

## MINISTRY AND LAY PRESIDENCY FROM A MISSION PERSPECTIVE

**Maria Erling**

Lutheran Theological Seminary at Gettysburg

The expansion of Christianity in the global South is an exciting phenomenon to observe. Missiologists have been predicting for some time that churches in the North [the old Christendom of Europe and America] would be eclipsed by an expanding church in the South. Phillip Jenkins' book, *The New Christendom* covers the details, and I commend it to you if you haven't already got it on your bed stands. Nevertheless, I caution you to set aside your typically American pragmatic instinct, and search not for growth strategies for your synod. The rapid expansion of Christianity in the South is not a matter of the right mission technique and fervor that, if adopted here, would turn things around for us. Their preaching styles, evangelical spirit, multiple forms of lay leadership, and spontaneous and provisional institutional forms are incarnational translations of the gospel that work because they address their own culture on its own terms. Peoples in the global South - poor, politically unorganized, rapidly urbanized, and ecologically plundered - have found in the gospel a power for good in their world.

Many reflections on the post missionary history of Southern churches note that rapid growth occurred when lay leaders, freed from colonial and missionary oversight, translated and took the gospel, with its questions and answers, much deeper into the indigenous culture. Those who can speak the language of a culture know better what stories and images will really connect with people. On top of that, the gospel setting of Jesus and his disciples has immediate resonance with rural, village people in the global South. And the mission journeys of Paul in the urban world of the Roman Empire, also registers with the rapidly urbanizing populations in the South. The strange world that Northerners perceive in the words of the Old Testament prophets, and of Jesus and the apostles, is reportedly not viewed in the same way by people in the South. Thus their approach to scripture is also more direct and less complicated than ours. They understand the railing of the prophets against unseemly riches, and the instructions given to the early church to share their wealth with other churches, and Jesus pithy insight that fat, overloaded, camels will have a hard time in narrow gated city slums, and they look at us, their Christian brothers and sisters in our wealthy homes and oversized cars, and wonder how we get on.

Their questions to the gospel about nationhood, family organization, warfare, and health in a rapidly transforming world will test the traditional, theological and dogmatic definition of Christianity used in the worldwide Christian communion. Lutherans defined and developed a global Christian fellowship on the foundations of 19th century missionary zeal, but today, as theologians and church people from the global South enter more fully into deliberations, Northern churches realize that the legacy of colonialism and the threat of continuing economic/military dependencies threaten their world wide communions. The Anglican Communion is troubled equally by these economic realities as it is with varying understandings of sexuality. The next decade will teach us what bonds of fellowship and unity in the spirit mean. The mission work we are all called to do today must be dedicated to the complicated work of

maintaining and transforming previous mission relationships in the context of changing foundations for fellowship.

My rather lengthy introduction on the Post-Christendom society in which we live and work may have taken you a few thought steps from the topic of lay presidency, but I hope it is not too wrenching to bring you back to our own incarnational moment with the gospel. We face a set of questions about leadership and local ministry demands that provide our own unique challenge. If we can learn anything from rapidly growing partner churches it is that: 1) Ministry adapted to its own cultural setting will thrive and imported forms will languish; 2) Understanding our own cultural context as well as the gospel tradition involves significant training; and 3) Our church's interconnected relationships around the world can engage our people in a gospel vision that can pull them out of the death trap of parochial thinking and living. I believe that our existing institutions and structures should be adapted to these new situations and demands because of the trust and reputation we have built already through our commitments. Our institutions - seminaries, schools, social service, outdoor ministries, and chaplaincies - are more than willing partners in providing fresh ideas and resources for addressing new ministry and mission needs.

### **Ministry adapted to its own cultural setting will thrive and imported forms will languish**

You have read in my earlier paper my proposal that Lutheran ministry and the work of the ordained must be viewed both in relationship to the work of a congregation in its social context as well in relationship to the wider, and shared mission of the whole church. I argue that the point of ministry and the charge we are to be faithful to involves a strong commitment to local translation, and that the ordained must be engaged in a lively exchange with his or her specific congregation, in its particular context, in order to adequately translate the living gospel in a living and changing place. It is clear that this kind of engagement demands considerable preparation, ongoing work, and an acute sensitivity to the particularities of the congregation itself. Such ministry demands a collaborative effort to do theological and mission work not only within a local assembly, but also in concert with other congregations and ministries in a conference or synod. Thus as we envision this work we can talk about the apostolicity of the congregations, as they seek to remain faithful to what has been handed on to them, and also seek to maintain their calling and mission in their own place for the sake of the whole church. Our situation is addressed by St. Paul's words, "Can the foot say to the hand I don't need you?" His challenge in his day was similar to ours: keeping the overall mission perspective in mind when we address the pastoral needs of individual congregations.

Our dialogue during the past year on the question of ordination and authorized ministry pioneered a model for theological and confessional discernment. It is also the method we must use in order to do the mission work of adapting our ministry to the local setting in which we work. All the institutions we have for ministry training - seminaries, lay schools, internship, CPE, and first call theological education - should be places in which the challenges of the discrete local context provide the framework for learning. This is already the case in our seminaries, which are not hothouses of theology but places of earnest study where both context and the tradition are understood as important dimensions of theological praxis. Understanding the tradition and its evolution provides a common framework for any future deliberation; learning to read the context

prepares leaders who can discern opportunities and spot barriers for mission. Leadership training in our seminaries already involves significant instruction that attempts to help students understand how much context determines their ministry options, but we need to do more to educate students in place once they have begun to engage in ministry.

I could spell out several ways in which our institutions and programs for training ought to be oriented to context, but I will here note that the traditional training regimen for pastors and lay and diaconal ministers should not be viewed as an encapsulated, privileged track that has no bearing on the question of educational programs designed for authorized lay ministers. I caution against developing two tracks toward ministry service that have no touch points with each other. Appropriately adapting ministry to context is a challenge that can perhaps be addressed through first call theological education programs, which are structured to deliver educational and peer experiences to people in place. As these programs are being revised I hope we can build more fruitful relationships with existing seminary programs and internship models so that we can achieve a greater level of flexibility in training for ministry in place. Programs such as TEEM (Theological Education for Emerging Ministries) provide one model that recognizes previous experience and with faculty guidance selects appropriate additional training that can include CPE, courses, or ongoing work with a supervisor or mentor.

One way I would advocate for increased utilization of seminary training would be to enhance synodical or alternative educational programs by connecting them to seminary programs. Any courses or training processes should be fully accredited according to ATS (American Theological Schools) guidelines. I perceive that our current, more diversely organized system does generate new candidates for ministry but that we are not using their limited resources very effectively. Several students who have matriculated at our seminary after serving as licensed lay presiders have to start at square one. It would be a better use of our resources if, from the moment individuals are identified for service and training, their coursework and on site supervision connects them regularly with a degree program in an accredited seminary. This would of course involve some re-envisioning of the way that seminarians begin their course of study and would demand that other methods of delivering an education to far flung areas be devised. In the age of online education and flexible course offerings this ought to be possible. Any person who then enrolled in an in place training program and registered in a recognized degree program would also enter the candidacy process. Multiple entry points into ministry preparation would link individuals with common formative processes that we expect of those who do Lutheran ministry. Whether these persons eventually complete degrees while serving is a question worth discussing further, but even if the educational process extended over several years, we would have these people engaged in the same reflection and preparation as other ministry candidates.

Building collegial relationships among those who do ministry is essential not only for coordination and commitment to mission efforts but also for the morale of our leadership. We should not underestimate the negative impact on seminaries, on recruitment into full time ministry, or on existing professionals if candidates for ministry perceive there are shortcuts they might have taken. One of the strengths of our present system of preparation is that pastors, diaconal, and lay ministers are equipped to contribute to deliberations at synod and conference

meetings, and can capably educate and train lay leaders in congregations. Because they understand our traditions and structures, and have formed collegial relationships via their preparation, they are well-networked leaders who can make effective and efficient decisions.

### **Understanding our cultural context in light of the gospel involves training and trust**

Since Lutherans claim a confessional identity rather than an identity based primarily on liturgy or polity, people in the church naturally turn to active theological reflection and analysis whenever a decision needs to be made. In my previous paper I pointed also to the collegial dimension to our church life, and particularly to the important role that discussion and argument provide for in our decision-making. A theologically oriented fellowship would expect that answers to questions and ways of perceiving would not be self-evident truths but by their very nature demand several levels of translation and refinement. Our sources and experience must be reconciled, and this activity must be conducted through vigorous articulation and testing of an argument.

In the regular curriculum that seminaries use for training pastors and lay rostered ministers theological reflection is given a central role. This traditional Lutheran commitment recognizes that the changing cultural landscape demands a creative as well as a committed witness. Theological truths and Biblical stories are not givens in our society any longer, say many interpreters. At the same time the sense that everything is in flux, and that everyone has an agenda creates a politicized and fragmented cultural context. Churches that mind their tradition, yet engage the new questions posed in an honest and authentic way, can offer a kind of sanctuary of trust to people beset by misgivings. Our active wrestling with a theological and confessional tradition is one of our assets as we seek to do ministry in this world. We need however to do a better job of articulating how our theological commitments inform the choices we make as a church and as people. This will help people understand why, for Lutherans, confessional arguments are always a dimension of any argument we wage on synod floors, whether it is about homosexuality, mission, episcopacy, or even the strange debate I witnessed once over communing those who are not yet baptized.

The theological conversation and discussion we conduct is not one that concerns only those who have been theologically trained, however, and I do not want my emphasis on professional training in preparation for ministry to be perceived as advocacy for a closed circle conversation among the theologically articulate. Any kind of elitism is off-putting in our context, and does not serve our mission. The work of relating the theological tradition to the local context involves translation work that necessarily involves participation by many voices. At synod and conference meetings and in congregations the work of mission seeks the appropriate translation, or way of relating the gospel to that time and place. This kind of mission ministry necessarily involves the full participation and interchange between those trained in knowing the tradition and those who have the ear for the local dialect and know the local needs and hopes. This active interaction is in itself a form of theological reflection and should be recognized as such.

The public nature of our ministry means that all members should have access to decision-making and see that their contributions and insights are recognized. Public ministry also means that others in the community expect something of our witness and stewardship. The legacy of our

ministries of service, the public visibility of our institutions, and the character of our leadership are things we hold in trust. Simply put, people ought to know what or who a Lutheran pastor is and what she or he stands for in the community. Interpreting ministry to a wider public, and discerning what should be the focus and mission of a congregation in a particular time and place is not a matter of following a formula or script, but is a complex and creative challenge involving intense interaction and accountability within a public sphere. The honoring of our relationships and the integrity of our public witness create the trust that supports the mission of our church.

In our own cultural setting creating and maintaining trustworthy relationships provides a gospel answer to the cynical and sometimes despairing mood of our generation. Honest witness and steadfast engagement is what we need to train our leaders to provide.

### **Interconnected relationships and a gospel vision**

Providing ministry is the concern of the whole church, and not just the responsibility of autonomous congregations. The way in which we identify and train leadership in place, or the creative sharing of leadership between or among congregations should demonstrate and reflect this commitment. Lutherans recognize that the task of providing for an authentic gospel ministry is the responsibility of the whole church, and the interest shown by many pastors and leaders who have asked me how this study is going reminds me that many in the church expect a serious and sustained discussion of any changes in practice in relation to ordained ministry. I take this interest as an encouraging sign that many are ready to commit resources and energy to the task of strengthening leadership for our church. Their interest is also a reflection of the instinctual Lutheran commitment to collegial decision-making. I urge that you recognize that this initial year of discussion among the bishops continue and expand to include other pastors and leaders in synods. We are not at a point of closure.

Attending to this issue of ministry gaps and mission challenges on the frontiers and marginal places in our society ought to be seen as a call that urges us to be the church more fully and meaningfully. If we perceive the need for lay presidency as urgent only for the sake of congregations here and there with declining populations and limited resources, then we narrow our mission and our church identity. If instead we understand that responsibility for ministry on the frontiers and demographic margins of our society belongs to our church as a whole, we can begin to understand that our mission as a church has a much broader focus, involving the needs of a whole society, and that we are all called to respond to it. The problems of leadership faced in Northwest Pennsylvania, Northern Maine, West Virginia, the Alleghenies, and Western North Dakota do not belong to isolated congregations, but to a whole church that has resources and talents. The question that lay presidency then presents to us is a question posed to our self-understanding as a church.

### **Mission rule: Think globally, act locally**

If we were a congregational church, with focus on the congregation as defining the purpose and intent of ministry, and any unity formed by agreement in spirit, and with no formal accountability beyond the congregation except for that which the congregation may contract on its own, then the resolution of our dilemma about leadership would simply depend on congregations creating their

own leadership in place. But we are not a congregational church. And we are not congregational because of our mission history. Our commitment to mission created structures of training and mutual accountability - schools, synods, boards, and commissions - that kept our leadership connected and our fellowship honest and expanding. Our church grew because of migration and mission, because of vision and memory. The tools we used to fashion our relationships - theological argument and confessional commitment, liturgical practice and youth training - created ministries outside the congregation and built significant common institutions. Lutherans have strong congregations, but they have a synodical context for common decision-making and commitment.

The church wide context is important to consider when asking the mission question about leadership. Leaders who are identified in local contexts should be brought into a collegial fellowship of leadership that belongs not only to the local assembly but also links that assembly with a mission that has existed through centuries and that now spans the globe. There are ways in which our training programs need not only become more sensitive to local context, but also to connect that local context to the wider work of the church in the world.