

Appendix: The Parish as Place: Principles of Parish Ministry

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This paper is written in the hope that pastors and lay members of the Lutheran church would be helped to understand more clearly their calling to do ministry in, with, and for a particular place. It is an attempt to integrate what it means to manifest Jesus Christ and to participate in the circumstances of all of the people in each place.

This paper avoids speaking of models of ministry that can, presumably, be replicated or transferred from one place to another. Instead, certain principles are identified that can be applied in every place, allowing for the distinctive form most appropriate for particular times and conditions. As a general premise, the mission of God is a given. This paper indicates that the ministry of the church, as it participates in God's mission, should be shaped by the circumstances for each time and place.

This paper was used to inform pastors and lay members of the Lutheran church regarding the stance in ministry that was supported and advocated by the Division for Mission in North America of the former Lutheran Church in America and the Division for Service and Mission of the former American Lutheran Church.

It should be noted that this stance in ministry required the interpretation and support of all parts of the church. Where it had "taken," there was clear evidence of strong leadership on the part of the synodical/district bishop who stated these principles and expects them to be applied. Conversely, money and rhetoric alone did not make them a reality without a consistent commitment on the part of the leaders in the church at all points. The teaching of this

understanding of ministry had to take place in seminaries, internships, the council of bishops, and their staffs—in addition to the day-to-day work of parish ministry.

The reader should be aware that these principles have emerged out of the experience of many pastors and congregations as they have found changing circumstances in urban and rural areas. All can profit by their experience and the examination of the biblical foundations that have informed this understanding of ministry.

Biblical and Historical Background

The church's ministry is rooted in God's Word. The church's ministry is informed and shaped by circumstances in God's world. Ministry is the activity of God's people, the church, participating in God's mission in and for the world.

The following paragraph is a concise summary of truths proclaimed through the testimony of our forebears. It describes the purposes of God as the one who creates all that is and buys it back. The world and all who dwell therein are the object of God's mission.

God, the very one who existed before all else, in Jesus, entered the world, lived in it as a sojourner, and so fully identified with the circumstances of humanity as to become a human. In that way God took on the enemies of the good creation—sin, death, and evil in all of their expressions—and succumbed to their power in order to break their hold on all those who inhabit that place. In doing so, Jesus the Christ became the firstborn of a new creation—a new citizen of a new realm. The church, the community of baptized who have been called, gathered and empowered by the Holy Spirit, is to embody this ministry of Christ in each time and every place as a sign of the new creation.

It is not possible to speak of the church's ministry apart from its purpose for and relationship to a specific place any more than it would be possible to speak of Jesus' ministry without speaking of Jerusalem. The church *in* each place is the church *for* that place. Just as God chose Israel to be a blessing for all nations and just as God appeared in human form for the sake of the world, so the church

exists not for itself but for every hamlet, town, neighborhood, barrio, hollow, country, city, and person.

Currently within the Lutheran church in the United States and in the Caribbean there is a growing need to rediscover the relationship between the ministry of each congregation and the place in which it is located.

While that relationship may be described demographically, sociologically, or historically, this is basically a theological concern. What is the object of each congregation's ministry if it is to be a faithful incarnation of the ministry of Jesus? How can the church be helped to rediscover what it means to be responsible for bearing Christ's ministry to its place?

Perhaps such a rediscovery can begin with understanding the difference between the words "congregation" and "parish." These words are often used interchangeably, thereby revealing the confusion that exists regarding for whom God's mission is intended.

The Bible has a word for this understanding of the creation as the object of God's salvation and justice. In Greek, it is *oikoumene*. This translates, "the whole inhabited earth, the world." In the Greek translation of the psalm, we read, "The Earth is the Lord's and the fulness thereof, the *oikoumene* and they that dwell therein."

In the New Testament we read in Luke's Gospel of Jesus being tempted when "the devil took him up and showed him all the kingdoms of the *oikoumene*." In Matthew's Gospel, the words of Jesus to his disciples about the last days speak of "this gospel of the kingdom will be preached throughout the whole *oikoumene*, as a testimony to all nations and then the end will come."

Originally the meaning was "the inhabited creation." Over the centuries this understanding has changed to the point that the word "ecumenical" has come to refer to relationships within the church. There are historical reasons for this, especially as the church took on the "indelible impress of the political framework" of the Roman Empire. During the ensuing centuries the distinctive nature of the *ekklesia* (church) and the *oikoumene* (inhabited creation) became fused and confused.

The word parish has had an equally interesting evolution. It derives from two Greek words, *para oike*, meaning "dwelling near, neighboring." It is the stance that a congregation takes in a particular

place (parish) when it seeks to incarnate the ministry of Jesus. In the New Testament a “parochial” person is one who lives in a place without the right of citizenship—a sojourner like Jesus. Using the words of Paul, one who is “in but not of” the world. It will serve the church well if the meaning of parish as the “inhabited place” in which the congregation is called to incarnate the ministry of Jesus can be rediscovered.

A congregation is an expression of the church (*ekklesia*). A parish is an expression of the inhabited creation (*oikoumene*). A congregation exists for its parish just as the church exists for the world. A congregation that does not make this distinction clearly runs the risk of seeing its existence as an end in itself—with members spending most, if not all, of their energies to serve one another exclusively rather than ministering to the people in their parish.

Over the past two decades a concerted effort by the Lutheran church to recapture the understanding of the parish as place has resulted in significant renewal of ministry. What follows are fundamental principles of parish ministry that have been rediscovered by experience. They can be applied by any congregation that desires to have its ministry rooted or rerooted in its parish.

Principles of Parish Ministry

1. Parish ministry demonstrates the fullness of God’s mission.
 - The ministry of the congregation is centered in the means of grace exclusively to the church—the Word and the sacraments of Baptism and the Eucharist.
 - The congregation strives to incarnate the ministry of Christ through its programs and to participate in God’s continuing creation through its involvement in the life of the parish.
 - Seen collectively, the ministry of the congregation to the parish demonstrates the proclamation of God’s love for the parish and actions that work for just conditions for all who inhabit that place.
 - The congregation and the pastor consciously seek to incarnate the presence of Christ in the parish by identifying with hopes and struggles of the poor and those who have been marginalized.

2. Parish ministry is geographical and integral to its setting.

- The pastor lives in the parish. The members of the congregation increasingly reside in the parish. They know their neighbors and are directly involved in the institutions of that place.
- The pastor and the congregation are consciously aware of their ministry as a sign, foretaste, and instrument of God's kingdom in relation to the realities of their parish.
- The pastor and the congregation demonstrate in their worship as well as in their public ministries a sense of responsibility and respect for the welfare of all people in the parish.
- The pastor and the congregation participate with others in the parish in community organizations that seek justice and promote well-being for all of the citizens.
- The pastor and the congregation are visible and known by name among others in the parish.
- The pastor and the congregation welcome others not living in the parish and who desire to be a part of the fellowship and ministry of the congregation in this place.

3. Parish ministry is inclusive.

- The congregation's membership increasingly reflects the racial, economic, cultural, and social composition of the people in the parish.
- The pastor and the congregation actively welcome and celebrate the gifts of racial, ethnic, and cultural diversity that come from an inclusive ministry.
- The liturgies of the congregation and other aspects of the congregation's life use the languages and varied cultural traditions of the people from the parish.
- The pastor is assisted and supported by the congregation in becoming equipped to minister in a multicultural setting when the parish reflects this need.

4. Parish ministry is interdependent.

- The pastor and the congregation are fully involved in a relationship of mutual support and accountability with other ministries of the Lutheran church in the area.
- The pastor and the congregation engage in ministry for their parish consciously representing the entire Lutheran church and are aware of its support at all levels.

Appendix: The Parish as Place: Principles of Parish Ministry

- The pastor, as the primary teacher in the congregation, meets regularly with other pastors for study, prayer, consolation, and mutual support.

5. Parish ministry is catholic.

- The pastor and the congregation understand that they share the responsibility of ministry in and for their parish with all other congregations of the one holy catholic apostolic church that are located in the same parish.
- The pastor and the congregation actively seek ways they can demonstrate the unity of the church as together with other congregations they seek to witness to God's saving love in Jesus Christ and to serve and advocate justice for the parish they share.
- Special emphasis is given by the various congregations of the church to efforts that result in empowerment of people for mutual determination about community life within the parish. The church, as one among many institutions in that place, demonstrates its solidarity with the oppressed in that parish in ways that will benefit all.

6. Parish ministry is intentional.

- The pastor makes repeated calls in the homes of parishioners, inviting them to unite in the life and ministry of the congregation. Members of the congregation assist in this effort.
- The pastor and the congregation avoid the development of a "clientele" by assuring that all programs include an invitation into the full blessings of membership in the fellowship of the church and the means of grace.
- The synod/district and churchwide agencies and other local ministries of the Lutheran church make their decisions with respect to how those decisions will affect the ministry of others. Decisions regarding funding, placement of pastors, interns, and other staff should be intentional and informed by the circumstances of the parish.

For additional reading on this subject:

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Harvey S. Peters, Jr.

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