

(Draft – not for quotation or citation)

The Church's Vocation in Society through the Ministry of the Laity in the Languages of Their Daily Lives

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The people of God are set apart in order to be sent back into the world.¹ What does the gathered people of God need in order to carry out their vocations in society? How will they be the transformed, equipped, empowered people of God serving in the world through their ministries in daily life? How are their skills for ministry and leadership in the congregation being strengthened? And as we move beyond the church doors, do we know the ministries in daily life to which each other is being called? How will we walk with one another in those varied arenas, any and all of which are places for potential ministry and for working toward a more just and peaceable world? And what about the people whose lives the congregation members touch? What does daily transformation of the body of Christ mean in the lives of those people? How can we really make a difference in the world?²

To believe in the communion of saints is to believe that God is the Creator of the whole world, that Christ is and continues to be incarnate in that world, and to claim the Spirit's power. As leaders walk with the laity, listen to and engage the theological questions people raise *from* being involved in the world, ministerial leadership becomes more interesting, more vital, more theologically challenging and alive. And ministry is multiplied.

Those who have been called to faith in Jesus Christ have been faithfully ministering in the world in each generation. Full *recognition* of this ministry and these ministers by the church is the issue. In that regard we have a transformation waiting to happen, an unfinished reformation.

Terms: A Variety of Images

A number of terms describe this radical reformation concept, the church's vocation in society. Each term contains its own wisdom:

The priesthood of all believers. By God's grace through faith in Jesus Christ, the Spirit creates the priesthood we all share. Christ became the faithful high priest, not only to make a sacrifice for the people, but to become the sacrifice (Hebrews 2:17-18; 7:26-27; 9:14). Patriarchal hierarchies historically have reserved the

¹ Suzanne DeDietrich, *The Witnessing Community* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1958). "The church has to rediscover again and again its vocation, its corporate vocation as the witnessing community taken out of the world, set apart for God, but set apart in order to be again sent to the world" (p.16).

² Material in this paper is taken from "Transformed for Daily Life: Ministry of the Baptized" in Norma Cook Everist and Craig Nesson, *Transforming Leadership: New Vision for a Church in Mission* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2008), 198-212, and Norma Cook Everist, "Learn to Share Christ in the Languages of People's Daily Lives" in Norma Cook Everist, ed., *Christian Education as Evangelism*, (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2007), 122-133.

bestowing and assurance of salvation to priests. Rather, all Christians are called to be a royal priesthood to “proclaim the mighty acts” of the one who called us out of darkness into light (1 Pet. 2: 5-9). The word is plural: “priesthood.” Within the priesthood of all believers some are called and ordained to Word and sacrament ministry and to Word and Service ministry.

Through faith Christians are transformed by the Spirit and called to pursue peace, to show hospitality to strangers, to remember those in prison (Hebrews 12 and 13). Because Jesus, our high priest died not on an altar, but “outside the city” (Heb. 13:12), the priesthood of all believers is called to go with him “outside the camp” (Heb. 13:13) and be willing to praise God, to do good and to share what we have (Heb. 13: 15-16). We need distinct offices and roles within the church but together as the priesthood of all believers we are transformed to be the church in the world, proclaiming the grace of God and living out ministry “outside the camp.”

Ministry of the baptized. We do not baptize ourselves. By the power of the Spirit in water and word, we are liberated from sin and death though being joined together in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. “By water and the Word God delivers us from sin and death and raises us to new life in Jesus Christ.”³ Christians often feel unclean. We need the washing clean of forgiveness and the refreshment of the daily remembrance of baptism, otherwise the sins and struggles of the day would overwhelm us.

How is our baptism linked to Christ’s baptism and what does that have to do with ministry? And, for that matter, why was Christ, who was not sinful, baptized? Mark’s Gospel dramatically begins with Jesus being baptized by John in the River Jordan. In Mark 10:38, Jesus asked his disciples, “Are you able to drink the cup that I drink, or be baptized with the baptism that I am baptized with?” Jesus was baptized into his ministry of servanthood, death and resurrection; Christian disciples are baptized into Christ. Jesus said, “...whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all. For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many” (Mark 10:43b-45). The congregation says to the newly baptized, “We welcome you into the body of Christ and into the mission we share: join us in giving thanks and praise to God and bearing God’s creative and redeeming word to all the world.”⁴

Laos in ministry. All of us are part of the *laos*, the “people” of God. By virtue of creation all peoples are God’s people; we need to take care that “people of God” language not sound exclusionary in a pluralistic world. Although we need to be clear on roles to which we have been called, it is not helpful to separate *people* in artificial or ultimate ways. We use the original Greek word *laos* because “lay” in the English carries the connotations of “not clergy” or in general, of someone who is not very

³ *Evangelical Lutheran Worship* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2006) 227.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 231.

knowledgeable in a certain field.⁵ Such hierarchical distinctions can lead some pastors to simply delegate to laity work they themselves do not like to do. Just as worship is the “work of the people” so, too, ministry is the work of the *laos*.

In Hosea, a child is named, “Not my people” to signal the unfaithfulness of the people of God: “you are not my people and I am not your God” (Hos. 1:9). And, yet, in the very next verses we hear God’s covenant faithfulness, “...in the place where it was said to them. ‘You are not my people,’ it shall be said to them, ‘Children of the living God’” (Hos. 1:10). That Hosea passage is recalled in First Peter,

You are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God’s own people, in order that you may proclaim the mighty acts of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light.

Once you were not a people,

But now you are God’s people:

Once you had not received mercy,

But now you have received mercy.⁶

Through God’s mercy, a redeemed *people* is called to live ministries of mercy.

Ministry of the whole people of God. The ministry of the Church in the world belongs to the whole people. Wholeness, however, is not a matter of health or perfection. Individual Christians are not totally capable or experienced, or well. Congregations may be broken in conflict. In the midst of this reality Christ imputes wholeness and salvation. It is a matter of believing that the church is whole even while it is broken.

The Body of Christ is not whole unless all are a part of using their gifts to serve in the world.⁷ In Ephesians 4 Paul urges the Ephesians saying, “I... beg you [plural] to lead a life worthy of the calling to which you have been called” (v.1). This calls for humility, gentleness, patience and bearing with each other. That’s hard. Paul writes there is one body, one spirit, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God, and one “hope of your calling” (vs. 4-6). Then Paul describes the variety of gifts (vs. 11-13), just as he does in Roman 12 and 1 Corinthians 12. But note that the lists of gifts are not closed and the roles are not ranked. The purpose of the gifts of people is “to equip the saints for the work of ministry” (v. 12). When the “whole” people of God are in pain, when the body is actually torn apart, Christ heals and grows the body: “Speaking the truth in love, we must grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, from whom the whole body, joined and knit together by every ligament with which it is equipped, as each part is working properly, promotes the body’s growth in building itself up in love”(vs. 15-16).

⁵ Frederick C. Marsh, ed., *The Merriam-Webster Dictionary* (Springfield, Mass.: Merriam-Webster Inc., 2004). According to Merriam Webster, the 4th definition of lay is “of or relating to the laity” and “lacking extensive knowledge of a particular subject” (p. 409).

⁶ 1 Peter 2:9-10.

⁷ See Harold Wilke, *Creating the Caring Congregation* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1080), 17.

Ministry in daily life. Each of us is called. Each of us has a daily life. Although our lives may be long or short, each person has a 24-hour day. Not everything we do is automatically ministry, but everything we do carries the potential for ministry. Einar Billing wrote, “Call” is an “everyday word, with a splendor of holy day about it, but its holy day splendor would disappear the moment it ceased to be a rather prosaic everyday word.”⁸ “Calling” also means Christians being called by grace to faith. “When it began to dawn on Luther that just as certainly as the call to God’s kingdom seeks to lift us infinitely above everything that our everyday duties by themselves could give us, just that certainly the call does not take us away from those duties, but more deeply into them, then work became calling.”⁹

To Luther “call is primarily gift, and only in second or third place a duty.”¹⁰ Our roles and relationships in daily life are transformed in Christ; even though they seem mundane or problematic, in Christ’s cross we can now receive our work and each other not as burden but as gift.¹¹ Calling for Luther was rooted in forgiveness of sins, the ultimate transformation. “In the degree that our life becomes a life of forgiveness of sins, to that degree we receive a calling.”¹² “Life organized around the forgiveness of sins, that is Luther’s idea of the call.”¹³

These reformation breakthroughs provided radical new possibilities for all people to serve in the church and to make significant vocational contributions to society. There was a break from reliance on authority for what to think and what to do in the world. People were able to read the Scriptures for themselves. But what more needs to happen? Freedom *from* is freedom *for*. It’s the “freedom for” that is left not fully realized. The power of the priesthood of all believers has, even these many years later, not fully been unleashed. Why?

***Vocatio* Rooted in the Forgiveness of Sins**

If our calling (our *vocatio*) is rooted in the forgiveness of sins, what does that mean for the real ways people live? What does forgiveness mean? How are we freed *for* ministry? These are core questions for living out our transformation in the Spirit. Each of the baptized who are members together of the priesthood of all believers needs to hear the Gospel or God’s grace in terms of their own specific situation. Theologian Letty Russell wrote that Jesus did not say to the blind person, “You can

⁸ Einar Billing, *Our Calling*, trans. Conrad Bergendoff (Rock Island: Augustana Press, 1958), 5.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 6.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 8.

¹¹ Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote that when through the cross we are placed in community, we no longer see one another as claim, but as gift. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Communion of Saints*, trans. John Doberstein (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1960), 106-120.

¹² Billing, *Our Calling*, 19.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 11.

work,” nor to the person who could not walk, “You can see.”¹⁴ Christ met people on the road in the midst of their lives and asked, “What do you want me to do for you?” Jesus cared about people and also about the societal problems related to human need in the world in which they lived.

We who have been transformed by the power of the Spirit each meet Jesus in our own need, and in the midst of society’s need. If the human problem is brokenness, the good news is that Jesus makes us whole. If the human problem is alienation, the good news is God reconciles and restores relationships. If the human problem is guilt, the good news is that God through Jesus Christ forgives. If the human problem is being lost, the good news is that the Good Shepherd looks for and finds the lost. If the human problem is death, Jesus Christ has brought new life. If the human problem is judgment the good news in Jesus Christ is unconditional acceptance. If the human problem is being overwhelmed by the stress and demands of daily life, Jesus invites the weary to come to him and to rest in the caring arms of God. If the human problem is bondage, the good news is that Jesus brings freedom.

The second part of what Russell said is not to be forgotten. If the human problem is hunger, the good news is that God feeds the hungry. God needs people working in society to carry out that gospel action of feeding the hungry. Likewise, if the human problem is injustice, God will need whole societies working together for justice for all.

Luther’s concept of ministry is linked with his definition of the church as the communion of saints. The naked and the hungry are our neighbors.¹⁵ Every Christian is a priest in the sense of servant; all of the baptized, including children are called to ministry to the neighbor. Martin Luther did not begin his reform of the church on the basis of pious leaders, but through a transformed concept of the church itself. Therefore not just priests, but the one who bakes bread or serves in civic government, or cleans a house is part of the priesthood and called to ministry in that very place.

Our neighbors are everywhere. Luther wrote about our “stations” and “vocations.” We today might think about “stations” as the whole range of roles and relationships of our daily lives and our “vocations” as our calling to ministry to the neighbor. We sit beside a “neighbor” at our work “station” or school desk. This neighbor is the person right here next to us and also people on the other side of the world. We may just sit there and do nothing to serve the neighbor, thereby missing our calling. But if we regard the other as one also made in the image of God, as one for whom Christ died, then, by the power of the Spirit, whatever the service we do, it is our ministry.

When we deeply believe that all of our ministries are rooted in the forgiveness of sins, then we will submit our roles and relationships to Christ in confession, knowing that through the cross and resurrection we are freed for powerful

¹⁴ Letty M. Russell, *Human Liberation in a Feminist Perspective: A Theology* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1974) 53.

¹⁵ Martin Luther, *Luther’s Works Volume 39: Church and Ministry*. (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1970), xi.

servanthood. Such ministries make a difference in people's real lives. In order to do this daily we will need spiritual guidance and faithful conversation with a trusted brother or sister in the faith.

It is helpful to take some time to quietly make a list of our roles and relationships (stations), asking who is my neighbor there? Some may be ongoing, such as relationship of parent and child, but even those constantly change throughout the life cycle. There may be new roles: a different job, a new colleague, an invitation to a volunteer position in the community, a global challenge. What is the potential for ministry there? We will need the caring guidance of a friend in Christ to help us discern our calling. What are the challenges and barriers? What are our own dilemmas in that relationship?

Is there alienation in the family? Alienation need not be permanent. When our vocation is rooted in the forgiveness of sins, we know we live already reconciled in Christ with the potential for restored relationships. We are then freed to engage in the work of reconciliation, within ourselves and within our family. Is there guilt about the thousands who die of hunger each day? The poor do not need our guilt. When our vocation is rooted in the forgiveness of sins, we are freed to minister to not only help a poor person but to work for change in systems which keep people in bondage to poverty. We are freed in Christ for powerful serving ministry. How might we reflect on our other roles and relationships? Who might help us hear God's Word of Law and Gospel? What are some of the challenges for a congregation in becoming transformed to equip and empower people for their vocations in daily life?

Vocation in the Languages People Speak in Daily Life

"We cannot keep from speaking about what we have seen and heard." So said Peter and John (Acts 4:20). God had used them to heal a lame man and they taught the amazed crowds about this God who gives life. For this they got into trouble, were taken into custody and questioned, and ordered not to speak or teach at all in the name of Jesus. But they would not be silent!

In the midst of our ministry in daily life, we are and will be called into question for the ministry we do, and called to give witness to the hope that lies within us. Sharing the faith needs to be done in the languages people speak all week long. Once in a while someone will simply be passing by the church on a Sunday morning and walk in. Once in a while the quoting of a random Bible passage will bring a person to faith. But only once in a while. Most of the time, we will need to meet people where they are. In order to do this, we need to speak their languages, listen carefully to their needs and be able to speak of God's great love in direct relation to their human need.

Peter and John were able to put into words the ministry they were doing and boldly say in whose name they were acting. They knew the Christ in whose name they ministered. We, too, need to know Christ well. If Christians do not understand the biblical and theological grounding of their faith, they may resort to using mere moralistic tidbits and biblical clichés. We need more than a cliché. Jesus walked where people walked. Not only did he often ask, "What do you want me to do for you?" He called self-righteousness and legalistic judgment for what it was: playing God, not ministry. Sharing Christ at the workplace is not effective evangelism when it

is merely an assumption that everyone at the worksite or in the world should be “a Christian, just like me.” Likewise, simplistic religious slogans pass right by a person’s real need. To learn the faith and to share the faith in the languages of people’s daily lives enhances the effectiveness of both education and evangelism.

Ministry of the laity is not primarily about “letting a lay person preach,” but rather about lifting up the varieties of vocations the baptized people of God engage in all week long. This means giving attention all year long to equipping all Christians educationally for sharing the Gospel in words that connect to people where they are. To take it one step further, it is not a question of convincing people to teach and proclaim, but first of all seeing what it is people are already teaching and proclaiming in the daily conversations they are having all week long. What are they saying to their neighbors? Do people understand the faith under girding the decisions they are making? And are they making decisions that promote justice?

So often what we learn on Sunday is disconnected from what we talk about all week. Not that we want to disconnect, but we do not know how to put it together. But if we begin in the languages of daily life we know, we may be able to translate God’s word into the vernacular, into ordinary terms, images and vocabulary, so that we can be the evangelizing disciples of God. Many Christians feel more confident and willing to translate God’s love into action than into words. When people are equipped to speak in their natural languages, they become more skilled with words...and, like Peter and John, willing to speak of what they “have seen and heard.”

Education and Evangelism as a Translating Experience

Educators know the importance of honoring diverse learning styles. People begin their learning most effectively when they can use their native tongue. When a person’s first language, and the culture surrounding it, is honored, people have a sense of self-worth that enhances their ability to learn more languages. Children especially have a marvelous ability to learn a second, or even a third language. English-only speakers in the United States are at a distinct disadvantage globally, and also in their own communities, in being able to communicate with and learn from people different from themselves. We honor the people we meet by respecting their language.

Even when people in a country or region speak one common language, they may disconnect the terms they use in their ministry in daily life from “Christian” terms. So, we need to willingly listen to and learn from someone speaking their “Monday language” not just their Sunday faith language. Are some farmers? What is the language of agriculture? Are some shop-keepers? What terms of business do they speak? Are some caregivers to families? What are the words they use? Do some people in our communities speak “computer”? Do some talk in terms of relationships? Do some use medical terms? By really wanting to know about the person’s life and their world views, and the “languages” in which they think and speak, we connect with them. Tim works in constructing houses. For him, the term “sheltering God” connected. Jon felt abandoned after his wife died suddenly. Knowing that Christ had said, “My God, my God, why have you abandoned me?” on the cross, spoke to his reality. Maria was seeking a new community after she moved to a large city from her small town. Even the way people spoke about relationships was new. She felt both comforted and empowered by the Holy Spirit’s work on Pentecost.

Surely people need to learn about the stories, concepts and truths about God from the Scriptures, the language of the liturgy and the confessions of the church. Biblical illiteracy and ignorance about church history and theology undermines the life and mission of a congregation. Martin Luther was convinced that people should be able to read the Scriptures for themselves, and to worship and pray in the vernacular, the common language of the people. The importance of his translating the New Testament into the vernacular cannot be underestimated. How do we help people read the Scriptures and help them let the Scriptures “read them” in regard to the issues they face all week long? How can we help people translate the Bible and the theology of the church into phrases and concepts that prepare them to think, feel, relate, and make decisions in the languages they speak all week?

Once people are able to conceptualize the faith in the common parlance of family, work and other activities, they will be able to more naturally talk about God in those places. We need to develop a healthy rhythm of being the gathered people of God for worship and for education, and the scattered people of God for mission and ministry in daily life. In order to do that, both places need to be translating experiences. Our Christian education can help people learn the biblical and theological heritage of the faith and help them connect this faith to daily life. Likewise, education for evangelism includes helping Christians listen carefully to the languages the people they meet speak in their daily lives and understand the real needs of people. Once people know they have permission to use those languages and to make those connections, they will never again *not* make such connections; they will become more effective evangelizers in the broadest sense of that term. This does not mean trying to shape the global society into an image of one’s own country; that’s simply a new form of colonialism. This means being able to share the love of Christ in a language of love people can understand. So how do we give people permission to learn in the vernacular? In so doing we further equip them for their vocations in society.

Articles of Faith

Beyond their languages of every day life, Christians who hold the same faith speak a common creed using the same words. The historic creeds, The Apostles’ and Nicene, are confessed together in Sunday worship.

The Apostles’ Creed Article 1: I believe in God the Father Almighty, Creator of Heaven and Earth

The God whom we confess creates not only “me,” but all that exists. Cultural beliefs focus on a God whose job, we presume, is to protect me, *my* family, *my* job, *my* church, *my* country. Rather, in this article a faith community, together with Christians around the globe and through the ages, confesses that they fear, love and trust in the Triune God above all things. Saying “I” we also say that this God is the Creator, the Protector, and the Provider of *all*. This is grounding for vocation in society.

The words people confess on Sunday need to ground their lives comprehensively all week long. How people translate the meaning, as well as their interpretations of these words, has significant consequences in the decisions they make in the arenas of their ministries in daily life. In every dimension of life, one

needs to ask, “What is God creating here? How is God providing? Just whom is God protecting?”

The educating faith community will help people raise questions about this God who is almighty and the creator of all. Where do people stand on the issue of war and peace? Immigration? How do one’s Christian beliefs relate to capitalism? Consumerism? Globalization? Economic justice? The people among whom we minister, whom we lead to be disciples in the world, live inside all of those systems and both benefit from them and oppress others by them. The issues are large, the choices complex. How do you care about people suffering from malaria, from hurricanes, from earthquakes near and half a world away? What does it really mean to believe in a creating, providing, protecting God?

Article 2: I believe in Jesus Christ, God’s only Son, our Lord. He was conceived by the power of the Holy Spirit and born of the Virgin Mary. He suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, died and was buried. He descended into hell. On the third day he rose again. He ascended into heaven and is seated at the right hand of the Father. He will come again to judge the living and the dead.

Jesus Christ draws the faith community into the streets, where ordinary people live and work. So, too, our teaching and preaching is not confined to the classroom or the sanctuary. It needs to equip people for their roles and relationships in ministry opportunities on the streets, at their workplaces, at the medical center, wherever they go all week long. Who is this Jesus Christ in whose name we teach? Where did Christ walk? Or, maybe the question is, “Is there anywhere Christ did not walk?”

Incarnational ministry is a ministry of presence, “real” presence, an active presence that reaches out to engage people in their real-life ministry settings, whether dramatic or mundane. This calls for biblical and theological teaching that can help people translate the death and resurrection of Christ into liberating, life-giving ministry. It may begin with encounter on the streets. Encounter can lead to engagement which can lead to evangelization. In saying we believe that Christ was conceived by the Holy Spirit and born of Mary, we confess the power of the Spirit at work through human beings; we believe Christ was incarnate, put on flesh and lived among all kinds of people, proclaiming God’s reign and caring, healing, and calling for justice. His death defeated oppressive forces of sin, Satan and death itself. We confess that the One who rose from the dead and ascended, is still incarnate. We might ask with Mary what in the world God is calling us to give birth to? What are the oppressive, death-delivering powers that need new life? And how is Christ present in the world today so that all might be united in God’s love forever? To believe in Jesus Christ is to fully encounter and engage the world and its people and to minister with the good news of Christ’s life-giving power in society.

Article 3: I believe in the Holy Spirit, the holy catholic Church, the communion of saints, the forgiveness of sins, the resurrection of the body and the life everlasting.

What makes people holy? What does it mean to confess together that one believes in the Holy Spirit? The Holy Spirit brings individuals and whole communities to faith, and, after disillusionment, back to faith again and again.

Ministry is rooted in the forgiveness of sins. Life everlasting is not just a ticket to heaven, but new life in Christ lived in community as the body of Christ now.

The Spirit transforms entire communities for ministries in daily life. And those ministries are diverse. The various callings of different people in a faith community may take them in opposite directions culturally, economically or politically. No matter. As the community gathers each time at the communion table, they are restored, strengthened and empowered to go forth to serve in the world as one body of Christ with many members. As they gather for rich, relative and relational Christian education, they are equipped to be the holy people who are not afraid to become involved in the dirt and grime of what may seem like “unholy” work.

On Pentecost, people from many nations came together. The disciples “were all together in one place” and were “filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues, as the Spirit gave them utterance.” The amazing message of Pentecost is that the people who had come to Jerusalem all heard in their own language what the disciples were saying. They were bewildered, amazed and wondering, but they heard! The Good News of the Spirit is that the Spirit enables us, too, to speak the Good News in languages in which people can hear about Jesus Christ. “We hear them telling in our own tongues the mighty works of God” (Acts 2:11). By the Spirit, the Church, through its many and diverse people, can be empowered for vocations of peace and justice in society, locally and globally.