

Answering God's Call:

The Role of Laity

by Katherine Tyler Scott

One of the responsibilities I share in my parish is that of chairing the Lectors Guild. The group is composed of women and men who feel that their calling is the reading of the Word, and they strive to faithfully read and inwardly digest the scriptures in preparation for their assigned service.

One Sunday morning a conversation occurred in the sacristy between our two priests. It was obviously the kind that was ongoing, and neither seemed to feel any urgency to resolve the issue being discussed – that being the increasing role of laity. With comfort and humor and the starting time of the service eminent, they remarked that the laity ...”could do almost anything.” One laughingly concluded that the next thing the laity would be doing would be the reading of the Gospel!

That same morning the reader of the Old Testament lesson reverently approached the lectern and began reading, not the words he had studied, but the Gospel! Once he was in the words he couldn't seem to find his way back to the beginning to start anew until a coat tug and a whisper from his co-lector helped him to do so. We could laugh later at coffee hour about the synchronicity of the morning conversation and the “divine” mistake of crossing over into a priestly prerogative.

This incident stayed with me not just because it's a useful story for lector training sessions, but because it is in a way the meta-story of what the Church is experiencing today. **The Church is a community of faith, a community of members with multiple gifts and the potential to do what is necessary to worship God through both words and deeds. The notion of shared ministry which is manifest**

in many parishes and dioceses is a way to express these gifts and utilize this potential.

In implementing them, the issues of identity, role, and responsibilities will always surface. This is a good thing. All of us need to address these questions and discern the answers individually and collectively, generally and specifically. And in doing so, we are called to remember that we are the “whole people of God, signed and sealed in Holy Baptism as Christ's own forever.” We are sacramentally marked and identified at this first ordination, an induction into the household of God that comes with a set of challenges and responsibilities as we live out our new identity.

Called to Story

We are called to develop a deep sense of historical and spiritual identity as Christians and integral to doing this is the practice of remembering. We are called to remember the story of God's people – our story – through Bible study, worship, continued theological education and reflection, and personal and communal discernment. As laity in the Episcopal Church, we are to engage in a continual dialogue between scripture, tradition, and reason. In both individual and community discernment prayer, we are to seek to discover the fuller truth of what God is saying to us – its meaning and the specific implications for our lives today.

Called to Mission

We are a people with a legacy of mission, and we are to seek our calling and commit to actions congruent with our Christian identity. Knowledge of the mission of the Church, or of the parish, or of our own personal mission is insufficient unless we can also state specifically how these are to be lived out and achieved through words and deeds.

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The Episcopal Church's structure is that of an ordered ministry. Historically, those orders have been bishops, priests, and deacons. In large part however, as a result of the Baptismal Covenant expressed in the 1979 Book of Common Prayer, the role of the laity as an order has had a significant impact on the way we “do ministry.” This issue of Vestry Papers looks at the roles and functions of ordered ministry and some of the issues the Church is grappling with as it looks toward canonical revisions dealing with ministry.

The Episcopacy in a Changing Environment

by The Rt. Rev. F. Clayton Matthews

The Episcopate, or office of the Bishop, comes from the historical tradition of ordered ministry – that of bishops, priests, and deacons. It can be dated back to the second century when most Christian communities seemed to share the same basic pattern of life with a principal leader or pastor – called *episkopos*. As a concept, it means overseer, but it has been understood canonically to mean jurisdiction – defined as authority in *Webster's College Dictionary*. An example of this jurisdictional meaning can be found in the action of the 72nd General Convention (Philadelphia, 1997) when Bishops Suffragan were recognized as exercising oversight. As a result, legislations is now before the Church to give Bishops Suffragan the right to vote on all issues in the House of Bishops, a right formerly given only to Diocesan Bishops and Bishops Coadjutor. This represents a more comprehensive understanding of oversight.

Bishops are elected from within the order of the priesthood. However, for the last several General Conventions, there has been a debate on the concept of “per saltum ordination” – election of bishops, regardless of the order from which they come. Simplified, it would allow for direct ordination, not sequential ordination, as is currently the custom. This type of ordination has never been adopted by General Convention, but there have been resolutions addressing it, and it is a part of the energy of the Church at large. If “per saltum ordinations” were allowed, it could alter the direct purview of episcopal oversight.

Within the per saltum conversation is the more realistic issue of whether or not a Canon Nine priest (one who is not seminary-trained and is limited to ministry in a specific congregation) is eligible to be elected as a bishop. It is an issue that has been positively resolved, but not fully tested within the Church.

A bishop does have oversight responsibilities for lay leadership within a diocese, but the primary oversight responsibilities focus on the ordained. For this reason, **a bishop is an integral part of all activities dealing with ordination, deployment, continuing education, and pastoral support.** An example of oversight in the area of deployment is that a rector

or vicar of a congregation serves at the pleasure of the Bishop and only serves because the Bishop cannot be in attendance at all congregations on a weekly or regular basis.

These points draw us to a challenge facing the Church today as we discern and live into more fully the expression of ministry of baptized and ordained persons. **The Episcopal Church proclaims, along with other denominations, the concept of “the priesthood of all believers.”** While this concept has practical applications, it has also created some confusion and extensive discussion regarding the distinctions between ordained ministry and ministry of all the baptized.

Those placing greater emphasis on “the priesthood of all believers” are known as “total ministry advocates,” and they generally recognize that the gifts of ordained ministry are also possessed by the community of the baptized in any given congregation. This form of thinking has historical roots in American culture since the Revolutionary War and is generally known as popular democracy. It has scriptural support as well.

This philosophy can lead congregations to conclude that formal leadership, including sacramental and preaching responsibilities, is not just the purview of an ordained person who is seminary-trained. Within this discussion are those who do not want the concept limited only to work within the context of a congregation, but who want ‘total ministry’ to include ministry in daily life as well.

There are others who place greater emphasis on the uniqueness of the ordained, as contrasted with the concept of “the priesthood of all believers.” Most who adopt this philosophy see the uniqueness of the ordained as “ontological.” That is, **the uniqueness comes from an indelible change or mark on one’s personhood, therefore requiring more intense discernment of suitability and preparation for ordination.** Only ‘ordered’ persons can provide formal, sacramental leadership with authority within a congregation. This way of thinking also has historical roots in American history since the Revolution that stem from the idea of immutable institutions. It too has scriptural support.

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The priesthood of Christ is totally unique. It is his priesthood, his sacrifice – “one, full, perfect and sufficient.” as the Anglican Prayer Book tradition puts it . . . which is at the heart of the Christian Gospel, the good news that he on the cross has done all that cultic sacrifices were unable to do, has reconciled humanity with divinity.

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The Deacon(s) in Your Congregation

by Roderick B. Dugliss, Ph. D.

In the final decades of the 20th century the church was enlivened by a revival of the oldest expression of ordained ministry – the diaconate. This recovery of the “full and equal” order of deacons is not yet everywhere in the Episcopal Church in the United States. Vocational deacons (as distinct from transitional deacons who wait, briefly, to be priested) are a strong and vital presence in some dioceses and non-existent in others. So, the option of having one or more deacons on the ministry team of your congregation may, or may not, be an option.

Why would you want to call a deacon? What do they do that will enrich the living out of the Baptismal Covenant by the people in your congregation?

Deacons embody the servant ministry of Jesus Christ for the Church and for the world. In the congregation, deacons are servant leaders who lead by example and who call out, empower, train, and support the people as they “seek and serve Christ in all persons” This takes many forms, depending on the needs of the community and the re-

sources of the congregation. In liturgy, deacons symbolize servanthood as they proclaim the Gospel, set the table, ensure the needs of the world are fully held up in the prayers of the people, and dismiss the congregation to be Christ in the world.

Congregations with one or more deacons find that engaged and active outreach is a priority. Individuals and the community are continually challenged – called to stretch their awareness of human need, to take the servant presence of Christ out to the weak, sick, suffering, broken, alienated, rejected. A prophetic voice is more likely to be raised and heard.

The priests who lead these congregations are more able to focus time and energy on meeting the deep pastoral needs of the flock and to be the mentors of ever deepening personal spiritual growth. Congregations with active deacons are likely to grow as the realized Gospel becomes visible and draws to it people who see a faith that makes a difference in the world.

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“My brother or sister, every Christian is called to follow Jesus Christ, serving God the Father through the power of the Holy Spirit. God now calls you to a special ministry of servanthood directly under your bishop. In the name of Jesus Christ, you are to serve all people, particularly the poor, the weak, the sick, and the lonely.”

from the Ordination of a
Deacon
Book of Common Prayer
page 543

The Organization of the Early Church

There is very little evidence about the origins of official ministry within the Church. What is available has been captured very succinctly in Williston Walker’s *A History of the Christian Church* (Charles Scribner & Sons). In his chapter on Christian organization, he traces the development of church structures from the first century after Christ’s death.

In all probability, development varied from place to place, but it is evident that very few 1st century Christian communities had the same structures. However, by the middle of the 2nd century, uniform patterns of local ministry were coming into place. They tended to have a principal leader or pastor called *episkopos* (bishop) who worked with a body of colleagues called *presbuterios* (elders). There was also a set of assistants who served him in his administrative and pastoral functions. These were *diakonios* (deacons). These “ministers” were not selected out of any group of trained professionals, as has been the case with Christian ministry since medieval times. Rather, they were selected out of the commu-

nity for their personal gifts and skills.

The Christian community was a close-knit body within any given city during these early times. They gathered regularly for worship and study, and they also served as a society for the members’ mutual assistance, as well as providing support for the poor, widows, and orphans. They regulated their own affairs, and they enforced their own standards of behavior. But their primary reason for existence was “in the new life of the risen Christ, communicated to them by God in the spirit and articulated in the proclamation and teachings of the original disciples and apostles.” They believed that the authentic preservation of the Gospel was essential to their life. So it comes as no surprise that church officers emerged to serve as leaders of worship and teachers of the truth.

Yet how they developed is another matter. The letters of Paul do not mention any established church officers, even though there were the beginnings of structure in some of the Pauline

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Shared Ministry . . .

An Episcopal Conundrum

by The Rev. Dr. William L. Sachs

It is refreshing to discover how much agreement there is among Episcopalians. As The Zacchaeus Project found, Episcopalians are united in affirming eucharistic worship as our center. It is also apparent that Episcopalians understand educational and outreach ministries as essential to our sense of mission. Even more encouraging, there is fresh interest in acquiring the skills which ministry and leadership require.

Many localities have experienced uncertainties and wounds and divisions, but most have rebounded. In locality after locality Zacchaeus interviewers found abundant energy and initiative in local congregations. While the tensions in our Episcopal midst are real and require our best collaboration, there are substantial areas of agreement among us. Episcopalians are especially united on the ideal of a shared ministry.

“Shared” ministry, or “mutual” ministry, is an appealing concept. The idea suggests common intentions and energies uniting clergy and laity. It also suggests practical adaptation of the roles and forms of our tradition to new challenges in local contexts. But what is “shared” ministry? Does the concept create more questions than answers?

A close reading of The Zacchaeus Report would suggest so. In many locations, the people our researchers interviewed affirmed both the shared ministry of their congregation and the initiative of their priest in the same breath. **It was common for lay respondents to emphasize the ministry they shared in their own congregation. Yet they also stressed their reliance on guidance from outside their church, especially guidance from their bishop and diocesan staff.** “Shared” or “mutual” ministry seems to be a conundrum, that is, a puzzle. Is “shared” ministry truly shared?

“Mutual ministry” reviews illustrate the confusion. Ideally such occasions assess a congregation’s life and work as a whole. But often tensions between clergy and laity become the occasion for such a review. Roles, expectations, and communications often require clarification, and a “mutual ministry review” can be an excellent means to address misunder-

standings. But does such an experience genuinely encourage the most basic sort of clarification that is needed, namely, what is “mutual ministry?” To move beyond consensus to a sense of common mission, a deeper level of understanding is necessary. There must be a vision of how true collaboration is to be achieved and what it will look like in practice.

The problem in achieving a truly “shared” or “mutual” ministry is also apparent when a lay person becomes unusually active in the congregation and perhaps the diocese as well. **When a person demonstrates exceptional leadership skills at various levels in the Church, the temptation is to encourage this person to be ordained. The implicit message appears to be that there is a hierarchy of forms of ministry, not something equally shared. And that ministry becomes complete when it is ordained ministry.** This emphasis seems enhanced by the clear commitment to eucharistic worship that The Zacchaeus Project reported. At the grassroots, the Church’s life seems best symbolized by the priest standing at the altar.

Happily, as Zacchaeus researchers looked closely at the Church’s grassroots, nuances became apparent. In many places, it was not simply a case of ordained versus lay ministry, nor assumptions of a hierarchical model. In a number of congregations, the sense of ministry arose out of a clear understanding of the baptismal covenant. The local ministry was seen as whole. The different orders of ministry that the Church upholds represent divisions of labor. And the actual shape of those divisions is determined in part by their historic form and in part by local demands. Within broad historic and canonical lines, there is variation. That variation arises out of a prayerful search for ways to realize a sense of shared ministry in a given place.

In short, Zacchaeus found that the Anglican sense of local initiative is alive, and need not imply localism. Isn’t this another way of saying that God’s Spirit is blowing through the Church, guiding and sustaining us as we seek to serve?

Bill Sachs is an ordained Episcopal priest and director of research for The Episcopal Church Foundation. He was co-director of The Zacchaeus Project.

Many Episcopalians regularly express a sense of being on a shared religious journey. In a way that transcends any ideological divide, they believe that their personal faith has drawn them into building a faith community with others.

The Zacchaeus Report

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Called to Congruence

Our beliefs and values are the DNA of our mission and determine our actions. Do we reflect the love we profess for God in our behavior and in our relationships with one another? We must make our beliefs come alive through actions and align them with what we do. **Clarity about and congruence in mission is the plumbline for the development of a community of the faithful as well as the foundation for effective social ministry.** As a gardener friend reminds me, “Mission work is root work.” Laity have a unique responsibility to tend to the root work so that the Church can be an institution of spiritual sustenance and active discipleship.

There are always many tasks that need to be done in a church. Laity share in many of these tasks, and our choice to assume these responsibilities can enrich us, the work, and the ministry of the Church if they are choices of the heart. When we assume a responsibility because it is connected to our particular mission or calling, it will be done with love and will prosper. If we can say no when we are not suited for what is being asked of us, we grow, the Church benefits, and room is made for someone else to give of themselves. **Sometimes our inability to set limits or boundaries is based on a sense of scarcity, a belief that there aren't enough other people or enough resources or enough time or enough experience.**

Called to Leadership

In a very sacred sense we have been entrusted by God to do what I call “holding the Church in trust.” When we hold something in trust, we recognize that it doesn't really belong to us. We are the inheritors of it, and our job is to ensure its value, vibrancy, authenticity, and longevity. One of the most important ways we can hold the Church in trust, in addition to being people of story and mission and of word and deed, is to develop our own capacities for leadership and those of others. I have always been an advocate of servanthood, but not when it helps us avoid leadership.

Leadership involves the use of an uncomfortable word – power. But power needs to be claimed if it is going to be exercised with integrity and judiciousness, with grace and compassion. **Leaders have power, whether they are laity, clergy, or bishops, and significant discomfort with it can create a community of false piety where the truth cannot be spoken in love.** Claiming our birthright power

derived from God's ultimate sacrifice is an important responsibility of the laity and can liberate the Church from debilitating power struggles or false humility. The exercise of power that holds others in trust involves assuming authority to help identify and develop clerical leadership. The authority of the laity rests not with our numbers but in the contributions we share in mission and ministry with those who have been ordained a second time.

Called to Community

It is in community that we learn more of who we are and what our unique gifts and callings are. The role of laity is to develop hospitable space for such work. This often entails holding up the mirror and helping others to see themselves in sometimes surprising and new ways. Laity share in the formation of the whole community and this includes priests, deacons and bishops. If they aren't functioning as we need or like, it is our shared responsibility to help them to do so. Whether as congregants, members of vestries, committees, or commissions, we need to invest in the ongoing development of all, especially ordained leaders. We need to support educational plans and opportunities for sabbaticals. When there is disillusionment and disappointment, we need to face our own complicity and collusion and take collective responsibility for making changes. We need to cease scapegoating our leaders. And yet, when we see troubling behaviour we cannot remain silent. We must be compassionately courageous in severing relationships when necessary.

We may be more practiced at giving our power away or denying it in others. But it is in the sharing of power that we and the institutional Church can remain vital forces for good in the world.

Laity “can do almost anything,” but our greatest contributions are to be a community of faith living out God's reconciling love; a community of story remembering God's call to us in the past, present and future; a community of mission, keeping our actions in the Church and in the world tethered to our values and beliefs; a community of discernment, identifying and developing leadership for the future. We are called to story, to mission, to congruence, to leadership, and to community. In combination, these form a remarkable discipline and discipleship for laity that is greatly needed in the Church today.

Katherine Tyler Scott is President of Trustee Leadership Development® Inc., a national leadership education program.

Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit; and there are varieties of service, but the same Lord; and there are varieties of working, but it is the same God who inspires them all in every one. To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good.

1 Corinthians: 12:4-7

Ministry for a New Time

An Excerpt

In his book, *Ministry for a New Time: Case Study for Change*, The Very Rev. James C. Fenhagen, with assistance from Celia Allison Hahn, profiles the historical role of Episcopal clergy, offers ways of rethinking our theology of ordination, and makes a case for systemic change within the structures of the Church. The following is an excerpt from the chapter, "Rethinking Our Theologies of Ordination."

The Recovery of the Authority of Baptismal Ministry

Although we can rejoice in the thousands of laypeople who have discovered a new sense of ministry given to them in baptism, we must admit that such renewal has not come without a considerable degree of stress. Laity complain over the lack of affirmation they experience from their congregations (and clergy) for ministries they exercise in the workplace and also in the congregation itself. How many laypeople have made calls on the sick only to be told by the recipient that they would rather have a call from the pastor? And more and more laity taking on ministries within the church height-

ens the sense of competition and loss of control. As one young priest was heard to say, "I am thankful that so many laity in my parish have gotten the message, but it does cause me to wonder, what is it that I can do that they can't?"

In the Episcopal Church, the only functions of ministry left to the priest alone are the celebration of the Eucharist and the pronouncement of blessing and absolution, and even these time-honored functions of priesthood are being seriously challenged. Finding meaning and a sense of worth in sharing ministry with others depends on an ability to clarify roles continually and give and receive support. Where this is present, the functions and authority for ministry are constantly changing with more to do than can be done. But when there is not such clarity, no one is sure who they are and what it is they are called to do.

"Ministry for a New Time" is published by The Alban Institute in cooperation with Cornerstone, a ministry of The Episcopal Church Foundation.

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Therefore, we currently have two parallel understandings of how people in ministry positions are identified, prepared, and given authority. However, our current canons on ministry do not take this into account. This current discussion, which will be before General Convention this July in Denver, also has an impact on our understanding of the exercise of Episcopé, or oversight, in a changing environment. Two papers will be presented to the deputies of the Convention for reception in preparation for anticipated canonical changes in the ministry canons. These papers are "Towards a Theology of Ordained and

Baptismal Ministry," presented by the Standing Commission on Ministry Development, and "The Priesthood in the Gathered Congregation," prepared by theologians identified by Bishop Richard Grein of New York and presented as a received study by the House of Bishops.

The discussion of these papers at Convention and the ongoing dialog among those charged with canon revision will ultimately shape our future practice and understanding of ministry. *Clay Matthews is Bishop of the Office for Pastoral Development of the National Episcopal Church.*

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churches. There has been much debate on the subject, and one hypothesis holds that it came naturally and informally as responsibilities in religious communities came to be assigned to an elder who regularly chaired the meetings of "the presbytery." By the 3rd century, there were established church orders and identified local leaders known as "bishop and head among the presbytery." With this structure, the beginnings of the idea of "apostolic succession" or "succession from the apostles" also began to appear. Over time, patterns of ministry and governance developed, and the unit

of the church in the Roman world was the body of Christians in a particular *polis*. Each had a principal pastor, the bishop, who presided at liturgical gatherings, directed the administrative functions of the community, and was the principal teacher and guardian of doctrinal tradition. The bishop belonged to a body of elders who were also associated with him in this work, and they were assisted by deacons. And though local churches exchanged ideas and admonitions, there was no organization of the church above the level of the *polis* at that time.

Cornerstone

a ministry of

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(\$25 annually for 5 issues,
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per issue)

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