

Do we need to rethink our roles in the Church?

A huge hurdle we face in growing and strengthening our churches is changing the paradigm we have for the role of the laity in the church. We have churches without clergy simply waiting for a priest or pastor. We have churches with clergy measuring their progress in terms of what the priest or pastor does. More than one parishioner has told me, "We can't start a Bible study or prayer group without clergy." I ask them, why not?

"Ordained" simply means appointed; each of us is *called* by Jesus to be his disciple. Jesus calls all people to take up their cross and follow him (Luke 9:23-25), putting Jesus first (Luke 14:25-35), loving others (John 13:34-36), making disciples (Matthew 28:19-20) and abiding in him (John 15:1-9). Early church members took this seriously: "Because these people knew they had been called and commissioned by their Lord to carry on his loving service in the world, they had big, pressing questions. They were driven to ask 'Who are we in relationship to those around us? To whom are we sent?'"¹ Too often, we leave these questions – and even more so, the mission work itself – to the ordained.

When we ignore our gifts and calling, we diminish the body of Christ. When we share our gifts, we build up the body of Christ (Ephesians 4:11-13). Are you getting the practical help you need in church to discover your spiritual gifts and to develop an appropriate ministry? Are lay people in your church fully involved or do they tend to leave the priest with most of the responsibility for building up the church?

I see too much of the pastor centered consumer mentality in churches described by Christian A. Schwarz. The priest or pastor is idealized as a "speaker, counselor, academic, public relations specialist, organizer, social worker, evangelist, master of ceremonies, teacher and competent at everything else, except perhaps walking on water" and is thereby condemned to mediocrity and ineffectiveness because he or she is not gifted in all these areas. Schwarz reminds readers both that the Reformation criticized the view of priests as especially holy because of their positions as sacramentalists and that priests are not spiritual gurus simply by virtue of their positions as leaders.²

Our priests and pastors have special gifts (as each of us do) and we need to discover them and share them in the body of Christ. No spiritual gifts are exclusive to clergy and no clergy person has all of the gifts needed in the body of Christ. Lay members are not simply helpers to the priest or pastor who cannot do all of the tasks a priest "should" perform. We need to celebrate each other's particular gifts and support each other with the diversity of our gifts.

Ministry in a congregation is collaborative. Lay people are responsible for nearly all aspects of church life other than the sacraments.³ Both lay and clergy leaders need to ask whether the work of the Church is getting done, how is it getting done, and what is each person's role?

¹ Loren B. Mead, The Once and Future Church: Reinventing the Congregation for a New Mission Frontier (Washington D.C: The Alban Institute, 1991) at 10.

² Paradigm Shift in the Church: How Natural Church Development can Transform Theological Thinking (Carol Stream, IL: ChurchSmart Resources, 1999) at 178-179.

³ The Episcopal Catechism in the Book of Common Prayer states that: "The ministers of the Church are lay persons, bishops, priests and deacons," listing lay people first among the ministers of the church.

Lay leaders need to take on significant responsibility for leading and performing this shared ministry.

Lay people may not want this significant responsibility for evangelism, for forming disciples, for pastoral care and outreach, for stewardship, for oversight, for building up the church. But our involvement will reap significant rewards. Dennis G. Campbell tells of a time when he asked parishioners to list his functions as their priest. Four pages into the list, a "saint" remarked that it would be impossible for anyone to do everything listed. Dennis replied, "Yes, it is impossible, and that is why we need everyone to minister. I can't even oversee all of this ministry alone. That's why there have to be some of you who are willing to serve as leaders and share that responsibility."⁴ Adopting a paradigm of strong lay involvement in ministry became a turning point in the congregation: "It was a pivotal moment in our life together when, as a congregation, we learned a new understanding of what ministry can and should be."⁵

The issue of clergy centered churches is not new. St. Augustine wrote, "What I am for you appalls me. What I am with you consoles me. For you I am a bishop, with you I am a Christian."⁶ Shifting the paradigm to support a more involved laity is critical because more disciples can more effectively help Jesus make more disciples.

⁴ [Congregations as Learning Communities: Tools for Shaping Your Future](#) (The Alban Institute, 2000) at 10.

⁵ Campbell at 11.

⁶ St. Augustine, Sermon 340.