

PASTORS AND LAYPEOPLE IN PARTNERSHIP TO ADVANCE CHRIST'S KINGDOM

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Americans do not like their jobs. 65% of American workers are frustrated and unfulfilled and want to quit.¹ This job dissatisfaction is not an outcome of a struggling economy. It is a two-decade downward drift. Not surprisingly, survey data suggests that more and more Americans are struggling to manage credit, diet, alcohol consumption, internet images, and depression. May we deduce that unhappy American workers are self-medicating? Why this widespread discontent? Is it really meaningful vocations Americans lack . . . or purposeful lives?

You are reading this essay in anticipation of a gathering at Wisconsin Lutheran College that will allow us to discuss our job. Yes, the singular—job—was intentional. We will evaluate our job performance. We will hear the gospel so that we can do our job with renewed zeal and vigor. We will reflect on the sense of fulfillment and satisfaction that is ours as a result of working this job. We are only going to talk about a job, a single vocation, a particular task—a purpose—that we all share. Who are “we?” What is this particular “job” we are all doing together? What is our partnership of purpose? Listen in to the following conversation. It is by no means a product of a scientific sampling. It is a variation on a conversation I have heard—been part of—many times. Listen in:

Lay Member to Pastor: “Saturday in the church basement to learn how to do friendship evangelism? How do I say this, Pastor? I’m not feeling it. I work all week . . . fifty hours or more. When I get a rare free Saturday, I need to take care of personal matters and family responsibilities. Besides, my friends are not interested in our church, and I am not in a position at my job to risk evangelizing co-workers. Besides, getting into people’s business like that just isn’t my style. And I didn’t study to be a preacher. You are the preacher. I got all I can handle with life. Volunteer activities don’t fit into my schedule.”

¹<http://www.conference-board.org/publications/publicationdetail.cfm?publicationid=1727>. Other surveys indicate as high as 80% of American workers are not happy with their jobs.

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Pastor to Lay Member: "I was hoping, Lay Member, that you would set a good example for our younger members. Folks just slide in and slip out for a worship hour. That is our whole deal. There is nothing going on at our church except for sixty minutes on Sunday. We need people to step up. Attendance and offerings are down. I need to start delegating things so I have more time for outreach. To tell you the truth, I would rather just do the outreach. Training and monitoring evangelists to make sure they don't mess up takes a ton of time. (Sigh.) Whatever."

The "partnership" between this hypothetical layman and his pastor was sealed in self-pity and has paid off in disappointment. Neither sees a future in their partnership. Neither has expressed any joy or satisfaction in what they do on their own or together. People do not resign themselves to life's purpose. These guys have just resigned. Are these two workers candidates for self-medication?

Our Mouth Speaks

Here comes a new conversation. This is one that the apostle Paul wants to have with all of us:

⁸But what does it say? "The word is near you; it is in your mouth and in your heart," that is, the word of faith we are proclaiming: ⁹That if you confess with your mouth, "Jesus is Lord," and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. ¹⁰For it is with your heart that you believe and are justified, and it is with your mouth that you confess and are saved. ¹¹As the Scripture says, "Anyone who trusts in him will never be put to shame." ¹²For there is no difference between Jew and Gentile—the same Lord is Lord of all and richly blesses all who call on him, ¹³for, "Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved." Romans 10:13²

The Spirit through Paul is indeed intending to have a word with us. The Spirit wants a word with us who are laypeople and with us who are pastors. He has a word, actually, for all of us who believe in Jesus: Speak the fullness of your heart. Confess your Savior. Proclaim the gospel! There are two things in this word from Paul's inspired pen that are absolutely true for us and about us. First, be certain that everyone who calls on the name of Jesus will be saved. It does not matter who you are or what you have done. Calling on the name of the Lord for rescue, for forgiveness, for deliverance from death and hell will absolutely result in the certain salvation of your soul! Secondly, be certain also of this that if our heart trusts in Jesus, our mouth will talk about Jesus. Paul does not say that a believer's mouth could

²All quotations from the Bible come from *The Holy Bible: New International Version*, electronic ed. Grand Rapids : Zondervan, 1996, © 1984

speak of Jesus or should speak of Jesus or given the right training and enough easy opportunities might speak of Jesus. Paul simply states that which is always true: Every person whose heart has been filled with Jesus also has a mouth that must tell others about Jesus.

Paul wants to talk about Christian hearts and Christian mouths . . . and Christian feet. They are connected:

¹⁴How, then, can they call on the one they have not believed in? And how can they believe in the one of whom they have not heard? And how can they hear without someone preaching to them? ¹⁵And how can they preach unless they are sent? As it is written, "How beautiful are the feet of those who bring good news!" . . . ¹⁷Consequently, faith comes from hearing the message, and the message is heard through the word of Christ. Romans 10:14-15,17

Listen to Paul's word to us! When God leads us to call on Jesus' name for eternal rescue, he also leads us to proclaim the good news about Jesus to others. God fills our heart with faith and trust and love for Jesus. This act of God's grace, this heart-filling results in our mouth speaking and then gets our feet moving to mobilize a local implementation of God's universal mission to bring all people into his kingdom of believers. The new creation in us—that New Man born in us when we are washed in baptism or converted by the Word (1 Peter 1:23, Titus 3:5)—must proclaim the gospel. The New Man in us—in every Christian—is a proclaimer of the gospel. It is our New Man's strongest impulse. The New Man compels us—every one of us—to express the fullness of our hearts. This compulsion is not the result of fear or some external threat. The compulsion comes from knowing and being changed by the love of Jesus (2 Corinthians 5:14).

But There is War Within

But there is a warring impulse within us. Next to our New Man who loves to share the gospel is our rebellious Old Adam who can say no good thing to anyone about anything. I am one Christian person but within me dwell—war—both the New Man and the Old Adam. The Old Adam rejects all of God's will and certainly God's will that calls us to be a witness and evangelist. So there are in us two contrary impulses. These two starkly different voices both demand attention and vie for obedience. Would that it would be true that we Christians would always listen to our New Man. Too often, the Old Adam in us wins the war. We are too easily influenced by this Old Adam. Our Old Adam has allies. Satan of course seeks constantly whom he may devour with sly temptations. The world's siren voice offers power, prestige, comfort, pleasures, riches, and glory. We are too willing to entertain these visitors of darkness. So we Christians must hear often that our God wants to own our identity. He has indeed made us to be his

witnesses. God has given to all of us the job, the task, the high purpose of being proclaimers of his gospel.

Does our conversation reflect that we do in fact know who we are? Are we proclaiming the gospel or are we firing off excuses? Are we telling others about Jesus or are we politely “not dipping” into people’s business? Are we fulfilling our purpose or are we too busy pursuing our own short-sighted, materialistic, self-centered goals? Here comes another word from God. Hear this: If our mouths are not proclaiming the gospel, our hearts have evicted Christ. Christless hearts are without God and against God in this world. If we are not imploring others on Christ’s behalf to be reconciled to Christ, then somebody better hurry up and implore us to be reconciled to Christ. God does not re-create us (2 Corinthians 5:17) and then ask us to *consider* pleading to the world on Christ’s behalf to be reconciled. God does not change our nature and then wait for us to *find time* in our schedule to be his witnesses. God made us to be his people who proclaim his glory in and to the world. If we are not doing and being what God re-created us to do and be, we are living in open rebellion against him. Brothers and sisters, our arms are too short to box with God. We will lose.

Compare how much proclaiming comes out of us to the amount of proclaiming God requires of us. This comparison will reveal that we have journeyed long past failure and are exploring a path to hell. Yes we do desire to go to our neighbor with our witness. But like Nicodemus, we cannot escape the cover of night. We want to be like Stephen who gave his life confessing Christ. But we are afraid. We see that the *status quo*—the way things have always been—is hurting more people than it is helping. We are not comfortable exactly with the way things are. But change requires courage and focus and determination and hard work . . . and we are too busy to add to our schedules volunteering for the kingdom of God. Our heart aches because we know that we are not just refusing to speak of Jesus. We are refusing Jesus.

Christ Our Sacrifice and Royal High Priest

Jesus was tight-lipped once. His motivation was different from ours. Jesus was tight-lipped not to stay out of trouble but rather to not extricate himself from trouble. Our trouble. The trouble that we deserve. He was silent for us so that he would not be interrupted in his journey to rescue us. As a lamb is silent before the shearer, so God’s Lamb was silent and did not open his mouth though weak and evil men were leading him to his “slaughter” (Isaiah 53:7). Jesus was God’s Lamb, the sacrifice chosen by the Father to atone for our rebellion and to pay the bitter price for our silence. Here is for us a message from the glorious God of the universe who left his throne in heaven to be born of a humble woman in the tiny town of Bethlehem.

This message is from our God who would not allow our sin to separate us from him. So he came to us. God's love for you will stop at nothing to rescue you.

⁴Surely he took up our infirmities and carried our sorrows . . . ⁵But he was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was upon him, and by his wounds we are healed . . . ⁶We all, like sheep, have gone astray, each of us has turned to his own way; and the LORD has laid on him the iniquity of us all . . . ⁹He was assigned a grave with the wicked, and with the rich in his death, though he had done no violence, nor was any deceit in his mouth. ¹⁰Yet it was the LORD's will to crush him and cause him to suffer, and though the LORD makes his life a guilt offering, he will see his offspring and prolong his days, and the will of the LORD will prosper in his hand . . . ¹²Therefore I will give him a portion among the great, and he will divide the spoils with the strong, because he poured out his life unto death, and was numbered with the transgressors. For he bore the sin of many, and made intercession for the transgressors (Isaiah 53:4-6,9-10,12).

We are Co-Priests and Co-Kings With Christ

The Father sent his Son to be the Lamb to be sacrificed on the altar of the cross. The Father chose his Son to be the royal High Priest to present to his Father the only sacrifice that could atone for our failures. This is an amazing word from God! The Father accepted Jesus' sacrifice. The Father accepts us. We are by this blood of Jesus perfect in his sight. The Father has brought us into his eternal family and he will not reject us. He will never deny us. By our baptism, we have been reborn into a family of kings and priests! We reign. And we proclaim. Could there be a more awe-inspiring expression of grace than this word from God that lavishes upon us the status of co-kings, co-priests, and co-heirs of the universe with Jesus?

One of the apostle Peter's objectives in writing his word for us in his first epistle was to strengthen in us our identity and purpose and function as co-kings and co-priests of Jesus. Embrace the person whom God made you to be and what he has given you to do. Embrace your identity in Jesus and your job as a proclaimer of Jesus. Embrace this word for you from Peter:

⁴As you come to him, the living Stone—rejected by men but chosen by God and precious to him—⁵you also, like living stones, are being built into a spiritual house to be a holy priesthood, offering spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ. ⁶For in Scripture it says: "See, I lay a stone in Zion, a chosen and precious cornerstone, and the one who trusts in him will never be put to shame." ⁷Now to you who believe, this stone is precious. But to

those who do not believe, "The stone the builders rejected has become the capstone,"⁸ and, "A stone that causes men to stumble and a rock that makes them fall." They stumble because they disobey the message—which is also what they were destined for.⁹ But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light. 1 Peter 2:4-9

The Spirit of God took possession of Peter's pen so he could ascribe to you this glorious **title**: You are God's house! The living Stone brought you to himself through the Spirit and hewed you into living stones which he joined together to be his spiritual house. Jesus is the Cornerstone of your house. You are therefore an eternal and enduring house because not even Satan can destroy your house (Matthew 16:18). Christ is the faithful Son over your house (Hebrews 3:6). Christ controls the entire universe to direct blessings upon you, his house (Ephesians 2:21). You are a holy house (1 Corinthians 3:17). God dwells in your house (Ephesians 2:22). Christ fills your house (Ephesians 1:23). What more glorious title could we covet than that which has already been given? We are God's perfect, beautiful, holy, eternal house.

The Spirit of God took possession of Peter's pen so he could ascribe to you this glorious **task**: You are God's priests to serve this house! In God's economy of grace, it was just not enough for him to make us a house. God also made us—every one of us—holy, royal priests to serve his house. We serve this house by offering spiritual and acceptable sacrifices. By faith, the Spirit gives us a new birth and a birthright into the family of God's royal High Priest so that we become heirs of everything that our High Priest has and every privileged duty that he does. In our baptism, we become co-kings who rule over all things because we are born of the King. We are co-priests of God's chosen High Priest who have every privilege of a priest because we are born of the High Priest. Luther, whom God used to recover and articulate our identity as members of a universal priesthood, affirms:

Every baptized Christian is a priest already, not by appointment or ordination from the pope or any other man, but because Christ Himself has begotten him as a priest and has given birth to him in Baptism.³

We Christians cannot long reflect on the titles and status God lavished upon us in Christ before we reach Luther's conclusion:

Who then can comprehend the lofty dignity of the Christian? By virtue of his royal power he rules over all things, death, life, and sin and through his priestly glory is omnipotent with God because he does the things which God asks and desires. . . . To this glory a

³LW, Vol. 13, Selected Psalms II, p. 329.

man attains, certainly not by any works of his, but by his faith alone. From this anyone can clearly see how a Christian is free from all things and over all things so that he needs no works to make him righteous and save him, since faith alone abundantly confers all these things.⁴

We Carry Out the Purposes of our Priesthood

What is the task and purpose and “job” of every one of us who are co-priests with Christ? Again, Luther:

Since of ourselves we are nothing but have everything from God, it is easy to see that we can give Him nothing; neither can we repay Him for His grace. He demands nothing from us. The only thing left, therefore, is for us to praise and thank Him. First we must recognize in our hearts and believe that we receive everything from Him and that He is our God. Then out with it, and freely and openly confess this before the world—preach, praise, glorify, and give thanks! This is the real and only worship of God, the true office of the priest, and the finest and most acceptable offering . . . We can give Him nothing, nor does He need what we have; for He has given us all that we have anyway. But He wants to be our God.⁵

What do priests do? They approach God. Adorned by the Holy Spirit in the spotless garments of Christ’s righteousness, we are not only free to enter into God’s presence, we are bold to do so. The writer to the Hebrews encourages us to approach God:

¹⁹Therefore, brothers, since we have confidence to enter the Most Holy Place by the blood of Jesus, ²⁰by a new and living way opened for us through the curtain, that is, his body, ²¹and since we have a great priest over the house of God, ²²let us draw near to God with a sincere heart in full assurance of faith, having our hearts sprinkled to cleanse us from a guilty conscience and having our bodies washed with pure water. ²³Let us hold unswervingly to the hope we profess, for he who promised is faithful (Hebrews 10:19-23).

As co-priests, we are free to enter God’s presence. We do not need a priest (other than Christ, our eternal High Priest) to represent us before God. We are priests ourselves. Though each and every one of us is a priest and does not need a priest, we are still blessed beyond measure to be a priest for each other. In his next sentence, the writer to the Hebrew explains the significance of this blessed job of ours:

²⁴And let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds. ²⁵Let us not give up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but let us encourage one another—and all the more as you see the Day approaching (Hebrews 10:24-25).

⁴LW, Vol. 31, p. 354-356.

⁵LW, Vol. 14, p. 33-34.

Priests proclaim the gospel. Priests offer sacrifices. Priests represent. Priests advocate. Priests teach. Priests offer up prayers on behalf of others, and in our case we say, on behalf of our co-priests. As priests, we are constantly encouraging the priesthood to carry out all of our priestly tasks. By carrying out these priestly tasks, we are also adding to the number of priests by bringing more priests into God's priesthood. This is our job. Nothing is more satisfying and fulfilling than living out the purposes of our priesthood.

What Are the Purposes of our Priesthood?

Do you wonder what this might look like? How does being a priest relate to my being also an electrician or an IT tech or a mother? Where does being a priest fit into my daily life? Consider some case studies from the Bible. While Cain's descendants were busy menacing aboriginal communities with violence and humanistic bravado, Seth's descendants "at that time" began to call upon the name of the LORD (Genesis 4:26). "Calling upon the name of the LORD", and its companion phrase, "building an altar to the LORD," express the public worship practice of Old Testament believers carrying out their identity and purpose as priests. Seth's family built an altar and then gathered around that altar to proclaim God's name and to confess and to offer the sacrifices of praise and thanksgiving. This worship at the altar demonstrated faith and passed on the faith. Seth's family passed on the faith to members in their immediate family. They surely tried to pass on the faith to their disobedient cousins. This is what priests do. They were believers so they were priests doing what priests have always done and will always do.

Abraham built altars and proclaimed God's name in response to God's promises. It is interesting that Moses notes that while Abraham was building these altars, "Canaanites were in the land" (Genesis 12:6). When Abraham moved, he built a new altar. Abraham's altars secured a public worship place where Abraham gave testimony as well as praise. Abraham demonstrated his spiritual leadership by building altars at which he could praise, proclaim, and worship. They did this as a witness to and for the benefit of their fellow citizens. Here we see these Old Testament believer-priests doing what priests do. They proclaimed God's Word!

Moses built an altar to celebrate Joshua's military victory over Amalek (Exodus 17:15). Joshua built an altar on Mount Ebal and read the entire law of Moses "before all the assembly of Israel, and the women, and the little ones, and the sojourners who lived among them" (Joshua 8:35). At these altars, patriarchs and prophets and warriors celebrated and repeated God's Word and promises. This is what believers do privately, in their capacity as individual priests before God and

as co-priests with Christ (i.e., not in a congregational or “public” or representative capacity): They proclaim the Name that saves!

David built an altar in faith in order to bring an end to a plague that was afflicting his people (2 Samuel 24:21). In what was probably an act of superstition or at best an act of desperation to save a military victory, even King Saul finally built his first altar to the LORD (1 Samuel 14:35). When God’s people are in trouble, they do what priests have always done and what we will continue to do. Priests represent and advocate. Priests intercede and seek God’s help for others.

From humble and oppressed farmers to powerful kings, and from homeless sojourners to citizens of walled cities, from conniving shepherds to honored prophets, to honor God for good times or to seek God’s rescue from bad times, God’s people have always done the things that believer-priests do: we intercede, we proclaim God’s saving name, we teach, we offer the sacrifice of thanksgiving and praise. Because we are partners of the gospel we broadcast the gospel’s good news.

The gospel is “good news” that must be published, proclaimed, and broadcast far and wide. In the very first proclamation of the gospel’s good news, God assured Adam and Eve that though the belly-creeping Deceiver would bruise the heel of their Offspring, their Offspring would crush Satan’s head. This was good news for Adam and Eve. Though expelled from paradise, they would not be cast away from God’s presence. They shared this good news of the Savior-Seed with their children! The names that Adam and Eve composed for their children were mini-presentations of God’s good news (Genesis 4:1, 25). In a famous 1911 essay, one of our seminary professors commented on this nature of the gospel in light of God’s first announcement of the gospel (Genesis 3:15) and Seth’s people’s first public celebration and proclamation of that gospel (Genesis 4:26):

Unpreached gospel would be a contradiction in terms. Where there is gospel, it is there as a result of preaching. The Bible is speech . . . Consequently, gospel and preaching are concepts which are as inseparably linked as mother and child. The one implies the other.⁶

Our Partnership with God and Each Other Centers on Preaching the Gospel

This “preaching” and proclaiming of the gospel is the very heart and strength and core of the partnership that people have with God, that believers have with believers, and that lay people have with their pastors. Together we are carrying out the one ministry of God’s church

⁶John Schaller, “The Origin and Development of the New Testament Ministry,” Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary Online Essay File, p. 2.

on earth, namely, proclaiming the gospel of Christ. We do not seek permission to proclaim the gospel; we seek opportunities. We do not seek authorization to broadcast the good news of Jesus. Jesus has already sent us, authorized us, and Great Commissioned us. We have authority because Jesus told us that just as the Father sent him to reveal the glory of the heavenly Father to the world, so also in just this way has Jesus sent us to reveal his glory to the world (John 20:21). We Christians are not in competition with each other. There is too much work to do to worry about competition. Jesus said, "Go and make disciples of *all* nations" (Matthew 28:19). Male or female, young or old, Jew or Gentile, rich or poor, we are all royal priests in Christ who do one job and share one purpose which is to declare the praises of him who called us out of darkness into his wonderful light. In many ways and places, the Scriptures review this truth for us and instruct us in our task:

- Go into all the world and preach the good news to all creation (Mark 16:15).
- Repentance and forgiveness of sins will be preached in his name to all nations, beginning at Jerusalem. You are witnesses of these things (Luke 24:47-48).
- Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive anyone his sins, they are forgiven; if you do not forgive them, they are not forgiven (John 20:22-23).
- You will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth (Acts 1:8).
- Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come! All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation: that God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting men's sins against them. And he has committed to us the message of reconciliation. We are therefore Christ's ambassadors, as though God were making his appeal through us. We implore you on Christ's behalf: Be reconciled to God (2 Corinthians 5:17-20).

God has bestowed a special grace on the Lutheran Church, carved out of the granite of controversy, to be able to offer a clear witness to the world as to what is the task and purpose and job of every Christian and what is the only ministry God gave to his church, namely, the preaching of the gospel.

- The Fifth Article of the Augsburg Confession states, "So that we may obtain this faith (that we are saved by faith alone without merit), the ministry of teaching the gospel and administering the sacraments was instituted. For through the Word and the sacraments as through instruments the Holy Spirit is given, who

effects faith where and when it pleases God in those who hear the gospel . . . ”⁷

- Martin Luther in characteristic directness and simplicity wrote that, “There remains nothing for the office of the ministry or the office of preaching other than this single work, namely, to bestow or to present the gospel which Christ commanded to be preached.”⁸
- In *This We Believe*, our own church body confesses the purpose of God’s church on earth: “We believe that God has given the church and the state their own distinct responsibilities. To the church the Lord has assigned the responsibility of calling sinners to repentance, of proclaiming forgiveness through the cross of Christ, and of encouraging believers in their Christian living. The purpose is to lead the elect of God to eternal salvation through faith in Christ.”⁹
- Then, regarding who exactly in the church has the responsibility to call sinners to repentance and to encourage believers in Christian living, *This We Believe* states: “God has given the means of grace to all believers. All Christians are to declare the praises of him who called them out of darkness into his wonderful light (1 Peter 2:9). In this sense all Christians are ministers, or servants, of the gospel. God wants all Christians to share the message of salvation with other people” (Matthew 28: 19,20; 10:32).¹⁰

It has been our task so far in this paper to show that the core of the partnership that any Christian has with another Christian regardless of vocation or day job or gender or any other demographic distinction is this: by virtue of the Holy Spirit calling us into God’s family of believers, our hearts have been filled with Christ. It follows then that our mouths will speak of Christ. We are all proclaimers of the gospel. We do this daily in formal and informal ways in a wide-ranging array of circumstances. We preach as the need for preaching arises in those circumstances and in a way that is appropriate for those circumstances. We preach respectfully (1 Peter 3:15) and appropriately in the various contexts of our daily life: with our family, on our job, in the various communities that we participate in throughout the day, and, of course, in the context of our congregational life. And this preaching and proclaiming God’s glory will be our job for eternity!

⁷*The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*, Ed. Robert Kolb and Timothy J. Wengert, Fortress Press: Minneapolis, 2000, CA, V:1, p. 41.

⁸LW, Vol. 38, Word and Sacrament IV, *The Private Mass and the Consecration of Priest*, p. 198.

⁹*This We Believe: A Statement of Belief of the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod*, Milwaukee: NPH, 1999, p. 33.

¹⁰*Ibid.*, p. 29.

In heaven—perhaps especially in heaven—we will fulfill our purpose by serving God by singing his praises.

⁹After this I looked and there before me was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, tribe, people and language, standing before the throne and in front of the Lamb. They were wearing white robes and were holding palm branches in their hands. ¹⁰And they cried out in a loud voice: "Salvation belongs to our God, who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb." ¹¹All the angels were standing around the throne and around the elders and the four living creatures. They fell down on their faces before the throne and worshiped God, ¹²saying: "Amen! Praise and glory and wisdom and thanks and honor and power and strength be to our God for ever and ever. Amen!" ¹³Then one of the elders asked me, "These in white robes—who are they, and where did they come from?" ¹⁴I answered, "Sir, you know." And he said, "These are they who have come out of the great tribulation; they have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb. ¹⁵Therefore, "they are before the throne of God and serve him day and night in his temple; and he who sits on the throne will spread his tent over them. ¹⁶Never again will they hunger; never again will they thirst. The sun will not beat upon them, nor any scorching heat. ¹⁷For the Lamb at the center of the throne will be their shepherd; he will lead them to springs of living water. And God will wipe away every tear from their eyes" (Revelation 7:9-17).

Gospel Preaching Allows Many "Forms"

There is one ministry of the church, namely, the preaching of the gospel. In the preceding section of this paper we have been discussing the "private" exercise of this ministry by all God's priests, that is, by all believers. There is also a divinely instituted "public" ministry. This "one public ministry of the Gospel may assume various forms, as circumstances demand."¹¹ The Scriptures give us many examples of "forms" of ministry that were developed by groups of Christians to address specific needs that arose amongst them. In the sixth chapter of Acts, the apostles proposed to the believers in Jerusalem that men be appointed to see to a fair distribution of food to all of the widows. This new form that organized food distribution freed the apostles to focus on preaching and prayer (Acts 6:2). At least two of the men who had been placed into this food distribution form of ministry later appear in the Scriptures carrying out forms of ministry that featured preaching and teaching the gospel. Stephen was doing miracles and signs and refuting synagogue members with his Spirit-given wisdom (Acts 6:8). Philip relocated from Jerusalem to preach the gospel and to

¹¹*Doctrinal Statements of the WELS, 2002*, Milwaukee: NPH. Art II, The Ministry under Theses On the Church and Ministry, p. 50.

perform signs in Samaria (Acts 8:5). From Samaria God sent him to the Ethiopian's chariot (Acts 8:29).¹²

When the believers in Jerusalem heard that many new believers were being gathered around the gospel in Antioch, the church in Jerusalem sent Barnabas to encourage the believers in Antioch and to evangelize more from Antioch (Acts 11:22-24). The apostle Paul saw the need to raise up men who could serve fledgling congregations as elders, overseers, and shepherds.¹³ The congregations agreed that this was a good plan. So they appointed or called men to serve as spiritual leaders of the flocks. God did not command or ordain these as specific forms. The church developed specific forms in order to respond in an orderly and loving way to meet local needs and special circumstances. When the church would call a person to serve in a specific form or position, God through his inspired apostles assured the church that Jesus himself would give the person he wanted to fill that position: "It was he (Christ) who gave some to be apostles, some to be prophets, some to be evangelists, and some to be pastors and teachers" (Ephesians 4:11). God through congregations or groups of Christians calls people to fill the church's ministry forms. This is why we speak of the call as divine.

What do people in these various forms of public ministry do? Though there are today many different forms with varying job descriptions for each form, is there an overarching purpose that describes what these forms do? Paul gives us the purpose for these various forms that the church may describe and define and then calls members from the priesthood to perform:

It was he (Christ) who gave some to be apostles, some to be prophets, some to be evangelists, and some to be pastors and teachers, ¹²to prepare God's people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up ¹³until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ. ¹⁴Then we will no longer be infants, tossed back and forth by the waves, and blown here and there by every wind of teaching and by the cunning and craftiness of men in their deceitful scheming. ¹⁵Instead, speaking the truth in love, we will in all things grow up into him who is the Head, that is, Christ (Ephesians 4:11-15).

These various forms and offices and job descriptions, whether they be called apostles or prophets or pastors or teachers or princi-

¹²We are not told whether a body of believers actually sent Philip out on their behalf, are we? One could argue that Philip's ministry was in the private realm rather than that of a public and called worker.

¹³These three terms may be used to describe different aspects of one and same person filling one form. "Elder" speaks of the man's tested character. "Overseer" speaks to his job description. "Shepherd" describes his heart. Cf. 1 Peter 5:1-4.

pals or preschool administrators or Christian college professors or synodical administrators, are all different ways of carrying out or supporting the one ministry of the church, namely, the preaching of the gospel.

Only a member of the priesthood of all believers can properly serve in these forms of public ministry. But the authority to preach Christ or to forgive or retain sins or to judge doctrine or to teach does not first come from the public form. Authority to proclaim Christ does not first come when someone is installed in a form of public ministry. We all have the authority to preach and teach and forgive and to offer the sacrifices of praise because we have been baptized into the priesthood. We have had this authority since we were baptized into the priesthood. One of our Lutheran elementary school kindergarten teachers preaches the gospel and forgives repentant sinners and withholds forgiveness from the impenitent. Jesus gave her authority to do this when she was baptized into the Christian faith. She did not first receive authority to preach and to use the Keys of the Church from the congregation's call to serve as kindergarten teacher. But the divine call that she has received from a congregation does authorize her to serve a group of priests on their behalf (that is, "publicly"). This group of priests calls a kindergarten teacher and authorizes a kindergarten teacher to preach and teach to their kindergarten children on their behalf.

As members of the universal priesthood, we are servants of Jesus. When we accept the call of Jesus which he extends to us through a local congregation or through another organization or group of Christians, we become also servants of that group to fulfill a job description or a ministry task on their behalf. This call is a call into a ministry that represents other priests. Every Christian, however, has a call as a co-priest of Christ to represent Christ.

This discussion about divine calls through which local congregations or groups of Christians call a member of the universal priesthood to become a worker also of a specific calling group is a discussion both about orderliness and about God's institution. God instituted the public ministry. It is his gift to his church to support his church and to encourage her spiritual maturity. And yet, in what can only be called a further expression of his grace, he has left the arrangement and development of forms to the church. God loves mercy. He also loves order (1 Corinthians 14:33, 40). The church will develop and fill and carry out forms of public ministry in an orderly fashion. God and his believers want order so God and his believers articulate characteristics and qualifications for those who might be called to fill the church's various forms. For order, we submit to and honor "the needed qualifications of those who are to perform publicly

the functions of the ministry.”¹⁴ Here is Luther’s perspective on honoring the qualifications required in forms of ministry that require public preaching and teaching of the assembled priests:

For although we are all priests, this does not mean that all of us can preach, teach and rule. Certain ones of the multitude must be selected and separated for such an office. And he who has such an office is not a priest because of his office but a servant of all the others, who are priests. When he is no longer able to preach and serve, or if he no longer wants to do so, he once more becomes a part of the common multitude of Christians. His office is conveyed to someone else, and he becomes a Christian like any other. This is the way to distinguish between the office of preaching, or the ministry, and the general priesthood of all baptized Christians. The preaching office is no more than a public service which happens to be conferred upon someone by the entire congregation, all the members of which are priests.¹⁵

Though the office of “pastor” and the “congregation” were instituted¹⁶ by God (though not to the exclusion of other forms), God has not commanded the specific forms of the pastoral office or the congregation. The form of the office of pastor has developed through history. The church has chosen to organize in various different styles of congregations depending on the needs and circumstances of Christian groups in different times and in different places. But this in no way diminishes the value of either the office of pastor or the organization of congregation. These are good things because they accomplish God’s purpose to get God’s Word to all nations and to nourish God’s people with his Word. Pastors and Christian lay people are in partnership with each other to carry out the one ministry of the church and to encourage each other individually and as members of a congregation to carry out that ministry.

It is the Holy Spirit who through the gift of their common faith leads the believers to establish the adequate and wholesome forms which fit every circumstance, situation, and need . . . In spite of their great diversity in the external forms of the ministerial work, the ministry is essentially one. The various offices for the public preaching of the Gospel . . . are all gifts of the exalted Christ to His Church which the Church receives gratefully and with due regard for love and order employs under guidance and direction of the

¹⁴Doctrinal Statements of the WELS, 2002, Milwaukee: NPH. Theses on Church and Ministry, p. 49.

¹⁵LW. Vol. 13, p. 232.

¹⁶“Institute” as used here does not mean that God explicitly commanded that there be pastors and congregations or that God established universal guidelines for all pastors and congregations. Rather, we say that pastors and congregations are examples of forms of public ministry that God brought about for the benefit of his church.

Holy Spirit for the upbuilding of the spiritual body of Christ; and all of them are comprehended under the general commission to preach the Gospel given to all believers.¹⁷

A Powerful Partnership With Each Other That is a Blessing To Each Other!

We began this journey by listening in on a hypothetical conversation between an imaginary church member and pastor. It was not an uplifting conversation. The member and the pastor had all but admitted defeat. Their partnership was a fruitless and ineffective fiasco. Can we imagine here amongst us now a more dynamic and forward looking conversation? This is why we will gather at our Christian college that trains Christian lay leaders, is it not? Here is a snippet of a conversation that might better reflect the partnership we will celebrate and assess.

Pastor to Lay Member: We were once not a people. Now we are the people of God! We were once without hope in this world. Now we have life to the full! We were once poor beggars. Now the kingdom is ours. Hey, co-priest of Christ and fellow priest with me, offer your fragrant sacrifices of praise! In season and out of season, let's broadcast God's glory!

The Co-priest: Offer sacrifices? Broadcast glory? That sounds like fun! But "in season and out?" What's the program?

Pastor: This is a kingdom kind of program. The program is whenever you see the opportunity regardless of where you are, proclaim the gospel! When you hear co-workers curse in Christ's name, tell them that you call on that very name to rescue you from God's anger. When your next door neighbor falls ill, deliver some chicken soup with a card promising to keep that neighbor in your prayers to Jesus. When your wife is fearing for your children's future, assure her that your children are also God's dear and precious children. The program may require few words or many scripted exchanges or unexpected chats, intimate dialogues or public presentations. This program will take you to people you know and to people you do not know, to the weak and to the robust, to the burdened and to the privileged. Here is our program: Tell the world what is in your heart. We can do this. We are doing this! Let's do it more and more!

The Co-priest: Let's do it! I see opportunities for this kind of program in my personal life. I also have some thoughts for this kind of program in our congregation. I know others too who want to encourage family members and friends with the gospel. With God's help and a good effort, this work will be blessed!

¹⁷Doctrinal Statements of the WELS, 2002, Milwaukee: NPH. Theses on Church and Ministry, p. 50.

What more appropriate or important task do pastors have than to encourage Jesus' co-priests to do what Jesus himself came to this planet to do (Mark 1:38)? The partnership that pastors have with lay people extends significantly beyond the congregation's property or even our church body's interests. Our partnership with each other seeks to preach the gospel of Jesus to the entire world. We are preaching in our various spheres to add people to the kingdom roster of Jesus. We pastors are not merely or primarily calling people into the true Lutheran faith. We are preaching Christ and imploring everybody to place their faith in Christ so that they can be included in the roster of co-kings and co-priests of Christ.

By God's grace, names will be added to the kingdom's roster. But the gospel that is so sweet in our mouths may at times turn sour in our stomachs (Revelation 10:10). There will be persecution and troubles that arise because we do our job as priests. Though we are co-priests and co-kings with Christ, our victories and trophies and crown will have to wait until the return of Christ. Therefore, we priests who are pastors and we priests who are lay members will encourage each other and stand by each other, and support each other until we can stand together before the glorious Christ who has gone ahead of us to glory. We will be a blessing to each other. Our partnership will be a blessing to God's reputation and glory on earth. Our partnership with each will advance Christ's kingdom in a most compelling and Christ-pleasing way because what defines and characterizes our partnership is love for each other (John 15:17).

Yes, we love our congregation. We are proud of our church body and its unflagging commitment to the unconditional gospel. These will in no wise suffer, however, if we are encouraging each other and equipping each other and praying for each other to preach the gospel to all people everywhere in every circumstance in any appropriate method, formal or informal, prepared or off the cuff, small group or stadium, a short sentence or weekend retreat.

Allow Perplexing Challenges and Tough Questions To Test our Partnership

We do love our congregation. And sometimes, the needs of our congregation require the faithful attention of everybody in our pastor/lay member partnership. A pastor sees sin or disobedience or insensitive behaviors or perhaps even time-honored assumptions about what the local congregation should do. But these assumptions or practices or sins do not serve. Spiritual men and women in a congregation see missed opportunities and souls not served. They see their congregation now adrift or disconnected from its community. Parents and leaders are heartsick because young people are slipping away. Somehow,

there is something about the *status quo* that is hindering our job and complicating our purpose. So the pastor and lay members must now test the strength and vitality of a precious partnership and ask some tough questions:

- First, of course, what cannot change and will not change no matter what?
- But what must change in our midst?
- Why does it need to change?
- Who has to do what to get after this change?
- What is my role in bringing about this change?
- How will we know that the changes we are working for are accomplishing the new future we all desire?

A congregation is an organization. It is also an organism. It changes as it interacts with circumstances and time. Circumstances require a congregation to adapt and to assess and to grow and to respond to what gives glory to God and what will help and encourage God's people. So when something needs to change, who should ask the tough questions? Should the pastor be asking the tough questions? Should the lay members be asking the tough questions? Clearly the only one true theological answer to these questions as drawn from the truth that we are all co-priests and we are all co-kings of Jesus is, "Yes!"

We are all proclaimers of the gospel. It is not about us or our organizations or our forms. It is about broadcasting good news. It is about revealing and sharing and communicating the stunning glory of God to everyone in this world. It is about getting God's kingdom to come amongst us. So when there is anything that is hindering the kingdom from coming forcefully amongst us, we must set ourselves—our concerns and fears and many of our preferences—aside. We are servants of Christ and his kingdom. We are priests with and for him. When presented with a challenge or any need for change, we will respond.

What we may not do in the face of such a challenge is to respond to a challenge by doing nothing. We may not do nothing even if doing something will cause friction and require confrontation. We may not do nothing even if something will test the vitality and integrity of our partnership. The challenges and hurts and issues will vary, but our response must not. The "something" that we co-priests and co-kings and pastors and lay members must do is test our partnership. We must implement the partnership. We priests delight in our partnership most of all when it is put to use for the good of God's kingdom. Our congregation is an important tool for this kingdom. It is entirely likely, therefore, that we will attend a Saturday seminar on friendship

evangelism so we can discuss ways to help others find their way into our congregation's community!

We have been blessed with a job, a purpose, and a partnership—we pastors and lay people—that works to advance Christ's kingdom. The kingdom of Christ is his spiritual rule of faith in the hearts of those who believe in him (Luke 17:20-21). His kingdom are those people who submit to his rule as King, faithfully believing what he has commanded to believe and living as he has commanded to live. When we pray "your kingdom come" in the Lord's Prayer, we are asking God to bless the outcome of our partnership so that "by his grace we believe his holy Word" as Luther explained this petition. But the blessings we seek upon our partnership will far exceed what is already enjoyed among us. We pray in this petition also that God's Word "may find approval and gain followers among other people and advance with power throughout the world."¹⁸ These are truly important and exciting and bold prayers. God has already answered these prayers and will keep answering them every time we pray for his kingdom to come.

We do not need to ask God to make his kingdom come. God's kingdom will come without our asking. But by praying this petition, we ask that God's kingdom "prevail" and "flourish" *among us*. Let us pray that God's kingdom prevails and flourishes among us. Let us pray as though God alone can make this happen among us. But let us also work in our roles as co-kings and co-priests of Jesus Christ as though Christ depended on us to make his kingdom prevail and flourish among us. Let us pray and let us work . . . together. Amen.

¹⁸*The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*, Ed. Robert Kolb and Timothy J. Wengert, Fortress Press: Minneapolis, 2000, LC, The Lord's Prayer, Second Petition, p. 447, 52.