

Baptism and vocation

By Norma Cook Everist

The ministry of the baptized. Ministry begins in baptism. In the service of Holy Baptism in the ELCA we hear, “By water and the Word God delivers us from sin and death and raised us to new life in Jesus Christ.”¹ Ministry is not reserved for some only. People enter “the ministry” through baptism. The ministry of the baptized is sacramental and communal.

Mark’s Gospel dramatically begins with Jesus being baptized by John in the River Jordan. How is our baptism linked to Christ’s baptism? In Mark 10:38, Jesus asked his disciples, “Are you able to drink the cup that I drink, or be baptized with the baptism that I am baptized with?” Jesus was baptized into his ministry of servanthood and ultimately the cross and resurrection. Christian disciples are baptized into Christ for servant ministry. Jesus said, “Whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all. For the Son of Man came not to be served, but to serve ...” (Mark 10:43-45). On the cross, Christ endured the consequence of his own diaconal ministry.² The resurrection of Jesus Christ is the lens through which the church views Jesus’ mission. Jesus uses the word about himself, *diakoneo*, “I am among you as one who serves” (Luke 22:27).

Baptized people go forth from the worshiping assembly to minister in the public world. The Statement of Purpose of the ELCA Constitution begins, “The Church is a people created by God in Christ, empowered by the Holy Spirit, called and sent to bear witness to God’s creative, redeeming, and sanctifying activity in the world.” This includes “standing with the poor and powerless and committing itself to their needs.”³ Baptized people in their ministries in the world and in the church need to be equipped and supported and accountable to God and to the body of believers.

Priesthood of all believers. The word “priesthood” is plural. By God’s grace through faith in Jesus Christ, the Spirit created the priesthood we all share. Scripture proclaims that all Christians are called to be a royal priesthood to proclaim the mighty acts of God who called us out of darkness into light. It is not a matter of who “gets to do” certain things or have certain power. The Spirit’s power is unlimited. If you have more, I do not have less; when I am empowered, you are empowered, too. Ministry is multiplied.

Within the priesthood of all believers, some are called to the ministry of word and sacrament, others to the ministry of word and service. Through the laying on of hands and prayer

¹ See “Holy Baptism,” page 225, *Evangelical Lutheran Worship*.

² The Hanover Report of the Anglican-Lutheran International Commission, *The Diaconate as Ecumenical Opportunity*. (London: Published for the Anglican Consultative Council and the Lutheran World Federation, 1996) anglicancommunion.org/media/102181/the_hanover_report.pdf

³ Constitution of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, Chapter 4. STATEMENT OF PURPOSE download.elca.org/ELCA%20Resource%20Repository/Constitutions_Bylaws_and_Continuing_Resolutions_of_the_ELCA.pdf?_ga=2.225619034.1383802412.1501522557-61500602.1487817069

these people become pastors or deacons.⁴ Theologically educated ministers of word and service are spokespersons for the faith, serving in many diverse ways in the world on behalf of the church and also within the structures of the church. For example: promoters of literacy in the community and also as church teachers, professors, youth workers and directors of education; social workers and counselors and also as parish nurses; ecumenical and interfaith ministers of music and also as church musicians; community organizers for justice and also as administrators of church-related institutions. Ministers of word and service are creative bridge builders in many directions, challenging and supporting the church in its mission.

Because we trust in Christ in whose name we minister, we do not need to fear or be threatened by another person's role. We rejoice with one another, support one another and continue to learn together. We pursue peace, show hospitality and engage in ministries of prophetic servanthood in the church and in the world. Together as baptized people, forgiven people, as the priesthood of all believers, we are called to ministries of reconciliation because those who are oppressed do not need guilt but rather opportunity and justice and new life.

Laos in ministry. *Laos* means people, which means everyone. When we use the English term "laity" which is rooted in "*laos*," the word often takes on the tone of being distinguished from "the clergy." People sometimes say of themselves or others, *only* a layperson, meaning not having the knowledge or authority of a professional. But that is to miss the gifts of all the people and limit the work of the church in the world. All of us are part of the *laos*, the people, including pastors and deacons. And, at the same time, deacons and pastors, theologically trained, have a call to public leadership and to equipping people for ministry. Deacons are not replacing the work of laypeople. Pastors and deacons do not compete with each other.

Even before the ELCA Task Force on Ministry (1988-1993), and even before the ELCA Constitutional Convention in 1997, there was the preparatory work of the Design Task Force on Specific Ministry (1983-84). That task force wrote that mutuality and interdependence should permeate all relationships of the whole people of God and the public ministries of the church. The design put side by side "The Office of Word and Sacrament" for pastoral work and "The Office of Word and Service" for diaconal work. Now we bring to fruition that vision. Nothing need be lost when we see the Spirit at work in one another.

When we think of the church as the body of Christ, we realize we need every member. (Romans 12, I Corinthians 12, Ephesians 4) When we think of the church as a circle, we include everyone and continue to expand that circle. No one need be outside. No one is at the top. When we consider people side by side, rather than as a hierarchy, leaders become partners.

Ministry of the whole people of god. The ministry of the church in the world belongs to all baptized people—to the whole people. Wholeness, however, is not a matter of health or perfection. Christians individually are not totally capable, experienced, wise or well.

⁴ The entrance rite might be "ordination" or "consecration" or "commissioning" but a person is not referred to by the name of the entrance rite, e.g. "the consecrated," "the ordained," "the commissioned," or "the prayed over."

Congregations may be broken in conflict or feel they are “not what they used to be.” In the midst of this reality, Christ continues to heal, grow and include the “whole” body. For example, for people with certain disabilities it is difficult to hear “Please stand” in worship. But together, we can respond liturgically and actually to Evangelical Lutheran Worship’s words, “The assembly stands.” We stand for each other, those who can and those who cannot. In baptism, Christ makes us whole and calls us together to dare to be a diaconal church, serving in a broken, unhealthy and dangerous world.

Throughout the centuries, the church has been tempted to turn away from crises and conflicts it cannot bear to watch, reluctant to claim its diaconal calling. There is something at stake in forgetting—disregarding—those who are poor and marginalizing those who serve on behalf of marginalized people. We are called to remember and to act! Deacons do that.

Still today, in various church bodies, it is hard for people to comprehend what deacons can do with their gifts in their callings. How strange it would be if a biblical body of Christ passage, e.g. 1 Corinthians 12, should read, “You are such a strong arm, I think you should be a leg.” Likewise, how strange for a congregation or committee to say to a deacon candidate, “You seem so gifted; you should become a pastor.” Or, how strange for someone to say to a pastor, “You seem so gifted; you should become a lay person.” Why not catch the vision and support the diverse callings of the whole body of Christ?

Ministry in daily life. Each baptized person has a daily life. Not everything we do is automatically ministry, but everything we do carries the potential for ministry. People need to hear the gospel in terms of their own specific situations in order to be freed for their vocational calling. Otherwise, we would disregard the deep needs of people and the great wounds of the world. Theologian Letty Russell wrote that Jesus did not say to the blind person, “You can walk,” nor to the person who could not walk, “You can see.”⁵ Christ met people in the midst of their lives and asked, “What do you want me to do for you?” Jesus cared about people and also about the societal problems related to human need in the worlds in which they lived.

If the human problem is brokenness, the good news is that Jesus makes us whole. If the human problem is alienation, the good news is God reconciles and restores relationships. If the human problem is guilt, the good news is that God through Jesus Christ forgives. If the human problem is being lost, the good news is that the Good Shepherd looks for and finds the lost. If the human problem is death, the good news is that Jesus Christ has brought new life. If the human problem is judgment, the good news is that in Jesus Christ there is unconditional acceptance. If the human problem is bondage, the good news is that Jesus brings freedom.⁶

Diakonia is not just an add-on to the work of the church, no more than baptism is just a nice little ritual for cute babies. Diakonia is not merely the carrier of the gospel nor offered just so people will be *ready to hear* the gospel. Diakonia is gospel action in daily life. Christ is alive where the people of God are served in Jesus’ name. In this is the real presence of Christ. Our neighbors are everywhere. Luther wrote about our “stations” and “vocations.” We today might

⁵ Letty M. Russell, *Human Liberation in a Feminist Perspective: A Theology* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1974) 53.

⁶ Norma Cook Everist and Craig L. Nesson, *Transforming Leadership: New Vision for a Church in Mission* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2008) 203-204.

think about “stations” as the whole range of roles and relationships of our daily lives and our “vocations” as our calling to minister to the neighbor, whether right next to us and on the other side of the world. Here is the grace of God offered in word and service.

Our vocational calling (our *vocatio*⁷), is rooted in being baptized into the baptism of Jesus, his incarnation, servanthood, cross and resurrection. As people are prepared and called by the church for public ministry, we carefully choose rites, signs and apparel. And we also remember that identity is not in the rite or the role. Our identity is in Christ. We put on Christ. We lay on hands in the name of Christ. We are called by the church to servant leadership in the name of Christ.

Baptized into Christ, we go forth with prophetic boldness in many directions in any and every place in the world. We are dismissed from the worshiping assembly with the words: “Go in peace, serve the Lord; remember the poor; share the good news; Christ is with you.” We are never outside the body of Christ because Christ is already there, on the other side of any wall human beings build. And when we reassemble, we need to ask each other, “Did you?” and talk about it together through life-long educational opportunities. Ministers of word and service are called to be servants in interpreting and meeting needs, hopes and concerns within the church and in the world. In every age, ministers of word and service need to claim their calling in the church and to help the church claim its calling to speak and act in the world.

Question for reflection and discussion

1. Remember your baptism. What does it mean to you that you were baptized into Christ’s ministry of service, serving, tending, healing, reconciling and building bridges of justice? How are we a resurrection people?
2. In what ways and roles are you called to participate in the church’s ministry of service (*diakonia*)?
3. Ponder the deep needs of people and the wounds of the world. How does fully claiming the historic and global office of deacon help our church be in mission?
4. How do you see deacons contributing to the mission and ministry of the church in the world?
5. What might a vocation of diaconal leadership look like (gifts, training, call, duties, symbols, rites)?

⁷ Just as using *laos* instead of “laity” can be useful, so, too, using *vocatio* rather than vocation, since some may not feel included by the term, saying “I don’t have a vocation; I just have a job.” *Vocatio* (vocation) means calling.