when the laity fails to use their gifts or fails to encourage, respect, and build on pastoral care and leadership, the pastoral office suffers, healthy order is lost within the church, and there is a sense of betrayal because the call is found to be hollow and lacking substance. In each case, for laity and pastors, servanthood with respect for others’ God-given gifts must come first in ministry. This summarizes the third point.

I would like to end this talk with a few personal insights. A number of years ago I was part of a call committee that conducted a congregation evaluation that was outside of the synodical evaluation tool. I believe that the responses from the laity are typical and speak volumes regarding the how laity views their work with the pastor. The responses demonstrate the authority that the laity is expressing when extending a call. Some of the respondents almost suggested that they wanted someone that could walk on water.

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<sup>1</sup> taken from *The Ministry: offices, procedures and nomenclature*, a report of the Commission on Theology and Church Relations of The Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod, 1981.

<sup>2</sup> Veith, Dr. Gene Edward. *Evangelical Catholics And Confessional Evangelicals: The Ecumenical Polarities Of Lutheranism. Touchstone: A Magazine of Mere Christianity*. May/June 1998. pgs. 14-17.

Nonetheless, the following responses are particularly germane. One of the questions was, "What pastoral abilities would you like to see most in our future pastor?" The responses included the following. "To be an effective leader and also he must be a follower - of Christ," and "To preach, to teach and to listen." These responses demonstrate that the laity expects both leadership and responsiveness as they address local ministry opportunities.

Another part of the survey provided greater insight to the authority expressed by the laity. The survey asked, "If you could ask one question in an interview situation, what question would you like to ask of a prospective pastor?" The responses included many probing questions: "How do you measure success?; How do you evaluate pastoral performance?; What do you see as your most responsible role as a pastor?; What do you think is your responsibility in getting to know present church families?; Explain who is going to heaven and hell in the parable of the sower.; What is the most important change in direction that our congregation needs to make?; What do you expect of the members of our church?" Each of these prospective questions demonstrates that the questioner is interested in properly exercising authority in extending a call for spiritual care of the congregation and to insure that local ministry is carried out. There was one more prospective question, however, that truly caught my attention. "What can I do to help?" This question demonstrated to me that the respondent had a healthy appreciation for order within the church, knowledge that they possessed valuable gifts that would be used in ministry, and the expectation that there would be effective servant leadership. The respondent who asked, "What can I do to help?" truly understood the role of laity in ministry.