

A THEOLOGY OF THE LAITY

(Talk given by Dr. Herchel H. Sheets at the Augusta District Lay Speakers' School, Warrenton, Georgia, March 19, 1993)

The first part of my assignment here is to try to set forth "a theology of the laity." As I propose to do this, it will involve word studies, definitions, and some tracing of historical developments.

Maybe we had better deal with that word "theology" first. The word comes from two Greek words: "Theos," which means "God," and "logos," which means "word." Theology, then, is words or thoughts about God.

"Laity" comes from the Greek word "laos," which means "the people." So a theology of the laity is thought or belief about the people as related to God or in relationship to God. The question is, "How are we to think of "the people"--specifically, the people of the Church--in light of our understandings of God?"

Part IV of our *Book of Discipline* is basic in any United Methodist response to this question. We read here, for instance, about "the general ministry of all Christian believers," and find such statements as these:

- "God's self-revelation in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ summons the Church to ministry in the world through witness by word and deed in light of the Church's mission."

- "The heart of Christian ministry is Christ's ministry of outreaching love. Christian ministry is the expression of the mind and mission of Christ by a community of Christians that demonstrates a common life of gratitude and devotion, witness and service, celebration and discipleship. All Christians are called to this ministry of servanthood in the world to the glory of God and for human fulfillment."

This idea of "the general ministry of all Christians" explains why the 1992 General Conference passed several amendments to the Constitution of The United Methodist Church which involve substituting the word "clergy" in every place in the Constitution where the word "minister," indicating an ordained person, now occurs. Before these amendments take effect, of course, they have to be voted on by all of the annual conferences and receive a two-thirds affirmative vote of the aggregate number of members of the conferences present and voting. (Note: This was done.) I personally feel that we lose something when we call ordained persons "clergy" rather than "ministers." There is just not the meaning in "clergy" that there is in "minister." But I understand the thinking behind the proposed change. If every Christian is a "minister," we lose something also when we call only a small percentage of Christians "ministers."

Another section of Part IV of The Book of Discipline talks about "representative ministry," about some persons within the Church being called by God to specialized ministries. These, as presently defined, are "diaconal ministers," who are called to "specialized ministries of service, justice, and love within local congregations and in the wider world," and "ordained ministers," who are called to "specialized ministries of Word, Sacrament, and order."

United Methodists, along with other Christians have always believed that theology or doctrine should be founded, based, on Scripture. So let's see if we can discover what light the Scriptures throw on the present stance of The United Methodist Church in regard to the laity, and if we can become clearer in our understanding of the role of laity in the Church and in the purposes of God. We will do this by looking at some words that are pertinent to our subject. We will focus on Greek

words, rather than Hebrew, because Greek is the language of the New Testament.

The first is "laikos," which means "belonging to the people, common." It refers to the uneducated masses. This word is relevant to our study simply because it does not occur in the New Testament. But in the later Church, beginning with Clement near the end of the first century, it came to be used commonly of lay Christians as opposed to ordained Christians.

A second word is "laos," which means "people." When God was seeking through Moses to deliver the Hebrews from Egyptian slavery, he told Moses to assure the Israelites that God was going to set them free. Moses was also to tell them that God had said, "I will take you as my people, and I will be your God" (Exodus 6:7). From that point on, God was forever calling Israel "my people"--not just a few of them, but all of them. Those words run like a refrain throughout the Old Testament, and Israel became known as "the people of God" (Judges 20:2; 2 Samuel 14:13; see also Hebrews 4:9 and 11:25).

Then Christ came and a new community of faith, in continuity with the old one, arose. It was composed of people, and they, too, were called "the people of God" (Greek, "laos of God"). Again, it was not just a few of them, but the whole body, in every place where this community was found, that was called "the laos of God." As in the old community, so in the new one, too, all of the people were expected to serve God. There were no exceptions, no exemptions.

Persons were brought into this special community through Baptism. So Baptism actually became a commissioning service. Those who were baptized became a part of the new "laos of God," and so were expected to live as God's people and to render service in Christ's name. Baptism, among other meanings, was the sign of one's call to ministry.

It was believed that every member was endowed by the Holy Spirit, bestowed in Baptism, for his or her own ministry, and thus was equipped for ministry. It was only later that the idea developed and took root in the Church that "lay" meant "non-professional" and "unqualified."

A third word that is pertinent to our study is "kleros," which means "portion, inheritance, lot, a selected part." It was from this that the words "clerical," "clerk," and "clergy" were derived. But in the Bible "kleros" refers to all of God's people. In the Old Testament, Israel is frequently called "God's portion," "God's possession" (e.g., Deuteronomy 4:20).

In the New Testament, "laos" and "kleros" refer to the same people: The people of the Church. In 1 Peter 5:3 elders are admonished not to lord it over their "kleroi," those within the "inheritance of Christ" for whom they have special responsibility. It was not until late in the second century that the term began to be used of persons in what our *Book of Discipline* today would call "the representative ministry" of the Church. And it was after the Middle Ages, when clergy were almost the only literate persons in the community, that the words "clerical" and "clerk" acquired their present non-ecclesiastical significance. But in the process the words, "clergy," "clergyman," and "clerk in holy orders" were retained to denote ordained persons in the ministry of the Church.

A fourth word we need to consider is "hiereus," which means "priest." Anyone who is familiar with the Old Testament knows the important role played by priests in the worship in the Temple. The underlying concept in worship conducted by the priests was that they were mediators between God and the people. They knew the means to effect God's acts of forgiveness and atonement and to bring people into right relationship with God.

The offering of sacrifices was central in the activity of the priests. But Christians believed that Christ had been both the priest and the sacrifice. No other sacrifice was needed after the Cross, for Christ himself had made the supreme and ultimate sacrifice. So there was no longer any need for priests to present sacrifices to God.

Yet the whole Church was sometimes called "priests" or a "priesthood." There is that marvelous passage, for instance, in 1 Peter 2:9-10: "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. Once you were not a people, but now you are God's people; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy."

But notice that it is not just a few individuals who are called "a royal priesthood" and given these other magnificent titles. It is the Church, the whole body of God's people. And their task is not to offer sacrifices, but to "proclaim the mighty acts of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light." That message is not reserved for proclamation by a select few. All who are in the Church are a part of the "royal priesthood" entrusted with that task, which is both a privilege and a responsibility.

That idea changed though as the Eucharist or Holy Communion came to be interpreted more in sacrificial terms--with the sacrifice of Christ being made again at every celebration of Holy Communion. And by the end of the second century, elders were frequently being called priests. Eventually, that became the common name for those who presided at the Church's worship services and ordered the life of the Church.

It took the Protestant Reformers to restore, at least for a part of the Church, the concept of priesthood for all Christians. They insisted that Holy Communion was not in any way a repetition of the sacrifice once for all offered by Christ, and so they rejected the term "priest" as applied to those set apart for "the representative ministry" of the Church. That is why Methodists and most other Protestants call their pastors "ministers" and not "priests."

But yet we have not discarded the idea of priesthood completely. We have just given it another interpretation, one more in keeping with Peter's view of the whole Church being "a royal priesthood." It is commonly called "the priesthood of believers." Sometimes this has been interpreted to mean that every person is his or her own priest, having direct access to God and not needing anyone to mediate between one and God. That is true, of course, though some of us would not like to place too much emphasis upon our not needing anyone else to represent us before God. But the idea of the priesthood of believers is not just an anti-priest concept. It is an affirmation of the responsibility of every Christian to be a priest in the Petrine sense: "to proclaim the mighty acts of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light", to share the gospel with others, and to come before God in behalf of the people around us. We are all--all of us in the Church--a part of "this royal priesthood."

A fifth word important for our discussion is "diakonos," which means "servant" or "minister." All the way through the Old Testament, persons are called to minister unto the Lord or to serve the Lord. Then Jesus himself said that he came "not to be ministered unto, but to minister," or as modern translations put it, "not to be served but to serve." The word used here is the word "diakonos" in its verb forms. Jesus made it clear, too, that anyone who wished to be his disciple would have to follow his example and be a minister or servant, a "diakonos." The Apostle Paul said that God made him a "diakonos" or minister (Ephesians 3:7), and he frequently used the word "diakonos" in referring to his co-workers.

That word can be appropriately translated either as "minister" or "servant." But whichever English word is used, the idea is that of investment of oneself in behalf of God and in obedience to God.

It is clear that in the early New Testament period every disciple was expected to be a "diakonos." That was not a role reserved for a select few. Every Christian was to be a minister of Christ, a servant of the Lord. In the later New Testament period, that term began to be applied to persons who held a particular office in the Church, but still the idea of servanthood prevailed. A minister was to be what Christ himself had been: A "diakonos," a servant.

Now, where does this bring us? Maybe to the point where we can affirm both the general and the representative ministries of the Church. Our Book of Discipline puts it like this: "There is but one ministry in Christ, but there are diverse gifts and evidence of God's grace in the Body of Christ (Ephesians 4:4-16). The general and representative ministries in The United Methodist Church are complementary. Neither is subservient to the other. Both are summoned and sent by Christ to live and work together in mutual interdependence and to be guided by the Spirit into the truth that frees and the love that reconciles."

Recently I saw a full page advertisement in a magazine which carried this eye-catching headline: "LET'S WIPE OUT ALL THE LAYMEN." The ad was not graphics or pictures but regular text. I don't usually read such advertisements, but I read that one! It began like this: "The church would be a great place if it weren't for the laymen. Compared to ministers, laymen are a feeble lot. They're not as good at witnessing, their commitment level is way lower, and as you know, they're terrible at preaching. So how should we get rid of them? Actually, it won't be as messy as you'd think. It'll be quite simple, in fact. We just promote them all to ministers (which is Scriptural)."

Perhaps some might think that would mean sending them to seminary and making ordained ministers out of them--though they might not call that promoting them! Actually, that course is

attempted rather frequently by perfectly well-meaning persons. They see someone with strong religious interests or qualities that seem to them to be appropriate for ordained ministers, and they say to the person: "Have you ever thought about going into the ministry? You'd make a good minister." And if enough pressure is brought to bear, that person may begin to think that he or she ought to "enter the ministry."

That may be the case. Sometimes God uses others like this to call persons to ordained ministry. But what God really wants may be for that person simply to be a "diakonos" within the "laos," a minister or servant within the people of God.

Does this mean concentrating on "church work"? Does it mean helping the clergy to do what is commonly called "the work of the Church"? That may be part of the calling. There is no question that the New Testament places great store by the Church. It is definitely "ministry," to use Paul's words, to "strive to excel in building up the Church" (1 Corinthians 14:12 - RSV).

There is no question either that the work of the Church is too important to be left in the hands of only a few--even if that few are well-trained clergy. Verna Dozier is a lay person who has a passion for helping lay people to own the ministry to which they were commissioned at their Baptism. She says, "When lay people give religion over to the clergy, it becomes an irrelevant little side issue."

But we've got to be sure that we don't define "religion" or "church" too narrowly. What is the "work of the church"? Where is the sphere for our ministry as Christians?

In his book, *Maximize Your Ministry*, Robert E. Slocum, who is an atomic physicist, tells about a job at which he worked during the summer before his senior year in college. He was accepted in the Summer CO-OP Program of Geophysical Service, Inc., which at that time was the world's largest petroleum exploration company. He says that from his first contact with the company, his imagination was captured by the corporate motto: "The world is your office when you explore for oil with GSI."

Isn't that the sphere of our ministry as Christians? We gather as the Church to worship, to study, to train, to support one another with care and love. And then we go out from the gathered congregation, scattering to our homes and places of daily activity and responsibility, to carry out our ministry, our service for Christ.

That's why Oscar Feucht said, "The Church is not an agency to be served, but a work force to be deployed." When its members are "ministers," what a work force that is!

Another experience Robert Slocum relates is pertinent here. He tells about the pastor of a large congregation calling him and asking if he would speak to his senior staff on the subject of lay ministry. His topic was to be "How to Get the Laity Involved in the Ministry of the Church." A few hours later, the phone rang again and the pastor said he had made an error. What he wanted was a talk on "How to Get the Church Involved in the Ministry of the Laity."

Oh, there's a difference, isn't there? What is "the ministry of the laity"? It involves participation in the life of the gathered congregation, surely. But isn't it also seeking to carry out the ministry of Christ in every place where our lots are cast? At least the spirit of that ministry, as well as some direction for it, is found in these words which Jesus read in the Nazareth synagogue on that Sabbath long ago: "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor" (Luke 4:18-19).

We don't always know what that means and involves, but through it all we need to keep listening to the One who calls us to be ministers, and keep remembering that like our Lord we have come, not to be ministered unto, but to minister, not to be served but to serve.

Washington Gladden put it like this: "O Master, let me walk with thee, in lowly paths of service free."

The Book of Discipline of The United Methodist Church. Nashville: The United Methodist Publishing House, 1992.

The 1996 General Conference made significant changes in the orders of ministry, but I have not included these in this August 2001 edition of this talk.

In the word studies I am especially indebted to *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament*, by William F. Arndt and F. Wilbur Gingrich (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, and Cambridge: The Cambridge University Press, 1952).

Advertisement for "The Open Church," in *Christianity Today*, March 8, 1993, p. 79.

Verna J. Dozier, with Celia A. Hahn, *The Authority of the Laity* (Washington, D.C.: The Alban Institute, Inc., 1982), p. 37.

Robert E. Slocum, *Maximize Your Ministry* (Colorado Springs, Colorado: NAVPRESS, 1990), p. 185.

Oscar Feucht, *Everyone a Minister* (St. Louis: Concordia, 1976), p. 106.

Slocum, op. cit., pp. 169-170.

Opening line of Washington Gladden's hymn, "O Master, Let Me Walk with Thee."

THE AUTHORITY OF THE LAITY

(Talk given by Dr. Herchel H. Sheets at the Augusta District Lay Speakers' School, Warrenton, Georgia, March 19, 1993.)

My assignment now is to talk about the authority of the laity. We need to do some defining of "authority" first. Are we talking about influence? Are we talking about power, control, clout, prestige, pull?

The place or scope of the authority is at issue, too. Are we talking about the structures of the Church, locally and beyond, and asking about the role and influence of the laity in those structures?

I have been impressed in recent years by what I perceive to be an increasing desire on the part of lay persons to have a stronger voice in the governing of the Church, at all levels. This desire is to be commended and encouraged unless its aim is to gain power and control. Is that what we mean by "the authority of the laity"? Are we talking about power in the Church, control, clout, weight, rule?

I am not naïve enough to think that such desires and forces are absent from the Church. I've had too much experience of the Church to be that gullible. But I also know that selfish concern for power and influence—even though under the guise of working for the good of the Church—is detrimental to the Church's mission and ministry.

Some years ago, journalist Joe McGinnis went on a search for heroes. He interviewed a large number of persons he thought might qualify for that classification. One of these was Jesuit priest Daniel Berrigan, who had been a leader of the antiwar protesters during the Vietnam War. In their conversation, Berrigan was talking about contemporary spiritual desolation, and McGinnis asked, "But don't you think God can still save us? I mean, isn't God the ultimate hero?" Berrigan laughed as he replied, "God the ultimate hero? Man, I don't know where you get your ideas. If he's anything, God is the ultimate servant."

I think Berrigan was right. He was right if God is like Jesus,. Remember that Jesus said he did not come to be served but to serve. With all of our thinking about authority, we must never lose sight of that truth. We are dealing with ministry, with serving in the name of Christ, and concern for control and power, for the sake of control and power, can have no place in that kind of ministry.

Jesus told us that, you recall. When two of his disciples came to him and asked for the chief places in his kingdom, and when the rest of the disciples heard about this and became angry with James and John, Jesus said to them all: "You know that among the Gentiles those whom they recognize as their rulers lord it over them, and their great ones are tyrants over them. But it is not so among you; but 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, and to give his life a ransom for many" (Mark 10:35-45).

God the ultimate hero? No, God is the ultimate servant, and we who would be God's ministers--lay, ordained, and diaconal--must never forget that.

We're talking then about authority within "the laos (the people) of God," about authority of persons whose role is that of a "diakonos," a minister, a servant. Pride of place, enjoyment of power, concern with control is inappropriate for a diakonos of God.

Let me, then, not talk so much about power and control as about source, foundation, cause, reason for the authority of the laity. What are the sources, the bases, of the authority of the laity?

For one thing, there is the authority of numbers. Ninety-eight per cent or more of the members of the Church are laity. No wonder Verna J. Dozier said that when lay people give religion over to the clergy, it becomes "an irrelevant little side issue."

The Church is not going to win very many battles against evil, for instance, unless the lay persons get into the battle. The clergy are important, but there are too few of them to carry the day on the big issues of our times. There is some power in numbers, and that is part of the authority of the laity: There are lots of them.

Someone has used the analogy of a football game in this regard. What you have there, it is said, are twenty-two people on the field in desperate need of rest, and fifty thousand people in the stands in desperate need of exercise! It wouldn't work in a football game, but it would work in the Church if the people in the stands would get onto the field and join in the action.

The authority of numbers—that's part of the authority of the laity.

A second part of the authority of the laity is the authority of presence. Where is the real ministry of the Church to be carried on? It is not within the walls of the church building. That is where the Church prepares itself for its ministry. The place where it carries out its ministry is out in the world, and that is where the lay people are.

Historian and United Methodist minister Edward E. Roslof, in an analysis of the situation of the Orthodox Church in post communist Russia, says that the authority of this dominant Church in Russia is declining. He quotes lay church activists in St. Petersburg as saying that its authority is declining because the Church has not found an authentic appropriate form of existence outside the church buildings.

If the Church's mission is outside the church building, part of the authority of the laity is the fact that they are present there; that is where they live.

It is interesting to me that many business and civic organizations talk today about their "mission." They even write "mission statements." That's language taken over from the Church. The Church has always believed that it had a mission, indeed that it was here for mission.

Recently I read a fine book by Robert Coles on *The Spiritual Life of Children*. At one point in the book he recalls that Soren Kierkegaard, the nineteenth century Danish philosopher and theologian, talked about there being a qualitative difference between a genius and an apostle. Kierkegaard said that a genius is pursuing an intellectual or aesthetic inquiry, while an apostle is on an errand. The apostle has been sent, and so has an errand to carry out, a job to do.

That's the case with all of us who are a part of the Church. We are on an errand, a mission, and lay people are present where the mission is to be carried out. That gives them the authority of presence.

Lay persons also have the authority of confirmation of the gospel. Nearly a generation ago, Dr. J.B. Phillips wrote a book that he called, *The Ring of Truth*. He had earlier become known on both sides of the Atlantic because of his translation of the New Testament into colloquial English. He wrote about "the ring of truth" which he had heard in the Scriptures, and of how this truth had been confirmed in his own mind and heart.

That is what people who have never accepted the gospel want to know about it. Does it have the ring of truth in it, and is there anyone who can vouch for that? Is there anyone who knows in his or her own experience that the gospel is true? Has anyone who lives in the same world I live in

had its truth confirmed in his or her life?

People expect clergy and other professional workers in the Church to be advocates of the faith they profess. So they are much more impressed by the testimony of lay persons whose lives confirm the truth of their witness.

If the gospel has been confirmed in your own life, then you have authority for your ministry. It's the authority of the confirmation of the gospel.

Another part of the authority of the laity is the authority of a Divine commission.

The 1988 General Conference of The United Methodist Church called for a special study of Baptism to be made. A committee was set up to do the study and to present its findings to the 1992 General Conference. As that study proceeded and as the committee's thoughts and suggestions began to be known through the Church, the reactions were such that the committee itself decided that the General Conference should not be asked to adopt the study document, but rather to present it to the whole Church for study during the next quadrennium. The committee saw what some of us have known for a long time, that there is so much fuzzy, confused, thinking about Baptism in the Church.

Actually, there are numerous meanings in Baptism. That is not a subject for us to pursue now, but I do want us to note that from the earliest days of the Christian movement, Baptism was seen and understood as a commissioning service. Persons who had never been baptized did not have any obligations to engage in ministry in the name of Christ. But those who had been baptized did. By their Baptism they had been claimed for God and had been commissioned to be in ministry, in service, for Jesus Christ.

If someone raises the question of whether or not the baptism of an infant includes that child's commission to be in ministry, my answer is that it does. For the moment, the child is not able to be about that mission in any conscious way, but the child's parents or sponsors and the Church can be in mission for that child. Then in the act of confirmation or public confession of faith, the child, now become a youth or adult, accepts for himself or herself the Divine commission given in Baptism.

All of us who are members of the Church have received this commission. God has called us to be ministers, servants of Christ. Paul said, "I was made a minister, according to the gift of God's grace" (Ephesians 3:7 – RSV). That is an affirmation every member of the Church can make. We were made ministers or servants by our Baptism. We have the authority of a Divine commission.

Laity likewise have the authority of special gifts. One of the historic questions, formulated by John Wesley himself, to be asked about persons seeking to enter the representative ministry of the Church is, Does this person have the "gifts and graces" that are needed in this ministry? Pastor-Parish Relations Committees are supposed to consider that very carefully before they recommend a person for diaconal or ordained ministry. Other screening and examining bodies, likewise, are to look for the answer to that question. If it is seen that the person does not have the needed "gifts and graces," he or she is to be asked to continue in the general ministry of the Church.

But that is not to say that "gifts and graces" are not needed for the general ministry. Both in the service of the Church and in the Church's ministry in the world, various tasks require particular gifts. As a pastor, I've generally worked with the philosophy that there is always someone who can do what God wants this church to do at this point in time. So I've often kept looking and asking until that person was finally found.

Incidentally, Lyle Schaller says that in the average church, 5% of the church members will be active leaders; 20% will be willing workers; 25% can be persuaded to accept major responsibilities on a one time only basis; and 50% will passively watch the others lead and work. But Schaller says that if the 50% who are actively involved should suddenly disappear, the same percentages of the remaining number will emerge as leaders and workers. And he says that the smaller the church, the easier it is to raise the percentages of actively involved members.

Douglas W. Johnson, Director of Research for the General Board of Global Ministries of The United Methodist Church, did extensive research several years ago on what makes vital congregations. In a section of his book, *Vitality Means Church Growth*, he wrote about the characteristics of effective lay leaders, highlighting three characteristics. He said that effective lay leaders

- have positive attitudes about life and about the Church;
- are conscientious about the jobs they assume in the Church;
- and work continually at spiritual development.

If you have people with those qualities, you have a head-start to begin with!

But the New Testament says a lot about gifts for ministry. Paul, for instance, wrote to the Romans (see 12:4-6): "We have gifts that differ according to the grace given to us." To the Corinthians he said, "Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit; and there are varieties of services, but the same Lord; and there are varieties of activities, but it is the same God who activates all of them in everyone. To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good" (see 1 Corinthians 12).

Paul apparently believed that the Spirit does the empowering for the ministries to which God calls persons. God does not call us to tasks for which the Spirit does not equip us. Sometimes we may attempt ministries to which God has not called us, or we may not do our part in preparing to be in ministry. But if we are cooperating with God and are in clear communication with God, we have the authority of spiritual equipping for the ministry.

Let me mention one other source of the authority of the laity: **It is the authority of Divine trust.** God has called us, and God is trusting us to be faithful in ministry.

Calvin C. Ratz wrote an article once in the journal, *Leadership*, under the title, "The Velcro Church." The subtitle was, "How to Help New Adherents Adhere—Here." Not a bad topic, and not a bad task for a church: How to get people to stick, to stay, to be faithful. A "velcro church" helps, a church that sticks, that stays in ministry, on the job.

Several years ago, Philip Yancey wrote a book about *Disappointment with God*. He said that the defects of the Church cost God dearly. "The watching world," he said, "judges God by those who carry his name. A large measure of disappointment with God stems from disillusionment with other Christians." Then he quoted Dorothy Sayers as saying that God had undergone three great humiliations in seeking to rescue the human race. The first was the Incarnation, when God took on the confines of a physical body. The second was the Cross, when God suffered the ignominy of public execution. The third humiliation, Sayers said, is the Church, for in an awesome act of self-denial, God entrusted his reputation to ordinary people.

The laos of God, each called and all together called to be a diakonos, a minister, a servant. And God is trusting us to be faithful. Our ministry is a ministry put into our hands by God, and God is expecting us, trusting us, to carry out our mission. If that doesn't give us authority, I don't know

what does!

Thomas Gillespie contends that renewal and revolution will take place in the Church "if the 'nonclergy' are willing to move up, if the 'clergy' are willing to move over, and if all God's people are willing to move out." May God help us, one and all, to be willing.

Joe McGinnis, *Heroes* (New York: Simon & Schuster, Touchstone edition, 1976, 1990), pp. 79-80.

Verna J. Dozier, with Celia A. Hahn, *The Authority of the Laity* (Washington, D.C.: The Alban Institute, Inc., 1982), p. 37.

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IF I WERE A LOCAL CHURCH LAY LEADER

(Talk given by Dr. Herchel H. Sheets at a gathering of Local Church Lay Leaders and Pastors of the LaGrange District, North Georgia Conference, at the First United Methodist Church, LaGrange, Georgia, on January 28, 1992)

"If I Were A Local Church Lay Leader...." I am not, of course, and never will be. I eliminated that possibility years ago when I answered the "call to preach." I trust, however, that I am not being presumptuous in addressing this subject. If I have never been a Lay Leader and have no chance of ever becoming one, what credentials do I have for speaking about it? Maybe that's like a person who has never been a parent telling parents how to raise their children.

But I have known and worked with a lot of Lay Leaders, and I think I know what the position is all about and what a Lay Leader might be and do. So I offer my suggestions for what they may be worth.

First, if I were a Local Church Lay Leader, I would strive to be the best friend and the strongest supporter my pastor had. There is almost unanimous agreement among pastors who have been serving churches for some time now that it is harder to be a pastor today than at any previous time in their experience. The demands on pastors are greater, the expectations are higher, the tasks are more numerous and complex. In addition, in many places the position of pastor is not as highly regarded as it used to be, and our culture itself encourages a critical stance toward persons in places of leadership and authority.

Consequently, many pastors are well acquainted with loneliness, frustration, discouragement and doubt. They need to know that there are persons who care about them, who are interested in them as human beings, and on whose friendship they can count. If I were a Local Church Lay Leader, I would strive to be a good friend to my pastor—without expecting any special attention or considerations from him or her.

Second, if I were a Local Church Lay Leader, I would seek to combine compassion and honesty in my relationships with my pastor. Robert Frost wrote in one of his poems about having a "lover's quarrel with the world." Church members sometimes have quarrels with their church or with their pastor, but those quarrels are not always "lovers' quarrels," because compassion or care is missing from them. The criticism that is given is not offered in the context of caring concern.

On the other hand, persons may care about the pastor, but the pastor can't count on them to be frank and honest with him or her. Rather than risk hurting their pastor's feelings or jeopardizing their relationship with the pastor, they disguise their real feelings; they muffle their critical judgment; they hide the truth from their pastor.

The pastor needs friends; the pastor needs church members who really care about him or her. But friendship calls for honesty, not for dishonesty. Friendship is based on truth, not on falsity. The pastor needs someone who can be counted on to tell him or her the truth--to tell it in love, but to tell it. If I were a Local Church Lay Leader, I would try to combine compassion and honesty in my relationships with my pastor.

Third, if I were a Local Church Lay Leader, I would pray and work for the kind of emotional and spiritual maturity that would deliver me from littleness and pettiness. As a district superintendent, I have been impressed by the frequency with which pettiness gets in the way of working relationships in the church and hampers and obstructs the mission of the church. But I knew that long before I became a district superintendent, for as a pastor I was sometimes the

object of that pettiness and the recipient of the ire and fury of human littleness.

I have told couples in pre-marital counseling that maturity is about as important for their marriage as love is. That may sound heretical, but I have seen too much marital misery caused by immaturity to accept that verdict. And, oh, I've seen a lot of church misery, too, caused by immaturity. Littleness causes more trouble in churches than just about anything else. I remember hearing the late Dr. Claud M. Haynes say once that the biggest department in many churches, emotionally and spiritually speaking, is the kindergarten department!

If I were a Local Church Lay Leader, I would be seeking continually to grow toward the stature of the fullness of Christ, and then my pastor could know that I would never be controlled by littleness and pettiness.

Fourth, if I were a Local Church Lay Leader, I would be careful of my speech. Elie Wiesel tells of an eighteenth century rabbi who was noted for brevity in speaking. His practical advice to preachers was: Make the introduction concise and the conclusion abrupt--with nothing in between.

You may want to suggest that to your pastor! But that's not what I'm talking about. Wiesel is closer to what I have in mind when he says that ancient sages have told us that it takes a person three years to learn how to talk and seventy years to learn how to be silent.

There are times when what a church needs most is silence. Its problems would go away or become less severe or never even arise, if members knew how to control their tongues. Do you know the best thing to do with a rumor? Let it die of neglect.

If I were a Local Church Lay Leader, my pastor could count on my not passing on gossip and rumors that might come my way.

Fifth, if I were a Local Church Lay Leader, I would shun pessimism as if it were a plague. The other day my wife and I were getting into our car after buying some groceries. Nearby a youth was helping an elderly woman to get her groceries to her car. Trying to carry on a conversation with her, he said in a cheerful voice, "It's a beautiful day, isn't it?" She replied, "Yes, but it's going to rain again tomorrow." The beauty of today obscured by the possibility of rain tomorrow!

That attitude may carry over into the church, too, and few things are more detrimental to the health of a church than pessimism. If enough people start believing the worst about the church, the worst may come to pass. Of course, realism has a place, but because it is Christ's church, optimism has a place, too.

Stuart Briscoe has been pastor of Elmbrook Church in Milwaukee, Wisconsin for more than fifteen years. In an interview once he was asked what epitaph he wanted written on his preaching ministry. He answered the question, but then said that his wife had already picked out his epitaph. She considered him to be so laid back that she planned to put on his gravestone, "Here lies Stuart Briscoe. He never anticipated any major difficulty."

That may be going a little too far, but every church needs at least a few people who are positive and affirming in their outlook and attitude. If I were a Local Church Lay Leader, I would try to be that kind of person.

Sixth, if I were a Local Church Lay Leader, I would seek to gain and maintain an overall perspective on the life of my church.

How many times have you heard some activity of your church mentioned and someone said, "I didn't know we were doing that"? The larger the church, the harder it is to know all that is going on, and in some churches if one knows everything that is going on, that may mean that not enough is going on. We expect the pastor to be pretty well acquainted with the life and program of the church. But if the Lay Leader is what that name implies, there is another person, too, who needs to be well acquainted with the life and program of the church. Only if you know the church can you lead the church.

Another aspect of that is that if you see the church in its wholeness, you are in a better position to evaluate it.

I have just read a book entitled, *The Gospel Of Coincidence*. The author of the book plays down God's role in the circumstances of our lives, but yet holds that we are still to pray about our circumstances. Praying about them, he says, is a way of facing up to them, re-evaluating them, getting new ideas about how to deal with them, and changing our attitude about them. He says that the counsel to lay our troubles at the Lord's feet is sound advice, not because God will solve our problems for us, but because when we lay our troubles at God's feet, we can begin to put them in perspective.

Seeing the church whole will do something for our perspective, too. We can put specific things about the church in better perspective when we see the church in its wholeness.

If I were a Local Church Lay Leader, I would try to gain and maintain an overall view of the life and program of my church.

Seventh, if I were a Local Church Lay Leader, I would seek to grow in my knowledge of "the connection" and in my ability to interpret the connection to the people of my congregation.

That term, "the connection," has always been important in Methodism. From the time of John Wesley to our own time, Methodists have been connected to one another--in membership, in structure, in ministry, in mission. Who we are as a church, how we function as a church, is intricately related to our connectional philosophy and system.

There are threats to that sense of connection in our day. Strangely enough, the pull of localism is powerful in spite of the fact that, because of our modern means of communication and transportation, the world is smaller than it has ever been before.

The demand for hands-on experience and for local control, appropriate as these are, may undermine the connection. Even our larger churches can become self-centered, can think that they are self-sufficient, and may want to be independent of and not responsible to anyone or anything else.

But if our connection is destroyed, a large part of our uniqueness as a church will be gone, too. It is through our connection that we are in ministry and mission all across the face of this earth. The connection must not only be preserved, it must be strengthened, too.

If I were a Local Church Lay Leader, I would not leave that task on the local level to the pastor alone. I would share that responsibility with my pastor. I would be learning continually about the district, the annual conference, the jurisdiction, the world Church. I would read and study to become acquainted with the multitude of ways in which we are in mission for Christ all across the earth, and I would learn ways of telling that story and helping the people of my church to thrill with pride and joy in our Church and to respond and share in that mission with gladness and

generosity.

Eighth, if I were a Local Church Lay Leader, I would strive to keep remembering and to help others to keep remembering that the church belongs to God.

What is the church? The church is the people, of course, which means that we are the church. If we are the church, the church doesn't belong to us then. We don't belong to ourselves; we belong to God. The church is God's possession, not ours.

To truly understand and believe this would give us both respect and hope for the church: Respect because if the church belongs to God, it is no insignificant organization; and hope because if the church belongs to God, its future and ultimate destiny is not altogether in our hands.

Dom Helder Camara was Archbishop of Olinda and Recife in northeast Brazil from 1964 to 1985. As pastor to the people of this large and poverty-stricken rural area, he became a spokesman for people everywhere who shared his convictions about truth and justice and freedom from oppression. On speaking tours in Europe, he responded to numerous questions, some of which reflected less respect for and hope in the church than he possessed. In answer to one such question he acknowledged that "the church is not always as lovely and pure, as brave and sincere, as it ought to be." He said that in creating the church the Lord had embraced human weakness, but that in promising never to abandon the church, the Lord had given it a very special strength.

"I'm an old bishop," he said, "and I have enough confidence to ask you never to resign yourself to the weaknesses, the compromises, perhaps even the treachery of the church--nor ever to despair of the Spirit of the Lord, who never ceases to dwell in the church."

If I were a Local Church Lay Leader, I would try to remember and to help others to remember to whom the church belongs.

Maybe that is enough to say. I've not said anything about prayer or Bible study or giving or church attendance. I assume these. I assume being faithful to the Church and upholding it with prayers, presence, gifts, and service. I covet for all of our churches significant numbers of lay people who are faithful to their baptismal covenant and their church membership vows.

But I also covet for each of our churches a Lay Leader with understandings and qualities such as these that I have discussed here. I will never be a Local Church Lay Leader, but if I were one, I would want and try to be that kind of Lay Leader.

In a "Suburban Cowgirls" comic strip scene, this man is wrapped cocoon-fashion in a blanket and is stretched out on his lounge chair in front of the television. A strange looking face is on the television screen, and already two long antenna-like hairs are sticking up on the man's head. His wife, presumably, is sitting on the sofa reading. She turns toward him and says, "It's not your cocooning that worries me, Bob. It's what you might turn into."

If you are not already the kind of Local Church Lay Leader I have described, I pray that you may "turn into" that kind of Lay Leader!

Elie Wiesel, *Somewhere a Master*, translated from the French by Martin Wiesel (New York: Summit Books, copyright 1982 by Elirion Associates, Inc.), p. 166.

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Alfieri Colley, *Suburban Cowgirls*, in *The Atlanta Journal and Constitution*, April 27, 1991, p. E-2; copyright 1991 by Tribune Media Services, Inc.