

# ***Lutheran Mission Matters***



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# Vocation and Mission: The Role of the Laity in the Mission of Christ

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**Abstract:** Jesus Christ, our great High Priest, calls both clergy and laity to serve in the priesthood of all believers. Vocation, a crucial aspect of this priesthood, places us in specific and varied settings in His mission.

In addition to service inside the church and on behalf of the church in the community, every Christian is called to serve in specific vocational settings. Christ calls pastors to serve by proclaiming the Word and administering the Sacraments within the church, equipping the saints for their service. Word, bath, and table fuel the church's mission. Pastors also serve in other roles and settings apart from their vocation as pastors (husband, father, citizen, etc.).

At the same time Christ calls laypeople to serve, according to their gifts, as members of the Body of Christ. They also serve as family members, neighbors, workers, and citizens. These specific vocational localities, distinct to each Christian, present settings for Christian love, a winsome presence, and an authentic witness.

The vocational service of both clergy and laity is integral to the mission of Christ.

The mission of Jesus Christ in the world is accomplished in His calling of every Christian to serve in the priesthood of all believers. This means that the measure of a congregation's faithfulness is never only its purity of doctrine or even its worship attendance but in the fulfillment of the vocations of its pastor and members. The pastor has it right when he responds to "Fine sermon, Pastor!" with the words, "We'll see." The Word unfolds in the lives of Christ's people.

This mission also means that the church's work is not over each week as the service ends. Rather, the service fuels the work of every priest, pastor, and layperson alike, called into the world to love and serve the neighbor. To say that the church's



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mission is complete when it distributes the Word of God and the Sacraments is a confusion of means and ends. These means of grace provide the nourishment and power for the mission Christ has given His church: loving the neighbor through acts of service and witness. Without the Word and the Sacraments there can be no mission of the church. Without the mission of the church, the Word and Sacraments become self-serving rites, forsaking the cross belonging to every Christian priest.

Martin Luther refreshed the church with the concept of the priesthood of all believers. Though he actually never used the exact words in his writings, he boldly attacked the accepted idea that only the work of priests and bishops is a spiritual calling (German, *Beruf*). Everyone else's work, the thought went, is secular, not spiritual. Luther destroys the idea of two estates, spiritual and secular, with God working only in the spiritual estate held by ordained clergy. For Luther, God works through both clergy and laity to accomplish His purposes. Here is his familiar statement from his *Letter to the Christian Nobility of the German Nation*:

It is a pure invention (fiction) that Pope, bishops, priests and monks are called the "spiritual estate" while princes, lords, artisans and farmers are called the "temporal estate." This is indeed a piece of deceit and hypocrisy. Yet no one need be intimidated by it, and that for this reason: all Christians are truly of the spiritual estate, and there is no difference among them except that of office. We are all consecrated priests by baptism, as St. Peter says, "You are a royal priesthood and a priestly realm" (1 Peter 2:9). The Apocalypse says, "Thou hast made us to be kings and priests by Thy blood" (Rev 5:9–10).<sup>1</sup>

Worthy of note is how Luther affirms the unique vocations of both pastor and layperson as "consecrated priests." He writes, "there is no difference among them except that of office (German, *Amt*)." In other words, both pastor and laity have a calling through which God works, even though their offices may differ. For Luther, the unique expression of each Christian's priesthood is the "mask" behind which God is at work caring for us and accomplishing His mission. In his Large Catechism Luther likens God's work in our vocations to what parents do when they assign their children chores. The chores build character and give children what their parents know they need. He writes:

What else is all our work to God—whether in the field, in the garden, in the city, in the house, in war, or in government—but just such a child's performance, by which He wants to give His gifts in the fields, at home, and everywhere else? These are the masks of God, behind which He wants to remain concealed and do all things.<sup>2</sup>

Unfortunately, the concept of the priesthood of all believers can become a point of contention between clergy and laity. Laity may think it means that they have every right to do what a pastor does—even preaching and administering the Sacraments.

Pastors may become threatened and defend their right to their unique calling. Such misconceptions are tragic, since the priesthood of all believers by its very nature is meant to unite the Body of Christ, not divide it. Timothy Wengert writes, “Luther’s principle—a single walk of life, but many offices—arose from his conviction concerning the unity of Christ’s body. He insisted that any multiplication of walks of life (*Stände*) would imply two bodies of Christ.”<sup>3</sup>

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A theology of the priesthood of all believers affirms that our High Priest has called every Christian to a life of service and sacrifice as priests. Christ calls pastors to serve by publicly proclaiming the Word and administering the Sacraments within the church, equipping the saints for their service. Word, bath, and table fuel the church’s mission. Pastors also serve in other callings as spouses, parents, citizens, etc. At the same time, Christ calls laypeople to serve, according to their gifts, as members of the Body of Christ. They also serve as family members, neighbors, workers, and citizens. These specific vocational roles or offices present settings for Christian love, a winsome presence, and an authentic witness. In these roles is where vocation and mission intersect—where Christ works through the varied callings of His people to accomplish His mission.

### **Theological Foundations for the Priesthood of All Believers**

An appreciation of the priesthood of all believers is incomplete without an affirmation of these three biblical concepts: gifting grace, equipping the saints, and bearing a cross.

*Gifting Grace:* The people of our congregations are priests because they have been justified by God’s grace through faith in Jesus Christ. Their priesthood begins and is nurtured daily with the sacramental grace of Baptism. Their life as priests is sustained by the grace of God in the Word and the Lord’s Supper. In Christ, God’s extravagant “grace upon grace”<sup>4</sup> also extends to their sanctification by which the Spirit of God enlightens them with His gifts. *Charis* (grace) is never far from *charisma* (gifts). In Ephesians 4:7, after affirming the amazing oneness of the church, the apostle Paul writes, “But grace (*charis*) was given to each one of us, according to the measure of Christ’s gift (*charisma*)” [ESV]. The same grace of God which saves us also gives us gifts specific to our callings. Paul is so confident in this

life-embracing grace that he assures the Corinthians that they “are not lacking in any gift.”<sup>5</sup>

*Equipping the Saints:* In Ephesians 4:11–12, Paul describes “apostles, prophets, shepherds and teachers” as gifts of God given for the purpose of “equipping the saints for works of service.” The word “equip” (Greek, *katartizo*) here can mean to prepare, to ready, or to fit perfectly. Some debate whether the phrase “for works of service” applies to the saints being equipped or to the equippers. Most translations go with the former. The KJV goes with the latter as if to say that the church leaders were given to the church for works of service. The same root word is used in 2 Timothy 3:17 when Paul writes that the desired outcome of a profitable use of the Scriptures is “that the man of God may be competent, equipped for every good work.” This passage seems to favor the saints of God being the ones equipped for works of service (*diakonia*). This reading also supports well Luther’s thought that the vocation of the Christian grows out of and contributes to the oneness of the church. As Paul puts it, Christ gives leaders to the church “to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for the building up of the body of Christ, until we all attain to the unity of the faith.”<sup>6</sup>

*Bearing a Cross:* The theology of the cross brings depth to the connection between our vocation and the mission of Christ. Just as God was hidden in the cross of Jesus Christ, so God is masked in our ordinary vocations. We may not see God as easily in our everyday callings, but His purposes are being accomplished as His grace is fulfilled<sup>7</sup> in our everyday walk with Christ. As we serve others and humbly enter their suffering because we follow Christ, we come to know the fellowship of His sufferings<sup>8</sup> and the fullness of His grace.<sup>9</sup> As priests we bridge the gap between man and God. We embody the love of Christ in our responsibilities and relationships. When the mission entails suffering, we may reach our deepest dependence on Christ and identify most with the One who has called us. And just here the mission of the church is engaged.

## **Locating the Congregation’s Mission**

Where does the congregation locate these works of service? Where do Christians bear their crosses in loving the neighbor? Where are sacrifices made as priests of God? Though both Matthew 28:19–20 and Acts 1:8 clearly place the locality of the church’s mission beyond the congregation’s building, many congregations spend most of their resources “serving one another.” The mission even gets narrowed further by works of service centering on the congregation’s worship services. A recent discussion of denominational leaders on the appropriate role of clergy and laity in the mission of God led immediately to a lengthy discussion limited to the assigned roles of clergy and laity in worship.

*Serving One Another in the Building:* That said, clearly the first setting for priestly acts by pastor and people is the church's meeting place. Significant sacrifices of time, gifts, and money are made in supporting the proclamation of the Gospel and administration of the Sacraments in worship. The pastor serves as public proclaimer and presider. Acolytes, musicians, greeters, ushers, readers, and others serve God and one another in worship. Meanwhile congregants serve on boards and committees and as leaders of the congregation. For the most part, these expressions of priestly service happen inside the church building and serve the saints who also worship and serve there. This mutual service within the ranks of the congregation is affirmed in all those "one another" passages of the New Testament; however, it is not affirmed as the exclusive expression of service.<sup>10</sup> If serving one another becomes the exclusive expression of a congregation's service, its members may find themselves isolated from those who are pre-Christian. One of the most frightening comments excusing this exclusive approach to the church's missions is, "We're here. They'll find us if God wants them here."

*Serving Others in the Building:* Priestly service in the building also takes place as a congregation welcomes its visitors. The New Testament's call to hospitality (Greek, *philoxenia*, literally, "love of strangers") recognizes that congregations serve those from the outside who visit worship or other church events. Pastors often encourage their members to invite friends for worship and other events. In Minnesota, it is common for many churches to host an annual dinner event for the community with wide community participation. Attracting people to the church building may also entail hosting conferences and community groups. The church becomes a gathering place that includes outsiders and offers many opportunities for service and love. Unfortunately, many churches compromise their service to the community by charging rent for any meeting or conference using their facility. Congregations, especially in urban settings, may depend on this rental income to stay afloat. The strength of this avenue of service, rent or rent-free, is in its bringing together Christian and pre-Christian people in the same place. It is no secret, however, that this "attraction model" for service is increasingly more difficult at a time when the local, institutional church is devalued, especially among millennials.<sup>11</sup>

*Serving Others outside the Building:* A predominant characteristic of Jesus, even as the promised Messiah, was that He came to serve.<sup>12</sup> His service went way beyond His little band of disciples and the places where they met. His proclamation, teaching, and restorative acts of service took Him to where the needs were, in both familiar and dangerous

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places. With compassion, He entered the needs of others, initiating acts of service rich with extravagant grace, giving more than was expected. A congregation as the body of Christ in a given location moves intentionally outside its building to serve others. In the name of Christ and their church, members may clean up highways, visit nursing homes, make welcome calls, work at the food shelf, volunteer at local schools, and help build low-income homes. One congregation is clearly in touch with this servant identity as a crew of its members follows the annual community parade to clean up the mess, and there are horses in the parade! One cannot imagine a richer affirmation of a Christian congregation than, “Those people really serve!”

*Global Mission Experiences:* Beyond these settings for priestly works of service is every congregation’s call to reach the ends of the earth with the Gospel. Congregations and individuals who intentionally engage in global mission endeavors are consistently strengthened in their identity and resolve as servants of Christ.

*Vocation:* Inside or outside the building, the emphasis in recent decades has been service in the name and on behalf of the congregation. We “serve the church,” we say, and that can take many forms of Christian service. Complementing these approaches to service is Martin Luther’s theology of vocation, placing the locality of Christian service in the specific callings of each Christian. A theology of vocation recognizes that priestly works of service are not just the weekend or weeknight activities of my congregation but my way of life. Here the location of my service is my workplace, my home, and my callings as a neighbor and citizen. It is precisely here that I have the greatest opportunity to express my faith in acts of service with those who are not yet Christian. In my vocations, God places me in unique venues for proclaiming the Gospel—relationships nurtured by love, time, and opportunity.

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As many congregations face declining worship attendance and aging membership, they often look for quick solutions. One may hear, “If we can just begin using contemporary music in our worship, we will grow again.” Some dig in and say, “We will stay true to our traditional liturgy, and people will see that this is the best way to go.” Both of these approaches assume that pre-Christian people are drawn to what we do or do not do inside the church building. This trusted centripetal model, drawing people in from the outside, still dominates many churches as they think about their mission. An emphasis on vocation changes the direction: a church’s mission is

centrifugal. The church sends its members out as invited, equipped, and encouraged everyday disciples of Jesus Christ. They return again and again for the training and motivation that come with Word and Sacrament ministry. The mission here is not so much what they do as members of the church but what they do as Christian students, workers, family members, neighbors, and citizens.

It is not uncommon when churches intentionally emphasize vocational mission to see ministries like these develop: neighborhood social events and Bible studies hosted in members' homes; members intentionally placing themselves in settings where pre-Christian people are present (the local café or coffee shop; school events; service organizations; political gatherings; etc.); and church members and families working side by side with the unchurched in community service projects. In relationships forged in these settings, Christians carry on the ministries of both presence and proclamation. Their personal witness is received as an authentic word of one who cares and serves.

### **Congregational Shifts**

How does a congregation move in its mission to a greater emphasis on vocation? What are the shifts necessary for such a change?

*Pastors Living Their Vocations:* Pastors must be encouraged by church leaders to fulfill all their vocations, especially those of spouse, parent, citizen, and neighbor. Their faithfulness extends beyond their vital work as pastors. As members see their pastor spending time with his family and at work in their community, they will be encouraged to do the same.

*Preaching on Vocation:* Sermons must not only present Law and Gospel but also show people what a life of service in response to this Gospel looks like. The Gospel in sermons must unfold in such a way that it propels people into their vocation with confidence and hope. It is simply crucial, if a church is serious about vocation, for proclaimers to illustrate the sanctified life, always linking it to the life-empowering Gospel.

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*Vocational Bible Study:* Perhaps as a follow-up to the New Member Class, churches may offer a class on Christian vocation, emphasizing its pivotal place in the mission of Christ.



*Vocational Retreats:* At least once a year, congregations may sponsor a weekend retreat in which participants plan their personal vocational mission, taking seriously their unique callings and opportunities for service.

*New Metrics:* Most congregations keep internal records such as worship and Communion attendance, financial giving, and official acts. Those serious about vocation may also record their members' service in their community. This metric asks, "In what arenas of community service are our members involved?" Developing metrics for the vocational impact of its members can yield helpful data for determining a church's influence outside itself.

*A New Third Place:*<sup>13</sup> For many congregations the church becomes the "third place" for its members, next to home and work. Some members may spend as many as three nights a week at church for classes, meetings, and service. Members become insulated from those outside the church. The shift here makes this third place a community or neighborhood place where relationships can be built with pre-Christian people. Christians cannot be salt and light in the world if they are not in the world.

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*Equipping as a Core Activity:* Perhaps the most crucial shift moves the pastor and leaders of congregations from only doers to equippers. Their leadership must go beyond delivering Word and Sacraments and supporting worship services. Merely dropping people into church positions is not "equipping the saints." Laity must be invited into works of service and trained and encouraged along the way. They must be taught what fulfilling their various vocations looks like.

## **Vocation: Arriving Where We Began?**

The final poem in Christian poet T. S. Eliot's *Four Quartets* is titled, "Little Gidding." Inspired by his 1936 visit to St. John's Church in Little Gidding, England, Eliot wrote the poem during the London bombings of World War II. His memory of this little village church raised thoughts of time and timelessness. The church, still standing, dates back to 1625. The church at its best today stands in places where the timeless truths of God are held fast and fiery, rich and lasting, a place where the dead are spoken of as still alive and the living are dying and rising each day in their baptism. Yet the church has always also been God's scattered saints, equipped and sent for works of service. In this poem Eliot gives us these famous lines:

We shall not cease from exploration  
And the end of all our exploring  
Will be to arrive where we started  
And know the place for the first time.<sup>14</sup>

We know well the place we call church. We know it by its cross and book, its font and table. We know it better, though, by the *ecclesia*, those called out of the world to gather there. They are the church in this place. Yet from the beginning, they have also been the sent ones. The New Testament presents the Christian faith, not as an escape from the world, but as a way of life in the world. With every new generation, the church explores how it will engage the world in mission. Whether it was the apostle Paul or Luther, the church has been found in that place where Christians fulfill their vocations. Just there Christians love, serve, and sacrifice in Jesus' name. Just there people see Christ incarnate in His people. And just there, yet again, we may "arrive where we started and know the place for the first time."<sup>15</sup>

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup>As quoted in Timothy Keller, *Every Good Endeavor* (New York: Dutton, 2012), 69. Keller, a thoughtful Presbyterian pastor, is lavish in his praise of Luther's theology of vocation.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 70–71.

<sup>3</sup> Timothy J. Wengert, "The Priesthood of All Believers and Other Pious Myths," *Institute of Liturgical Studies Occasional Papers* (2006), 17.

<sup>4</sup> The phrase is used by the apostle John in John 1:16, revealing the extravagant nature of God's undeserved favor.

<sup>5</sup> 1 Corinthians 1:7

<sup>6</sup> Ephesians 4:12–13

<sup>7</sup> Ephesians 2:10

<sup>8</sup> Philippians 3:10

<sup>9</sup> Ephesians 4:13

<sup>10</sup> The New Testament uses the phrase "one another" or "each other" 59 times.

<sup>11</sup> David Kinnaman's *You Lost Me* (Baker, 2011), a study of millennials' attitudes toward the church, is helpful here.

<sup>12</sup> Isaiah 42:1–9; 49:1–13; 50:4–11; 52:13; 53:12; Mark 10:45.

<sup>13</sup> Ray Oldenberg's book, *The Great Good Place* (New York: Marlowe, 1989) suggested this term for social gathering places besides home and workplace. His concept carries significant import for the church's mission.

<sup>14</sup> T. S. Eliot, *Collected Poems 1909–1962* (Orlando: Harcourt Brace, 1963), 200.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*