

# ***Lutheran Mission Matters***



Volume XXIV, No. 1 (Issue 47) January 2016

# Category Error, Common Sense, and the Office of the Public Ministry in the Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod

Dust Kunkel

**Abstract:** The report by Synod Task Force pursuant to Resolution 4-06A of the 2013 LCMS Convention on Licensed Lay Deacons is used as the starting point to explore assumptions and the application of The Office of the Public Ministry within the secular context of the twenty-first century. On the eve of the five hundredth anniversary of the Reformation, with the Western church destabilized by vast cultural change, a founding community practice built on Scripture and congregation polity is offered as a qualitatively Lutheran way forward.

In July 2015, the Task Force for 2013 Resolution 4-06A (TF 4-06A)<sup>1</sup> recommended ending the role of supervised Licensed Word and Sacrament Lay Deacon in the LCMS—a leadership function authorized by the 1989 Synod Convention—by directing all Licensed Lay Deacons (LLD) to cease practice or become ordained. Licensed lay deacons over 55 can choose to be “grandfathered” into ordination as pastors through a regional colloquy process, and deacons younger than 55 must enter the Specific Ministry Pastor (SMP) program, or other routes to ordination. The recommendations “fix” what the task force considers a theological problem by phasing out non-ordained, trained, and supervised laymen administering the Sacraments and preaching. Though theologians of the LCMS should examine the soundness of the theological assumptions made by TF 4-06A<sup>2</sup>, there is a more foundational issue at stake: one of faulty logic.

It is a form of incorrect thinking to apply a reductive view, that is, oversimplifying an issue until it distorts, to the Office of the Public Ministry (hereafter, The Office). Even more detrimental is the impact of this reductive view when applied to congregations embedded in the secular settings of the twenty-first

---

*Dust Kunkel is the Executive Assistant to the President of the NOW District, LCMS. He grew up in Ghana, West Africa, in an LCMS missionary family that started schools, planted congregations, and equipped leaders in partnership with the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Ghana. He has served in the LCMS for twenty years in leadership roles including youth and family ministry, outdoors ministry, campus ministry, leadership research and design, and mission network and leader support across the NOW district. He holds a Master’s degree in Education by research from the University of Edinburgh, Scotland. [dustk@nowlcms.org](mailto:dustk@nowlcms.org)*

century. Logicians call it a fallacy; the rest of us would call it lack of basic common sense. With due respect to the task force and its formidable task, this essay will show that TF 4-06A's reductive view of The Office inadequately addresses the common-sense challenges present in LCMS congregations, and will present an alternative course built on LCMS polity, Lutheran reformation practice, and the template for The Office provided by the New Testament.

### **Introducing Category Error, the Common Sense Logic**

In logic, category error is “the error of assigning to something a quality or action that can properly be assigned to things only of another category, for example, treating abstract concepts as though they had a physical location.”<sup>3</sup> If I wrote, “My anger was a skittle in my pocket,” it might provoke thought in my reader as a metaphor, but in logic it would be an error. For most people, this is basic common sense. Imagine a visitor to a university campus<sup>4</sup> who sees all the colleges and buildings and then at the end of the tour asks, “But where is the university?”<sup>5</sup> The visitor's error is assuming the university belongs to the category of buildings (as if it were an extra building) instead of the category of institutions: all of these buildings, plus the people who carry its values, make up the “university.”

Category error causes confusion, particularly in systems of people working together. Here is another example: Imagine a person who has never seen or participated in a sport. This person watches a game for the first time and assumes “team spirit” is a specific role enacted by someone, like a batter, fielder, or pitcher on a team.<sup>6</sup> “Where is the ‘team spirit’ person?” he asks. That is category error. Anyone who has played a team sport knows team spirit is an “other” category shared by all players. A coach might create a role for team spirit—imagine how awkward!—but that could in no way fulfill the activity of team spirit. Again, basic common sense. Furthermore, not only would the “team spirit person” be unable to fulfill the job, the team members' minds would be confused about team spirit.

Authority for ministry  
in the LCMS rests  
not in a single person,  
episcopate, or Roman  
hierarchy, but in the local  
congregation gathered  
around God's Word and  
His Sacraments.  
Instead of “top-down,”  
LCMS polity is  
“grassroots-up.”

In a similar way, authority for ministry in the LCMS rests not in a single person, episcopate, or Roman hierarchy, but in the local congregation gathered around God's Word and His Sacraments. Instead of “top-down,” LCMS polity is “grassroots-up.” Each community of gathered believers identifies ministry needs and “calls” workers to preach the Word and administer the Sacraments.<sup>7</sup> The Word and Sacraments, similar to team spirit,

do not rest in one person's role but in the authority of the local congregation. The Office of the Public Ministry is a single public office always originating in a local congregation context—at its heart, a ministry of service—with wide application through a variety of functions.<sup>8</sup>

Yet, practice through the centuries among Lutherans has been marked by a specialized pastorate with extensive graduate training.<sup>9</sup> This is understandable, considering the context of Western culture (“church buildings on every corner,” “Sabbath Sundays” on which even the few non-Christians did no work, an abundance of denominations and sects, etc.). Congregations needed “experts” to explain how they were different from other Christians. In fact, the very term “layman,” inherited from these past centuries of specialization, has become interchangeable with “not an expert.” The industrial revolution's focus on specialization only amplified this approach.

Within this milieu, or category, the next step was logical: *the pastor became the only one at point of contact* with parishioners allowed to preach and administer the sacraments. For many Lutherans today, “ordained pastor” means the same thing as “The Office,” although the first term is loaded with a variety of structural arrangements that reduce the role (boxes to check) to a single person, while the latter, as a concept that connects the dots across the New Testament, is wider and deeper. Again, this is logical for the sixteenth-century era (and succeeding centuries of specialization) in which the church was primarily *the insider* to authority structures and culture.<sup>10</sup>

### **Category Error in the LCMS**

Research over the last few decades (most notably the 2014 Pew Research report quoted by TF-406A, and Barna Group's 2015 assessment of church trends)<sup>11</sup> increasingly suggests we now live in a secular era at the beginning of the twenty-first century. Its closest resemblance is to the first century, when the church was *the outsider*. To assume today that the institutional church (and its theological representatives) is an insider to Western secular culture is to embrace category error. More importantly, to assume any stance that seeks to regain this former position as insider is a category error. It is also poor common sense. Most of us learned, looking back on junior high, that trying to move from outsider to insider is a waste of time and energy.

Or, picture a house breaking apart in a 9.5 Richter-scale earthquake. The house is the Western church, and the earthquake is culture shifting from Christendom to secularization. One evidence of trying to “fix” the structural fracture in the LCMS house is the attempt to remove (trained, examined, supervised-by-pastors, licensed-by-district-presidents) laymen from serving as Word and Sacrament deacons. The fix is, essentially, “cease ministry, or be ordained through existing channels.” This

attempt is like nailing a two-by-four over a widening crack in the foundation. It is also ironic, since these very LLDs are already the most “Lutheranly vetted:” they arise from within a congregation and are only licensed on an annual basis by district presidents in response to that congregation’s determination of need.

Other evidences of trying to fix the structural fractures in the Western church or respond to the cultural earthquake include regularly-published “statements” by national church leaders on secular issues, reactive stances taken in the public square, funds channeled to organizations engaged in political influence, and policies and legislation focused on centralization (for example, the recent national LCMS opinion by its Committee on Constitutional Matters that requires congregation mission activity to be passed through its national mission board).<sup>12</sup> Aftershocks from a changing culture batter the institutional Western church. It is easy to become disoriented, caught in the initial stages of the grief-cycle (denial/isolationism, anger, and bargaining) and lose focus on the primary issue, faulty logic. Then, habituated to category error, Western church bodies become increasingly isolated from common-sense needs in congregations.

To expect one role that grew from a foundation of being *the insider* to culture in the sixteenth to twentieth centuries to *personally* enact all functions of The Office in a church now existing as *the outsider* in a secular culture is to make a category error.

It is crucial to the purpose of this essay that we share common ground in high regard for The Office found in Scripture and the Lutheran Confessions (also Walther’s *Church and Ministry*).<sup>13</sup> The question at hand regarding category error is not The Office, itself, but rather its application within different eras. To expect one role that grew from a foundation of being *the insider* to culture in the sixteenth to twentieth centuries to *personally* enact all functions of The Office in a church now existing as *the outsider* in a secular culture is to make a category error.

New Testament (NT) roles and functions of leadership in the first century existed in a church that was *the outsider* to the authority structures of Roman, Greek, and even Jewish culture. In the last two thousand years, this is the closest-matching category to our era. It is fascinating that TF 4-06A uses Philip the deacon as the case for the role of evangelist, yet disregards a robust discussion of the facts explicit in the text: under the supervision of the Apostles, he proclaimed the Word of God in Samaria, and then taught and baptized the Ethiopian eunuch. So, Philip was an evangelist, but, somehow not extending The Office in proclaiming the Word or administering the Sacrament? This strong-arming of the text by TF 4-06A is the result of category error in thinking: Philip does not match our sixteenth-twentieth century reductive model for The Office, so we lay him on a procrustean bed and lop off any bits that do

not fit.

Furthermore, though the leadership types from Ephesians 4 are noted by TF 4-06A, they are not unpacked. Nor are the following examples of roles and functions from the first century identified as legitimate means for proclaiming the Word of God: the preaching and Sacraments that must have been celebrated in all the of the house churches<sup>14</sup> by leaders of those churches (for whom we have lists in most of Paul's letters), the travelling preacher function of Apollos, the husband-wife leadership team of Prisca and Aquila, the supervision practiced by Paul and the other apostles and leaders of the Early Church, even the cryptic mention of Philip's four prophesying daughters. The lack of transparency by TF 4-06A in its biblical sourcing should raise concern. The central issue is this: category error underneath TF 4-06A's recommendations informs a reductive application of the Office of the Public Ministry. Our inherited, stratified forms for The Office do not fit the manifold expressions for The Office, or functions under The Office, found in the New Testament.

We now live in a secular age, not a Christian one. The church does not need an "office of evangelist" in the twentieth-century mold, as TF 4-06A recommends. This is too little, too late. That would be Philip with his arms and legs cut off. "Don't preach or baptize—just 'do outreach' and bring them to the church building." Let the pastor "do" the preaching and Sacraments. This only strengthens the clergy-laity divide. The very nature of the model—which seeks to attract people to a pastor and worship service—does not fit the demands and context of secular culture.

Instead, each local congregation requires many and various team-spirited leaders who, *under supervision, responsibly extend The Office* like Philip—the first-century evangelist, deacon, preacher, and baptizer—proclaiming the Good News and carrying the means of grace into every culture and people group. As Philip and Stephen so aptly demonstrate, it is not so much the title of "deacon" that matters; it is local vetting and spirit-led service while under supervision.<sup>15</sup>

Some suggest that NT roles and functions were for their time and do not exist now, except the pastor role which is the same as The Office. Not only does this

"Don't preach or baptize—just 'do outreach' and bring them to the church building." Let the pastor "do" the preaching and Sacraments.

This only strengthens the clergy-laity divide. The very nature of the model—which seeks to attract people to a pastor and worship service—does not fit the demands and context of secular culture.

perspective disregard the ramifications of its own assertion (after all, if the NT roles do not exist now, then the LCMS pastor may also not exist in the future), but it also does revisionist violence to the structure of the Bible if we apply it to our lives today. What would be left in Bibles if all the roles and functions of leadership were removed except the pastoral role, and it was defined as “sole provider of Word and Sacrament?”

Others suggest that The Office subsumes the NT roles and functions within itself. This seems closer to an NT understanding, and yet the LCMS shows little application in training systems and authority structure. Nowhere does the LCMS provide for training or certification for “pastor-apostle,” or “pastor-evangelist,” or “pastor-prophet,” and so forth. This solution has its own limiting issues, but the point still stands: Why is the concept of The Office being presented as “all ordained-pastor or nothing at all”?

Others suggest that NT roles or functions for The Office are “non-trainable” and exist as gifts in all pastors-in-training. If this were so, then LCMS would have an effective process to identify and amplify these gifts through training and mentoring and other means, and it does not. LCMS training systems were received from the sixteenth century and refined in the modern-industrial centuries that followed. The LCMS mass-produces a specialized expert in theology, with an over-reliance on the residential model. When it comes to training, the few “alternate routes to ordination” that exist have the same goal as MDiv programs, albeit with fewer “specialized theological expert” requirements, leading some (not me) to term them “MDiv lite.” Category error is the reason: The LCMS has embraced a reductive role for The Office that does not match the requirements of our era, nor the broad, multi-roled concept of The Office portrayed in the New Testament.

Having specialized theologians is not the issue; the Church will always need leaders who divide Law and Gospel well. However, *too many of one kind* of leader is an issue. The tendency, when gathering plumbers at a plumber’s convention is for all the talk to be about toilets and pipes, and one might believe a house was just toilets and pipes.

The LCMS has a blind spot flowing from category error. It is an over-attention

TF 4-06A sets up  
a straw man  
of “discord in the Synod”  
over the issue of LLDs.  
Why straw man?  
The discord is raised  
exactly by those who  
are not served by LLDs,  
nor impacted  
by their ministry.  
It would be true discord  
if congregations served by  
LLDs were asking  
for a change  
and not being heard.



to clergy-focused questions, rather than to common-sense, field-based needs. TF 4-06A sets up a straw man of “discord in the Synod” over the issue of LLDs. Why straw man? The discord is raised exactly by those who are not served by LLDs, nor impacted by their ministry. It would be true discord if congregations served by LLDs were asking for a change and not being heard. LLD congregations and their supportive districts do not think this way, and neither did Luther. He encouraged Melancthon, a layman and the writer of a large portion of the Lutheran Confessions, to preach. Nor were the pastors of Luther’s day always the recipients of an MDiv or extensive academic training. Many had two-year degrees or less, and were often immediately in the field serving under some form of supervision.

One might assume that TF 4-06A’s recommendations provide for a less rigorous, more amenable, path to ordination through the Specific Ministry Pastor (SMP) distance education program, allowing men to “not move” to seminary. However, it is concerning that in this age of information delivery and localized training, the SMP program suggests a budget of \$8,000/year to \$10,000/year, which on the low side costs \$32,000 in total and on the high side (more likely) costs \$40–\$50,000. Week-long, on-site intensives and travel twice a year to the seminary add to the financial burden on congregations, new starts, and leaders least able to bear it.

The following scenario illustrates category error in the application of The Office today: In the United States and Europe, as Western culture destabilizes, the “people group” tag used by foreign missions now legitimately covers not only traditional ethnic immigrants but also myriad subcultures created out of the breakdown of traditional forms, the marriage of technology and globalization, and the human need for community. Within many of these emerging communities, the church is viewed with distrust, and professional church workers with an MDiv or the title of “Pastor” face overt rejection.<sup>16</sup>

There are no shortcuts to gain credibility among the people groups of the twenty-first century. Those seeking to proclaim the Good News of Jesus must be prepared to build relational trust over years, even decades, for the right to be heard (both by individuals and in the public sphere).

Paul in Athens comes to mind. There are no shortcuts to gain credibility among the people groups of the twenty-first century. Those seeking to proclaim the Good News of Jesus must be prepared to build relational trust over years, even decades, for the right to be heard (both by individuals and in the public sphere). Often the proclamation and baptizing will be by those embedded within a particular group. These leaders will have “street cred,” not as church-workers or pastors, but as quality human beings first.

The qualifications for leaders outlined in 1



Timothy 3—almost all of which are behavior traits proven over time—take on enhanced meaning in this secular context. (Paul does not include “seminary training” or “ordination” in the list. Instead, he expected the local church to vet these leaders—again, a practice occurring naturally in the case of all LLDs.) TF 4-06A uses well-defined rubrics for The Office, but these rubrics are too rigid for this real-life, twenty-first-century scenario.

By now, “category error” should be flashing like a caution light. The LCMS is no longer philosophically and structurally equipped to be the “mission-oriented” church it says it is. Nor is “the foreign mission field” across an ocean, if it ever was. If they won’t take “our kind of leader,” will entire people groups be removed from Christ’s command to “as you go, make disciples, baptizing and teaching”? In 1927, the world had two billion people; today we sit at around seven billion, and projections suggest at least nine billion by 2050. With no other options provided by TF 4-06A (remember, TF 4-06A’s “evangelist” is basically an “expert lay person” only allowed to “bring people to church where the pastor can preach/baptize/commune them”), the unspoken inference is that TF 4-06A expects a community to be partial to Christendom in order for LCMS congregations to do ministry there.

If a group of Christians embedded within an anti-Christian or secular community or people group needs a locally vetted and supervised leader to preach and administer the Sacraments, will the LCMS (using the underlying philosophy of TF 4-06A) block it? Trends suggest that more and more congregations find themselves in hostile, or ignorant, environments. These congregations require flexible support for Word and Sacrament ministry, not excessive legislation or idealistic expectations for the community to be partial to Christianity.

TF 4-06A’s recommendations are concerning because they destabilize the Lutheran position on *where* the call comes from by severely limiting the type of leader allowed. This essentially removes the authority for Word and Sacrament from the local church and reverts it within a specialized clergy. It becomes “logical” to assume that only where a pastor is, there are the Word and Sacraments.

If a church is too old (small congregations are often elderly), too poor, too remote, or too young (new starts are too small to afford a full-time ordained pastor), it is restricted from Word and Sacrament ministry because only full-time MDiv

Trends suggest that more and more congregations find themselves in hostile, or ignorant, environments.

These congregations require flexible support for Word and Sacrament ministry, not excessive legislation or idealistic expectations for the community to be partial to Christianity.

pastors or SMPs are qualified. (However, if one is ethnically non-Anglo in the LCMS, it is another matter). Underlying TF 4-06A's recommendations is the colonial assumption that ethnic groups can have "sub par" theological training for their leaders, but Anglos must have MDiv pastors or at least \$32,000 to \$50,000 salaried SMPs. Misunderstanding our category error, we do disservice to both.

The assumptions underlying the recommendations of TF 4-06A lead us into a shrinking Christian fortress<sup>17</sup> protected by a specialized elite. For example, TF 4-06A recommends that Synod pick up the bill for covering the costs of bringing LLDs into seminary training and ordination, though the LCMS faces dwindling funds and growing numbers of indebted, first-call pastors who could use the financial help.

A recent survey of 28 first-call pastors in the West Coast districts found an average student debt burden of \$55,000, with ten of the pastors reporting debt in excess of \$75,000.<sup>18</sup> Though national offices, seminaries, and pastors and their families face financial crises, a crisis of "being fed regularly" is faced on the ground by congregations. TF 4-06A's options could be construed as an insult by any congregation facing tough questions: "If you don't have anyone who will sign up for the SMP program, then 'pipe in' a preacher over the internet and receive the Sacraments when the theological expert can get to you. It might be a few weeks—or months." Unspoken under these limited options is that small congregations, young congregations, old congregations, remote congregations, new starts, and the regional support relationships between congregations and districts are inconsequential.

In the name of doing what's right and proper, the core of the LCMS is jettisoned: congregational self-governance and supervision within and under The Office. TF 4-06A's recommendations lead to a future where the dwindling local church is held hostage by demands from a top-heavy structure and a specialized clergy class. For Lutherans steeped in Reformation history, this sounds sadly familiar.

Nor does TF 4-06A prepare in any way for the congregational future toward which trends point: rising costs for benefits, healthcare, and salaries coupled with plummeting funds. Information technologies available through district training networks and the Concordia University System already exist that could provide high-level training at low cost for more leaders (and more kinds of leaders). Instead, if category error is embraced, congregations will be asked to face increasing requirements for The Office, while simultaneously bearing the burden of the changes required.<sup>19 20</sup>

At the district level, where accountability is closer to the ground, initial licensure as a deacon costs \$3,000 or less for training developed collaboratively by districts and seminaries and taught by graduate-level instructors. Supervision is always required, mentoring ongoing. In a number of districts, continuing education must be completed prior to each annual re-licensing. It was here, in the trenches of ministry

at the local congregation, where an effective and confessional definition emerged: *Licensed Lay Deacon is a function that extends The Office in a responsible way under supervision.*

It was here, in the trenches of ministry at the local congregation, where an effective and confessional definition emerged: *Licensed Lay Deacon is a function that extends The Office in a responsible way under supervision.*

In the Northwest District, conservative estimates predict close to one thousand Lutherans would be without regular Word and Sacrament ministry if supervised laymen were no longer authorized to extend The Office in a responsible way. In each of the four states in the Northwest, congregations once too small to be served by anyone other than a LLD are now grown over time by the service of the LLD to call a full-time pastor. Data suggests LLD programs in districts are a “farm system” drawing 10% of the men on to seminary training and ordination. The other 90% *do not want to be pastors*; they serve their local congregation with humility and grace for a specific time and need.

Not only is the function of the LLD fiscally responsible, and centered on the local congregation’s authority and accountability (a calling card of the LCMS), but the deacon function also highlights and strengthens the pastor as overseer in team ministry rather than as a “lone ranger.” Since LLDs are licensed by district presidents annually, it can be suggested that they receive trans-parochial affirmation by the LCMS within their region of service. Finally, and maybe most importantly, LLDs have “street cred” as spiritual leaders in their secular communities because they typically are not paid,<sup>21</sup> and all of them emerge from their local community.

This essay cannot cover all the bases. Others may highlight the scriptural, confessional, and historical support for LLDs or other functions that, under supervision, extend The Office responsibly. Whatever these functions are titled, Philip and Stephen would remind us that it is not the title, but the faithful service extending The Office—preaching, baptizing, communing, forgiving—that matters. TF 4-06A assumes that ordaining LLDs “fixes the problem.” That is a titular solution. Legislating ordination for all LLDs within the context of the colossal challenges faced by the Western church is like shooting a charging elephant with a Red-Rider BB gun. To the neophyte hunter, the gun looks like a fix, handles like a fix, and carries all the essential elements of “gun-ness.” Yet, when the elephant charges and the hunter fires, there is a click, and the BB moves so slowly the hunter can see it leaving the gun. *If* the BB reaches the target, it bounces off, and the elephant keeps coming.

By focusing on recommendations that place the burden for change on congregations and laymen, TF 4-06A effectively keeps the spotlight off the real issue. The real issue is a reductive assumption regarding The Office that does not meet the massive challenges of our secular-centric age, the broad application of The Office evident in the New Testament, and the needs (and emerging crisis) on the ground in congregations. The conversation must move from “removing supervised laymen doing Word and Sacrament ministry” to one more crucial: *how The Office of the Public Ministry is structured in training and function to serve this era’s congregations embedded as outsiders in a secular culture.*

The conversation must move from “removing supervised laymen doing Word and Sacrament ministry” to one more crucial: *how The Office of the Public Ministry is structured in training and function to serve this era’s congregations embedded as outsiders in a secular culture.*

TF 4-06A is correct in this: The LCMS must make a choice and sacrifices must be made. However, TF 4-06A misses the crux of the choice: Shall the burden for sacrifice and change be on the local church and laypeople, on aging congregations and fledgling starts struggling to grow in secular contexts, or on our leadership and systems? We know the answer, because we see it best displayed in Jesus. Leaders bear the burden. Systems can, and should, be changed.

## **The Lutheran Founding Community Practice**

This essay has identified philosophical assumptions, rather than engaging in theological discourse. First, because assumptions are the primary issue.<sup>22</sup> Second, because theological dialogue is a process that requires time, I have chosen to not provide detailed recommendations for the issue of Licensed Lay Deacons. That would be counterproductive to the goal of this essay, which is to guide the reader to reconsider assumptions. The reader may have reached the conclusion, as I have, that this is the worst of times to rush to action on this issue.

Yet, it may be the best of times to engage in the Lutheran founding community practice. At its most practical, the Reformation was an event *and* a process of discernment under the Word of God during an era of stress and change. Luther, seeking to practice reform, was cast out by Pope Leo. As part of its Reformation heritage, the LCMS retains a specific article in its constitution, Article VII, guarding against such abuse and centralization of power. Some call it “The Leo Article:”

*In its relation to its members the Synod is not an ecclesiastical government exercising legislative or coercive powers, and with respect to the individual congregation’s right of self-government it is but an advisory body.*

*Accordingly, no resolution of the Synod imposing anything upon the individual congregation is of binding force if it is not in accordance with the Word of God or if it appears to be inexpedient as far as the condition of a congregation is concerned.*<sup>23</sup>

Translated for the present concern, the ministry of supervised LLDs serving the need identified by local congregations is not an aberration; and if Synod adopts a protocol that removes the function of LLD, *each congregation can and should decide for itself if it needs this function, or any other function supported by the Word of God for the Office of the Public Ministry to meet its ministry needs.* The issue goes deeper than LCMS polity. It strikes to the heart of God for the last, the least, and the lost, preached by Old Testament prophets and lived by Christ Himself. Will the LCMS disregard the poor, the old, the small congregation, the geographically challenged, the emerging new people groups, and the young churches in favor of propping up a training and certification system that does not match the field needs of this era?

It is by embracing confessional Lutheran heritage that people of the LCMS find a way forward, practicing reformation. Scripture (“Sola Scriptura”) + Congregation Polity (the “Leo article”) = Reformation. To be confessional is good, to be reformationally confessional while holding to congregation polity keeps the full counsel of LCMS heritage.<sup>24</sup> Rushing to “fix the deacon problem” does not fit this rubric. It is a critical time for each congregation to assess its God-given authority for Word and Sacrament ministry, its common-sense needs, and determine what kind of leaders it wants for this *church-as-outsider* era. Each new era requires courageous theologians guided by the Holy Spirit, who, like Luther, identify their conceptual baggage, their inherited assumptions, and return to the springs of Scripture for a house-cleaning.<sup>25</sup>

The LCMS exists in a secular era, a new category for the institutional church. With respect for the theological acumen of each of the members of the task force and for the integrity with which they faced their daunting task, TF 4-06A’s recommendations are not a way forward; they are a red flag at a crossroads. It is

If Synod adopts a protocol that removes the function of LLD, *each congregation can and should decide for itself if it needs this function, or any other function supported by the Word of God for the Office of the Public Ministry to meet its ministry needs.* The issue goes deeper than LCMS polity. It strikes to the heart of God for the last, the least, and the lost, preached by Old Testament prophets and lived by Christ Himself.

category error to apply The Office of the Public Ministry in a reductive manner to congregations struggling to proclaim Christ in their secular communities. The report by TF 4-06A takes a rigid model that emerged when the church was the insider and presents it as a monolithic office to be defined, defended, and ultimately imposed through a convention vote. It may be more helpful to compare the needs of the local church in this secular era with the needs of the local church in the New Testament. Believers gathered around Word and Sacrament were outsiders to culture then, and are outsiders today. One does not need the concept of category error to understand this alone; it is also basic common sense.

That is why this essay used the example of team spirit, a phenomenon anyone involved in a team sport has experienced. Team spirit resides in each, yet transcends all, as we practice together. To be clear, it is not the same as the work of the Holy Spirit through God's Word and Sacraments, but it *is* one picture that may renew a broader vision for The Office. This Office of Public Ministry is deep. It is wide. It is flexible. It is the gift of authority for ministry given by Christ to every local body of believers: Lutheran reformers practice returning to the springs of the faith for guidance forward. Here, at the eve of the Reformation's five hundredth anniversary, will the congregations and leaders of the LCMS follow Luther's example, return to Scripture, and recover a faithful application of The Office of the Public Ministry for the secular category of our time?

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> The report can be found here: <https://www.lcms.org/Document.fdoc?src=lcm&id=3559> in cached format, or on the LCMS 2016 Convention Website here:

<http://www.lcms.org/convention>. The "Executive Summary," a separate shorter document that overlooks some key issues in the report, is not used as a resource for this essay.

<sup>2</sup> Reflexivity (transparency about one's assumptions) is a requirement in any research, especially that focused on human relationships, faith systems, and culture. One way to measure transparency is to ask, "Does this person speak as if for God on this issue, or as one of many finite beings discerning God's wisdom in His community, the Church?"

<sup>3</sup> [http://www.oxforddictionaries.com/us/definition/american\\_english/category-mistake](http://www.oxforddictionaries.com/us/definition/american_english/category-mistake)

<sup>4</sup> Gilbert Ryle, *The Concept of Mind* (Chicago, University of Chicago Press: 1949). Ryle was clear in his goal: to dissolve what he considered the Cartesian myth of the duality of mind and matter. Ryle's diagnosis of the impact of Cartesian thinking on all Western thought—and therefore, Western Christianity—is helpful, and his description of category error is a useful tool for unveiling our assumptions. However, I find that his prescription lacks impact on the whole human condition. Those with a Lutheran and, therefore, sacramental, perspective have a more holistic prescription for Cartesian duality: First, Jesus in His flesh brings together Spirit and material for Good. In Christ, all things hold together (Col 1:17). Second, Spirit and material are united by God's promise through the means of grace for our good. Both examples used for category error in this essay are taken from Ryle.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 16.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 17.



<sup>7</sup> The abundance of sources on this aspect of Lutheran theology suggests no need to provide references here. The author commends to the reader the other essays in *Missio Apostolica* and now *Lutheran Mission Matters*.

<sup>8</sup> Most notable in CTCR's *The Ministry, Offices, Procedures, Nomenclature, 1981*, accessible on the LCMS website here: [http://www.lcms.org/Document\\_fdoc?src=lcms&id=423](http://www.lcms.org/Document_fdoc?src=lcms&id=423).

<sup>9</sup> The exceptions relate to moments when the church functioned for a time as outsider, or saw a pressing need, as during Westward expansion in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, when the first-language-German Lutherans were immigrant outsiders, and geography and the need for workers saw creative and active methods at play. For more on this topic, see Michael Newman's excellent presentation on *The Real LCMS: Strands of DNA from the Movement Called Missouri* here: <http://www.lsfm.global/media.html>.

<sup>10</sup> The author is indebted to Rev. Dr. Robert Newton for providing the concept of *insider/outsider* to the leaders and participants in Ministry Applied Practice (MAP)—West Coast, a partnership between the three western districts for orienting first-call LCMS pastors in a post-Christendom culture.

<sup>11</sup> For the printable PDF version, see [www.pewforum.org/files/2015/05/RLS-05-08-full-report.pdf](http://www.pewforum.org/files/2015/05/RLS-05-08-full-report.pdf). The most recent report, *Five Trends Among the Unchurched*, from Barna can be found here: <https://www.barna.org/barna-update/culture/685-five-trends-among-the-unchurched#.VJSOqC5AA>.

<sup>12</sup> This opinion by the CCM came at the request of the leadership in the national office, not from the field, and can be found here: <http://blogs.lcms.org/2015/faq-regarding-ccm-opinion-14-2724-regarding-by-law-3-8-3>.

<sup>13</sup> The author assumes knowledge by the reader of the Lutheran concept of The Office of the Public Ministry. There is not enough space in this essay to cover category error *and* expound The Office of the Public Ministry. Instead, consider C. F. W. Walther's *Church and Ministry* as one starting point.

<sup>14</sup> Lutheran theology affirms that faith comes from hearing the Word and receiving the Sacraments: How else did faith grow in all of the numerous locales during Paul's missionary journeys and afterward, unless the church identified leaders locally, and proclamation and sacraments occurred regularly?

<sup>15</sup> It would be incorrect to assume there are no models that might help in understanding "many functions/roles, one office." For example, multiple health-care roles with specialized responsibility deliver the same care under a doctor's supervision. Many of us have experienced excellent care at our point of need by lab technicians, pharmacists, nurses, nurse practitioners, and physician's assistants rather than doctors.

<sup>16</sup> Some people groups retain a Christendom worldview, and the "pastor-as-sole-provider" application of The Office may be appropriate in their case, for example, cultures strongly influenced by Catholicism and a few urban enclaves on the Eastern seaboard. This solution does not engage the enormous financial challenges faced by pastors.

<sup>17</sup> This is not the fortress Luther referenced in his hymn.

<sup>18</sup> The anonymous survey was conducted by the leadership of the three districts—PSW, CNH, and NOW—in partnership with the Center for Applied Lutheran Leadership (CALL), Concordia University, Portland.

<sup>19</sup> The response process by the Task Force for Resolution 4-06A is indicative of a perspective that believes it is "meeting the church halfway" and "achieving consensus," as can be seen in the remarks by Rev. Vogel, the Task Force chair, in reply to comments here:

Copyright 2016 Lutheran Society for Missiology. Used by permission.

View *Lutheran Mission Matters* 24, no. 1 (2016) at <http://lsfm.global/>.

Membership in LSFM is available at <http://lsfm.global/joinlsfm.htm>.

E-mail [lsfmissiology@gmail.com](mailto:lsfmissiology@gmail.com) to purchase a print copy of a single issue.



<http://blogs.lcms.org/2015/task-force-report-on-licensed-lay-deacons-available>. What is problematic is the very notion of consensus in this case: The burden of change suggested by TF 4-06A's recommendations is placed primarily on the leaders and congregations who did not ask for it.

<sup>20</sup> The author has been told by a representative of an LCMS seminary that “we only enact what Synod in convention tells us to do; we can't be involved.” Though technically this is correct, it can be avoidance of responsibility. Those most equipped to have influence on the process, and speak for reforming structures to reduce category error, should not be on stand-by during a crisis. Seminary leaders' vested interest in their institutions makes their motives suspect if they do not advocate for those in the field, whom they exist to serve.

<sup>21</sup> The Northwest District's guidelines for the deacon identification, training, supervision, and annual continuing education requirements are publicly available in the resource section of [www.nowlcms.org](http://www.nowlcms.org) by typing “Guidelines for Licensed Deacon Ministry” in the search bar.

<sup>22</sup> The LCMS has a disconcerting “blind spot.” It is primarily a monocultural church led by older Anglo men of German heritage. It may be troubling for some to consider the last time German men were highly effective was in World War II. The LCMS leans towards systemization, centralized power, and “elite theological training.” While the German nation was forced to face its dark side after WWII, the LCMS has not finished this work. How much Germanic cultural baggage must others carry before they are allowed to walk with the LCMS?

<sup>23</sup> The constitution can be found in the LCMS Handbook here: <http://www.lcms.org/handbook>.

<sup>24</sup> I use “congregation polity” in the broadest sense here, as the process of discernment that happens in any group gathered regularly to hear the Scriptures and receive the Sacraments and thereby grow in faith. This is exactly how the service of LLDs came to be: It grew from a robust discussion launched first at the local level in congregations that had a need, or saw a need, and was supported and refined by districts who saw their role as supportive of congregations, seeking to walk together in ministry as “Synod in this place.”

<sup>25</sup> Opposites (sinner-saint, word-water/wine/bread, law-gospel) held together by the person of Christ are part of what it means to “think like a Lutheran.” This is paradox, or dialectical tension. Yet, Lutheran thinkers may transpose the dialectical tension perspective onto concepts that do not need it, such as the Priesthood of Believers and The Office. It may be helpful to see The Office as deferential to the locally gathered priesthood of believers, as an office of service and encouragement. Then, under the authority of the local church and guidance of the Holy Spirit and Word of God, The Office practices a supervisory capacity over multiple proclamation and sacramental functions. This “congregation-first” accountability for The Office is in keeping with Article VII of the LCMS constitution.