

Shared Ministry: Meeting the Challenge of the New Millennium Realities

Rev. David S. Belasic

The following remarks from Dr. David Belasic offer his observations and suggestions for developing a healthier, positive relationship between pastor and people.

For the past eight years I've been in a unique position for observing what is happening to many fellow pastors. Perhaps you can identify with this. In our region pastors were surveyed and asked to describe the various ministries of the congregation.

One very revealing response was: ...there is only one ministry in this congregation, the ministry of Word and Sacrament, which I bring and which comes through *me* as the called and ordained pastor of this congregation.

Imagine the implications of that response. Consider what it is doing to the pastor and the people, their future, and what is happening to relationships, marriages, children, home, families...and that often, mistakenly, in the name of orthodoxy or Lutheran heritage. Sometimes we clergy are our own worst enemies.

Now God is leading us into the dynamics of a new millenium. We must pay attention and keep asking the two basic Lutheran questions: 1. What does this mean? and 2. How is this done?

But ahead of those two questions is a personal question: Have you lived more of your life as a non-Christian than you have as a Christian? Your response may make a difference how you read what follows.

Only a few among the clergy and a few more among the laity of our congregations have known and experienced the depth of the lostness of the lost, the seeking pre-Christian. This is intended for them as well as for all followers of Jesus, who serve Him as witnesses, whether that be as pastor, missionary, educator, or lay leader in all our communities. We take seriously our baptism and God's grace in Christ, and so we speak for our Risen Savior, who died, went to hell for us sinners and rose again to life...to give life to the lost—even as He has to us!

With this writing I am challenging what I observe to be some of our current thinking and practice in ministry in a variety of places. First I urge that we begin with the Word of God by reading the following sections of Scripture reflectively, *prayerfully*.

John 3:16,17
1 Cor. 12:4-7
Rom.12:3-6
2 Tim. 2:1-3

John 20:19-23
1 Cor.12:12
John 15:4,5

Ephesians 4:11-16
1 Cor.12: 24-27
John 15:12,13,16,17

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A representative summary of the above passages is contained in the following assertions of St. Peter and St. Paul:

The end of all things is near. Therefore be clear-minded and self-controlled so that you can pray. Above all, love each other deeply, because love covers a multitude of sins. Offer hospitality to one another without grumbling. Each one should use whatever gift he has received to serve others, faithfully administering God's grace in its various forms.

1 Peter 4: 7-10

Each of you should look not only to your own interests, but also to the interests of others. Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus: who being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, but made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. And being found in human appearance as a man, he humbled himself and became obedient to death—even death on a cross!

Philippians 2:4-8

As a District President I am grateful that many have been willing to share their hearts with me. Some lay people have been doing the same. Both clergy and laity care a great deal about the Church, our Lord's Mission, and about each other. It is my observation that we have been reaping a harvest of what we and some before us have been sowing in our teaching and in our frequent going it alone as pastors. It has been going on for a long time—and quite prominently since the time that J.A.A. Grabau (1804-1879, founder of the Buffalo Synod) influenced the LCMS more persuasively perhaps than did C.F.W. Walther concerning the high authority of the pastor by virtue of his divine call. Grabau's view of ministry always appeals—especially to the old Adam in us.

There is a proper regard for what is called the Office of the Public Ministry or The Pastoral Office. Some among us have defensively been trying to hold up this position even more assertively, dominantly, authoritatively. That is brought on partially by the decline in status of clergy and a lessening influence of the church in society with an attendant loss of respect for pastors. This can lead to improper conclusions:

1. Laity may feel obligated to accord an exalted status to the pastoral office.
2. This often leads to abdication of responsibility to the pastor. After all that's what he gets paid to do; he deals with 'holy things'; he knows the Bible and can give the right answers.
3. The end result means letting the pastor do the bulk of the congregation's work—and becoming extremely busy, the harried pastor will be subject to criticism for overlooking the needs of some individual members, or coming to meetings not fully prepared.

Being put onto a fenced-in pedestal is a lonely place to be. While there are different functions in the Body of Christ as the Church, it is a shared body, each member endowed

with different parts and gifts with only one Head. There is a real need for developing a more fully shared ministry among all the people of God.

The biblical concept of *shared ministry* among all the people of God hasn't always been widely received or practiced among us in the era of a church culture. The Reformation teaching on justification by grace through faith caught on, but the Reformation teaching on the priesthood of all believers caught on only minimally, and the consequences, in my observation, are showing up more noticeably in our non-church or anti-church culture.

There is a lot of concern about the use of the term *ministry* in some circles—especially as it appears in church growth and meta-church literature. It is true that sometimes (among sinners, pride-filled, people desiring to control or rebel) there can be a blurring of the distinction between the pastor's equipping-teaching-serving role, the Office of the Holy Ministry, and the ministry of witness and service by all of God's people. The anxiety about this distinction among church growth critics is much greater than it needs to be. Understanding the ministry in both the wide and narrow sense is well known in the biblical tradition.

The late Dr. Francis Pieper (*Christian Dogmatics*, Vol. 3, p. 439) writes,

“The term *ministry* is used both in Scripture and by the Church in a general, or wider, and in a special, or narrow, sense. In the wider sense it embraces every form of preaching the Gospel or administering the Means of Grace and commission to apply them, or by chosen public servants (*ministri ecclesiae*) in the name and at the command of Christians.”

With that introduction, Pieper goes on to say little of the wider sense of ministry and to focus mostly on the narrower sense of the Office of the Public Ministry. He does, however, cite Martin Luther on the relation of the Public Ministry to the spiritual priesthood of all Christians with the following quotation:

When we were made Christians through the Priest and His Priesthood (namely, through Christ) and in baptism, where, by faith incorporated in Him, we were also given the right and power to preach and profess the Word we received from Him before everybody, everyone according to his station and calling. For, though we are not all in the public office and calling, still every Christian should and may teach, instruct, admonish, comfort, reprove his neighbor with God's Word whenever and wherever he finds someone in need of it: for instance, a father and mother, their children and servants, a brother neighbor, citizen, or peasant (*sic*). For a Christian certainly can teach the other one who is still ignorant or weak and admonish him with the Ten Commandments, the Creed, Prayer, etc., and he who hears it is in duty bound to receive it from him as God's Word and join in confessing it publicly. (Quoting *Luther's Works*, on Psalm 110, v. 4: STL V., 1038, *Christian Dogmatics*, Vol.3, p.441)

Could it be that for too long a time, in an increasingly non-churched, pre-Christian culture, we have *not* encouraged, developed, or shared the ministry of witness, service, or biblical instruction? That is, have we not *under*-emphasized the biblical teaching of the priesthood, the sacrificing, prayerful, care-giving witness and service of all the followers of Jesus, and *over*-emphasized the pastoral office?

Listen carefully to some of the groans I have heard: I can't get anybody to help. There are so many needs. My people are all so busy. I've got to do it. ... Surely there are other approaches to ministry, centering in God's Word and Sacraments, Law and Gospel, biblically based, Christ-centered and outreach focused that we can model and use in our increasingly hostile post-Christian culture. We can equip and develop more lay leaders for ministry in the new millennium!

This issue is not merely for larger churches. The Body of Christ concept of shared ministry is not about size of congregation or type of ministry. It is about growing the quality of ministry, the quality of relationships, and the *quality* of witness and outreach among and with and through all of Jesus' followers for the sake of others in a new pre-Christian culture.

A much closer look at the biblical concept of *shared ministry* through the total Body of Christ in a pre-Christian culture could be God's blessing for many. What we are observing in processes like small groups, e.g., Stephen Ministry, support groups, Developing Leaders for Ministry, Helpmates, Share-Care and Prayer groups is no magic dust. It takes hard work—theological, emotional, administrative work, but it also appears to be a God-blessed work in a variety of churches.

For the sake of fellow pastors, for the sake of the gifted people of God who can serve as witnesses, nurturers, caregivers, disciple-makers, small group leaders, and especially for the sake of the lost, it is obvious that we need a renewed emphasis *on the shared ministry of the total Body of Christ* to make us a healthier, freer, more reproductive group of God's servants in His mission.

We are not in this alone. If we happen to have an Elijah complex, it is mostly self-imposed. It is not of God. We are called to function as part of a body of believing followers of Jesus...and the parts in this body are all at different stages of development; and like our own individual levels, their own level of sanctification is not very high, but we are called to help people struggle, grow, mature, witness, serve, becoming living sacrifices for Christ to make their lives count eternally, each a contributor of faith, hope, forgiveness, compassion, care and strength in the **Name of Jesus Christ**.

St. Peter writes, "As each has received a gift, employ it for one another as good stewards of God's varied grace." (1 Peter 4:10) St. Paul writes, "...be strong in the grace that is in Christ Jesus, and what you have heard from me before many witnesses entrust to faithful men who will be able to teach others also." (2 Tim. 2:1-2) Paul also writes,

I appeal to you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your reasonable service. Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind that you may prove what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect. (Romans 12: 1,2)

Groups of five, seven, or nine or so Christians, growing in faith, knowledge, love, witness and service, can help one another do that—and assist the pre-Christian friend too. The pastoral role is to model and provide leadership assistance and training—equipping the saints for the work of ministry.

Shared ministry, its discovery, development and deployment of God's multiple gifts for ministry by the whole Body of Christ is the challenge of the Church for the new millennium. Consider the Scriptures anew in the light of today's culture and context. Pray, think, and act on these things. God has great plans for His Church, for you, in the new tomorrow.

A Note for Contributors

We welcome your participation in writing articles for *Missio Apostolica*. Here are a few guidelines:

Articles should be related to mission and missiology, taking up either theological, historical, social and practical questions relating to the missionary dimension of the Church, or dealing with missiological issues of our day.

Language should be clear, informative, and stimulating. We try to avoid redundancy, overly pedantic style, pejorative terminology, over-use of professional jargon. Language and content should reflect logical coherence not to be too oral in style if it has been delivered as a conference paper. We try to avoid controversial and polemical issues in writing, for our journal has very limited space to share.

- We appreciate carefully documented notes and references based on research.
- Length: about 12 double-spaced, typewritten pages (about 3000 words). If possible, submit your article on computer disk—preferably IBM.
- The Editorial Committee of the Journal will examine the manuscript. We regret that we are unable to provide a monetary honorarium. We will send you five copies of the issue in which your article appears.

We also encourage you to contribute to our "Mission Observer" section of the journal: about 500 words, preferably one thematic thought or accent in a brief presentation. All writings should include a brief biographical note.

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