

## Reclaiming Our Birthright ~ The Work of the Whole People of God

*Don Engel writes his church...*

Friends in Christ:

Many will remember a time when an ordained minister, the pastor, led the entire service, chanting the Kyrie and Gloria, reading all the lessons, praying the prayers, and distributing both the bread and wine in communion. The people participated by singing the responses and hymns, listening to the lessons, sermon and prayers, and receiving Holy Communion. Lay people who led services could not vest, nor enter the pulpit. From my own experience, I can remember one occasion in which a member of the congregation thanked a lay person for leading the liturgy, but had one criticism: the lay preacher sat in the pastor's chair!

Recent liturgical renewal has led to fuller participation of all the baptized in Holy Communion and in sharing the leadership at worship. Peter writes "But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people, in order that you may proclaim the mighty acts of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light." (1 Peter 2:9)

Increasingly lay people are assuming a greater role in the liturgy. Liturgy (*leitourgia*) as used in the Second Testament means the "public work." *Leitourgia* describes the public work done by the priest for the people in a sacrificial sense and the work or service of the people in response. Frank Senn writes, "Thus, 'leitourgia' describes the high priestly work of Christ as well as the work of the people of God on earth." (*Christian Liturgy*, p. 34.)

Why do lay people not fully participate in the shared leadership of the liturgy? Are clergy usurping the role of the laity? "Usurping" is perhaps a strong word to use in connection with the lack of lay leadership in the Sunday liturgy. And, to be sure, especially since the advent of the Lutheran Book of Worship, clergy have been slowly commending the roles to lay people which are properly theirs. At the same time, lay people may not be very eager to take up the responsibilities of the assisting minister without proper training. More on this below.

The role of the Presiding Minister (P) is clearly indicated and reserved for an ordained minister in Lutheran Book of Worship. This is in keeping with historic and ecumenical practice. The role of Assisting Minister (A), however, is also clearly indicated. The involvement of lay people in leading worship is not an invention introduced with LBW. Hippolytus, in his *Apostolic Tradition*, wrote "The reader is appointed by the bishop's handing to him the book. For he does not have hands laid upon him." Certain parts of the liturgy are appropriately and rightfully led by properly-trained lay people.

This division of labor is the basis for a gracious partnership in the sanctuary whereby the leadership is passed back and forth between the ordained and trained clergy and the trained laity. This partnership teaches and models the work of the whole people of God. The role of the assisting minister is both respected and encouraged whether one assisting minister performs all of the functions or several people share in them.

Our worship contemplates several functions for the assisting minister:

*Praising God as at the Kyrie and Hymn of Praise* The assisting minister sings the parts appropriate to the season. The Kyrie and Hymn of Praise are simple enough to chant. One does not need to be an opera singer to chant the Kyrie. If the assisting minister cannot chant, we may assign this work to a cantor —another lay person— rather than to the presiding minister.

*Proclaiming the community's witness as in the First and Second Lessons* The laity share in the witness and proclamation by reading the First and Second Lessons. The presiding minister then reads the Gospel. This affirms the partnership between lay and clergy in worship and proclamation.

*Interceding for one another as in the Prayers* The Prayers may be composed by the assisting minister. There are many resources for composing the weekly prayers, as, for example, *Sundays and Seasons* from Augsburg Fortress or the newly published *Revised Common Lectionary Prayers* (Augsburg Fortress, Minneapolis, 2002) published by the Consultation on Common Texts. The presiding minister may suggest special petitions and may supply the names of the people who desire to be included in public prayer. (Only proper names may be used in many quarters!) The pastor can also assist the assisting minister in such matters as the pronunciation of proper names, and the like.

*Serving as stewards as at the Offertory Prayer* The assisting minister may receive the offering plates and begin preparing the altar/table for Holy Communion. After the presentation of the bread, wine and money gifts, the assisting minister, as representative of the people, begins the Offertory Prayer. This is a feature unique to the Lutheran expression of the contemporary Eucharistic liturgy.

*Feeding the hungry as in the distribution of the bread and wine* The assisting minister communes the presiding minister and assists the presiding minister in communing the other communion ministers. It is both historically typical and practical for the ministers to commune first, as worshipers approach the table. They draw less attention to themselves than when they commune last with all watching and waiting. Assisting ministers distribute the wine following the presiding minister who generally takes the bread. The theory is that the presiding minister or pastor knows who communes.

*Sending the people out as a blessing as with the Post-Communion Prayer and Dismissal* The presiding minister offers the blessing. Thereafter, the Post-Communion Prayer and Dismissal are spoken by the assisting minister, thus rounding out the gracious partnership in the sanctuary between the clergy and the laity.

Let me offer an important word about the training of lay people for the duties of the assisting minister. I alluded to it above. It is uncomfortable for both the congregation and the assisting minister when the lessons are poorly read or people are not certain of their duties. Proper training of assisting ministers assures that all are confident and comfortable in their duties. It shows care and respect for the congregation's worship!

There are some helpful resources for training assisting ministers: *Assisting Ministers and Readers* by Gerald Spice (Augsburg Fortress, Minneapolis, 2001) and *Assisting Ministers Handbook* (Parish Life Press, Philadelphia, 1986) by Ralph Van Loon, a detailed resource, come to mind. It may be that the Synod worship team or local seminary can assist in offering a workshop for assisting ministers. Since practices vary across the Church, congregations may prepare a brochure to help instruct and remind assisting ministers of their duties. Samples from my own ministry may be viewed at <[www.christlutheranchurch.mb.ca](http://www.christlutheranchurch.mb.ca)>.

In Christ,

Don Engel.



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