

THE UNDERSTANDING AND RESPONSIBILITIES OF THE MINISTRY OF THE LAITY
in the Episcopal Church USA and The United Methodist Church

Patricia N. Page

UNDERSTANDINGS

The understanding of the ministry of the people of God has been a major concern of Christian churches throughout the world during the latter half of the 20th century.

In 1953 Yves Congar, a French Dominican theologian, produced a massive study of the theology of the laity. Hendrik Kraemer, a Dutch Protestant theologian, wrote *The Theology of the Laity* in 1958. Lay centers were established in Germany and Switzerland. The World Council of Churches inaugurated a division on the ministry of laity. The theological and liturgical strivings of the Vatican Council II (1962-65), especially the encouragement of Bible reading and Bible study, influenced the theology and liturgy in many churches not least in the emphasis on the biblical model of the church as the *whole people of God* (Greek., “laos”).

The talk about the ministry of the laity got lost in the passions of the 60s and early 70s but people such as Mark Gibbs, a Church of England lay man, and T .Ralph Morton, an ordained minister in the Church of Scotland, wrote *God’s Frozen People: A Book for and about Christian Laymen* in 1965.

Their work bore fruit in the early 1970’s. The Episcopal Church created a unit on lay ministry which published *99%: Resources for Lay Ministry* and held conferences through out the USA. The Board of the Church Army, an Anglican lay evangelistic group, maintained the National

Institute for Lay Training at the General Theological Seminary from 1975-1982 (I was Director of Training of this program from 1975-1980). The Lutheran Church established a Department of Ministry in Daily Life. A group of Roman Catholic clergy and laity who were deeply committed to the ministry of the whole people of God founded the National Center for the Laity in 1978. Gradually dioceses, conferences, synods, councils developed educational programs for laity.

Concurrent with these developments in the understanding of the ministry of laity was extensive work in the first revision of the Episcopal Book of Common Prayer since 1928. At the same time the United Methodist Church was engaged in the first substantial revision of the content and format of its Hymnal, including General Services, since the 1870’s which embodied the former Methodist and former Evangelical United Brethren traditions. (*The United Methodist Hymnal*, the United Methodist Publishing House, 1988, p. v.)

The Understanding of Ministry of the Laity in the 1979 Episcopal Church Book of Common Prayer.

The 1979 Book of Common Prayer provided a radically new liturgy of Holy Baptism and a new Catechism both of which defined and shaped the Episcopal Church’s new understanding of the ministry of the whole people of God. The most formative aspects of this liturgy are:

- a) The introductory sentence to the rubrics concerning the service is: “Holy Baptism is full initiation by water and the Holy Spirit into Christ’s Body the Church.” There is provision for confirmations, receptions of members from other churches, and renewal of

FOR INFORMATION ONLY - NOT FOR CIRCULATION – YOU MAY NOT QUOTE OR PUBLISH WITHOUT THE AUTHOR’S WRITTEN APPROVAL

baptismal vows but all of these are only for the purpose of strengthening the vows made at baptism.

- b) Statement of person’s commitment to be baptized (or by parents and godparents on behalf of candidate) and congregation’s promise to support persons “in their life in Christ”.
- c) The Baptismal Covenant: statement of faith as found in the Apostles’ Creed, promises to live the Christian life, prayers for those making this commitment.

The promises are

Will you continue in the apostles’ teaching and fellowship, in the breaking of bread, and in the prayers?

Will you persevere in resisting evil, and whenever you fall into sin, repent and return to the Lord?

Will you proclaim by word and example the Good News of God in Christ?

Will you seek and serve Christ in all persons, loving your neighbor as yourself?

Will you strive for justice and peace among all people, and respect the dignity of every human being?

The candidate for baptism (or sponsors) and the congregation which renews its vows in each baptism responds to each question: I will, with God’s help.

- d) Thanksgiving over the Water – a recounting of the place of water in the Biblical story and blessing this water so it can provide power to those being baptized “to continue for ever in the risen life of Jesus Christ.”.

- e) Following the baptism the whole congregation says, “We receive you into the household of God. Confess the faith of Christ crucified, proclaim his resurrection, and share with us in his eternal priesthood.”

The Baptismal Covenant in the Hymnal of the United Methodist Church

The Hymnal of the United Methodist Church 1989 has four liturgical orders of the Baptismal Covenant which follow the same format as the service of Holy Baptism in the Book of Common Prayer. Three of these orders contain a form for confirmation or reaffirmation of faith. Also, different from the BCP liturgy, these three orders provide an order for reception into the United Methodist Church for members of Christ’s universal church and an order for reception into the local congregation coming from other UMC congregations. The fourth order is for use by a congregation for baptismal reaffirmation when there is no baptism, confirmation, or reception.

What do these liturgies tell us about the ministry of the people of God?

The Episcopal and the United Methodist liturgies contain similar clear pictures of the new persons those baptized are intended to grow into:

- members of the household of God
- faithful members of God’s holy church
- Christ’s representatives in the world
- true disciples who walk in the way that leads to life

faithful disciples

sharers in Christ’s holy priesthood

In each liturgy there is acknowledgment of the important ministry of the whole community to “support these persons in their life in Christ.”

The understanding of the ministry of the Church in the Catechism in the Book of Common Prayer (pages 854-856)

Q. What is the Church?

A. The Church is the community of the New Covenant.

Q. How is the Church described in the Bible?

A. The Church is described as the Body of which Jesus Christ is the Head and of which all baptized persons are members. It is called the People of God, the New Israel, a holy nation, a royal priesthood, and the pillar and ground of truth.

.....

Q. What is the mission of the Church?

A. The mission of the Church is to restore all people to unity with God and each other in Christ.

Q. How does the Church pursue its mission?

A. The Church pursues its mission as it prays and worships, proclaims the Gospel, and promotes justice, peace, and love.

Q. Through whom does the Church carry out its mission?

A. The Church carries out its mission through the ministry of all its members.

The Ministry

Q. Who are the ministers of the Church?

A. The ministers of the Church are lay persons, bishops, priest, and deacons.

Q. What is the ministry of the laity?

A. The ministry of lay persons is to represent Christ and his Church; to bear witness to him wherever they may be; and, according to the gifts given them, to carry out Christ’s work of reconciliation in the world; and to take their place in the life, worship, and governance of the Church.

Subsequent definitions of the ministry of a bishop, of a priest, of a deacon.

Definitions of the Mission and Ministry of the Church in the United Methodist Church Book of Discipline, 2000

Section II. The Ministry of All Christians

Par. 125 “All Christians are called through their baptism to this ministry of servanthood.

Par. 127 “This ministry of all Christians in Christ’s name and spirit is both a gift and a task. . . . Entrance into the church is acknowledged in baptism and ratified in confirmation.”

Section III. Servant Ministry and Servant Leadership

Par 131 “The ministry of all Christians consists of service for the mission of God in the World. . . . the ministry of all Christians is shaped by the teachings of Jesus.”

Par 132 “The United Methodist Church has traditionally recognized these gifts and

callings in the ordained offices of elder and deacon. The United Methodist tradition has recognized that laypersons as well as ordained persons are gifted and called by God to lead the Church.”

Section IV. Servant Ministry

Par. 133 “The ministry of all Christians consists of privilege and obligation . . .In the United Methodist tradition these two dimensions of Christian discipleship are wholly interdependent.”

Par. 134 “Our Relationship with God: Privilege”

Par. 135 “Our Relationship with Christ in the World: Obligation

Section V. Servant Leadership

Par. 136 “Within The United Methodist Church, there are those called to servant leadership, lay and ordained. Such calls are evidenced by special gifts, evidence of God’s grace, and promise of usefulness. . . The privilege of servant leadership in the Church is the call to share in the preparation of congregations and the whole Church for the mission of God in the world..”

.....

Other significant descriptions in the Book of Discipline:

Par. 216 The Meaning of Membership

When persons are baptized they become full members of the Church. They become “professing members” when they “covenant together with God and with the members of the local church to keep the vows which are a part of the order of confirmation and reception into the Church:

FOR INFORMATION ONLY - NOT FOR CIRCULATION – YOU MAY NOT QUOTE OR PUBLISH WITHOUT THE AUTHOR’S WRITTEN APPROVAL

1. To renounce the spiritual forces of wickedness, reject the evil powers of the world, and repent of their sin;
2. To accept the freedom and power God gives them to resist evil, injustice, and oppression;
3. To confess Jesus Christ as Savior, put their whole trust in his grace, and promise to serve him as their Lord;
4. To remain faithful members of Christ’s holy church and serve as Christ’s Representative in the world;
5. To be loyal to The United Methodist Church and do all in their power to strengthen their ministries;
6. To faithfully participate in its ministries by their prayers, their presence, their gifts, and their service;
7. To receive and profess the Christian faith as contained in the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments”.

Summary:

Much of the theology of the ministry of the laity in both the Episcopal Church and The United Methodist Church has been reinforced by the developing theology of baptism. This has been true not only for our two churches but also in the worldwide ecumenical body represented in the World Council of Churches. The Lima text, *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry*, 1982, is the culmination of special ecumenical consultations beginning in 1927 as well as bilateral conversations.

The fact that the Catechism in the Book of Common Prayer 1979 placed the definition of the ministry of the laity at the head of the descriptions of the ministry of the Church gave

**FOR INFORMATION ONLY - NOT FOR CIRCULATION – YOU MAY NOT QUOTE OR
PUBLISH WITHOUT THE AUTHOR’S WRITTEN APPROVAL**

a strong boost to lay persons trying to understand their vocation. However, there was considerable confusion as to what that meant. Some people considered Holy Baptism as the “ordination” of laity for ministry. The acceptance of women as deacons gave new life to the ancient order of the diaconate but it did provide more confusion to lay people who were trying to understand their vocation. In the 1990’s it became popular to talk about the Ministry of the Baptized. However, so often this phrase was often followed by the discussion of “the ministry of the baptized” and “the ministry of the ordained” which denied the basic assumption that “ordained “ are also primarily in the ministry of the baptized. The web page of the Office for Ministry Development of the Episcopal Church now reads “Resources for ministry of the baptized *including the clergy.*” (Italics added.)

The United Methodist Church in its Book of Discipline, par. 219, defines *The Call to Ministry of All the Baptized*. “All members of Christ’s universal church are called to share in the ministry which is committed to the whole church of Jesus Christ. Therefore, each member of the United Methodist Church is to be a servant of Christ on mission in the local and worldwide community.

RESPONSIBILITIES

Ministry of the laity in the Episcopal Church

Its life

A From Title III, Canon 1 – 4 of the Episcopal Church of the United States.

Canon 1. Of the Ministry of All Baptized Persons

Sec. 1. Each Diocese shall make provision for the affirmation and development of all baptized persons, including:

- (a) Assistance in understanding that all baptized persons are called to minister in Christ’s name, to identify their gifts with the help of the Church and to serve Christ’s mission at all times and in all places.
- (b) Assistance in understanding that all baptized persons are called to sustain their ministries through commitment to life-long Christian form

Canon 2. Of Commissions on Ministry

Canon 3. Of Discernment

Sec. 1. The Bishop and Commission shall provide encouragement, training, and necessary resources to assist each congregation in developing an ongoing process of community discernment appropriate the cultural background, age, and life experiences of all persons seeing direction in their call to ministry.

Canon 4. Of Licensed Ministries

Sec. 1. A confirmed communicant in good standing, or in extraordinary circumstances, subject to guidelines, established by the Bishop, a communicant in good standing, may be licensed by the Ecclesiastical Authority to serve as Pastoral Leader, Worship Leader, Preacher, Eucharistic Minister, Eucharistic Visitor, Catechist.

The guidelines should include discernment, selection, training, continuing education and the duration of licenses.

B., Professional lay ministries:

FOR INFORMATION ONLY - NOT FOR CIRCULATION – YOU MAY NOT QUOTE OR PUBLISH WITHOUT THE AUTHOR’S WRITTEN APPROVAL

Directors of Christian Education, Parish Visitors, Parish Nurses, Communicators, Youth Workers, Teachers and others all of whom should be helped through the process of discernment, training, and deployment.

Its worship:

The rubrics of the Book of Common Prayer 1979 specifically provide for a lay person as well as a clerical person to lead in many services of the Episcopal Church. This is true of the Daily Offices of Morning, Noon Day, Evening Prayer, and Compline. In the 1928 Prayer Book it allowed for the “minister” to be the leader.

In Pastoral services such as Ministration to the Sick and the Burial of the Dead the leader may be a deacon or a lay person.

Only a bishop or a priest can pronounce absolution where there is confession provided or where there is to be an anointing. Both a deacon and a lay person can hear a confession in the Reconciliation of a Penitent. but cannot give absolution. When it is necessary to have anointing as in Ministry to the Sick a lay person or a deacon “may perform anointing with oil blessed by a bishop or priest.” The Lay Eucharist Minister can administer the consecrated bread and wine in the church when there is not a clergy person present.

In the celebration of the Holy Eucharist lay persons may be appointed to read the Lessons, the Old Testament Lesson and the Epistle, and the Prayers of the People.

The Celebration of a New Ministry is primarily for the institution of priests and deacons in their new ministries. The rubrics also provide for this service being used for lay persons:

“A lay person being instituted should read one of the Lessons and assist where appropriate.”

In its governance

Laity are expected to form the vestry of each congregation. The members are elected in the annual meeting of the congregation.

Each congregation elects delegates and alternates to its annual diocesan convention. Each diocese decides the number of lay delegates and alternates. Every active clerical person in the diocese automatically has a seat and vote.

Each diocese elects its 4 lay and 4 clerical delegates to the triennial General Convention.

In each diocese lay persons and clergy are elected to the Standing Committee and the Diocesan Council. The Council appoints lay and clerical persons to serve on the departments and committees of the diocese.

Discipline and accountability

The Task Force on Disciplinary Policy and Procedure of Title IV of the Canons of the Episcopal Church : Fitness for Ministry, Accountability and Ecclesiastical Discipline

will present its revisions for a vote in the General Convention, June, 2006. These revisions would extend the disciplinary canons to “All persons [ordained and lay] serving in this Church shall abide by these Canons in their personal conduct in acts performed for or within the Church” “According to these revisions it would be more possible to expel laity from the community for among other offenses ‘an act which results in the person being repelled from the Holy Communion, an act which brings scandal or disrepute upon the Church, or which threatens the welfare or safety of the church, church property, the church community, or any member,’ (From a report in *The Living Church*, Steve Waring, March 6, 2005, p. 6.)

Ministry of the laity in The United Methodist Church

Its life

Par. 250 “Out of the general ministry of each local church there shall be elected by the charge conference. [The charge conference is made up on the members of the church council plus clergy who have a charge conference relationship.]

1.” **a lay leader** who shall function as the primary lay representative of the laity in that local church and shall have the following responsibilities:

- (a) fostering awareness of the role of laity both within the congregation and through their ministries in the home , workplace, community, and world, and finding ways within the community of faith to recognize all these ministries.
- (b) meeting regularly with the pastor to discuss the state of the church and the

FOR INFORMATION ONLY - NOT FOR CIRCULATION – YOU MAY NOT QUOTE OR PUBLISH WITHOUT THE AUTHOR’S WRITTEN APPROVAL

needs for ministry;

(c) membership in the charge conference and the church council, the committee on finance, and the committee on lay leadership where, along with the pastor, the lay leader shall serve as an interpreter of the actions and programs of the annual conference and the general Church...

(d) continuing involvement in study and training opportunities to develop a growing understanding of the Church’s reason for existence and the types of ministry that will most effectively fulfill the Church’s mission;

(e) assisting in advising the church council of opportunities available and the the needs expressed for a more effective ministry of the church through its laity in the community;

(f) informing the laity of training opportunities provided by the annual conference.”

It is recommended that a lay leader also serve as a lay member of the annual conference. Each charge is entitled to as many lay members of annual conference as there are clergy in the charge.

Par. 258 “There shall be elected annually, by the charge conference in each local church, a **committee on lay leadership** that is composed of full members of the local church. The charge of this committee is to identify, develop, deploy, evaluate, and monitor Christian spiritual leadership for the local congregation.” The pastor is to chair the committee, a lay person elected by the committee will serve as vice chairperson. The committee will consist of no more than nine persons in addition to the pastor and lay leader.

Par. 266 Lay Speaking Ministries

“A **lay speaker** (local church or certified [by the district or conference committee on Lay Speaking Ministries]) is a member of a local church or charge who is ready and desirous to serve the Church and who is well informed on and committed to the Scriptures and the doctrine, heritage, organization, and life of The United Methodist Church and who has received specific training to develop skills in witnessing to the Christian faith through spoken communication, church and community leadership, and care-giving ministries. An applicant must be active in the support of the local church or charge.”

Par. 270 Provisions for Lay Missioners

Lay missioners are committed lay persons, mostly volunteers, who are willing to be trained and work in a team with a pastor-mentor to develop faith communities, establish community ministries, develop church school extension programs, and engage in congregational development. . . . They are accountable to their pastor-mentor as members of the ministry team. . . . The concept of lay missioners is theologically based in the ministry of the laity.”

Its worship

The United Methodist Book of Worship contains some introductory comments on baptism: “Baptism anticipates a lifetime of further and deeper experiences of God, further acts of Christian commitment and ministries in the world. Confirmation, ordinations, and consecrations to particular ministries, and all other steps in ministry.”

Its governance

A charge has as many lay members of the annual conference (the term is lay member) as it has clergy. The lay members are elected by the council (the administrative body of the church). In order to keep the number of clergy and lay equal, where there are clergy and clergy in non-local church appointments which do not have a corresponding lay member, other laity have to be added. These might be presidents of United Methodist Women, United Methodist Men, and United Methodist Youth or lay persons who chair committees.

Lay delegates to General Conference are elected by the lay members of annual conferences to be equal to the number of clergy being elected by clergy members of the annual conference. The number elected to the Conference is determined by a formula which is basically based on the numbers in the annual conference,

Discipline and accountability

Both ordained and lay persons may be charged with offenses defined by the Order and Discipline of the United Methodist Church. Those covering lay persons are listed in Paragraph 2702, Section 3, of the *Book of Discipline*.

3. A professing member of a local church [includes both lay and ordained] may be charged with the following offenses, and , if so, may choose a trial: (a) immorality; (b) crime; (c) disobedience to the Order and Discipline of the United Methodist Church; (d) dissemination of doctrines contrary to the established standards of doctrine of The United Methodist Church; (e) sexual abuse; (f) sexual misconduct: child abuse; (h) harassment, including , but not limited to racial and/or sexual harassment; (i) racial or

FOR INFORMATION ONLY - NOT FOR CIRCULATION – YOU MAY NOT QUOTE OR PUBLISH WITHOUT THE AUTHOR’S WRITTEN APPROVAL

gender discrimination; or (relationships and/or behaviors that undermine the ministry of persons serving within an appointment (presumably this would referred to an ordained person).

Paragraph 2704, Section 4, *When a respondent is a layperson*, gives directions for cases when the grievances or complaints have been brought against a lay person..

SUMMARY

The Episcopal Church and the United Methodist Church both have a number of provisions for promoting the ministry of laity within the body of the Church. These have their justification in the format for the vows which all members take in Holy Baptism and the Baptismal Covenant. Each affirm that the ministry of the laity is to carry out Christ’s ministry in the world.

Still there is confusion about the ministry of the laity. We honor ordination of the few more than we do the baptism of us all. We experience the structures authorized for lay leaders as being of the next level up to – or just below - the status of the ordained. The Episcopal Church has invested much in the theological education of those to be ordained and very little in preparing all the laity for our ministry in daily life.

However, God has moved us a long way in our understanding of the Baptismal Covenant and we believe is still opening up to us the fuller vocation of being God’s people.