

Almighty and everlasting God,
by whose Spirit the whole body of the Church is governed and sanctified:
receive our prayers and supplications,
which we offer before you for all people in your holy Church,
that all its members, in their vocation and ministry,
may truly and godly serve you;
through our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. Amen.
*Collect for Good Friday*¹

Greater is he that multiplies the workers than he who does the work
John Raleigh Mott²

This is a reflection on the idea of ministry of the whole people of God in the light of present changes in the paradigm by which the church understands its mission. In *The once and future church*, Loren Mead of the Alban Institute notes a disappearance from the churches of "one clear paradigm of mission". Consensus as to mission has gone. In the period since World War II, the loss of common understanding has meant that a sense of mission no longer has compelling power for churches and church people.³ Mead argues that three things are happening:

- there is a stretching of understanding between the great vision held in the past and a new vision yet unformed;
- local congregations are being forced to move from a passive supporting role to an active one; and
- institutional structures and forms developed to support one vision of mission are now rapidly changing.⁴

The strategy Mead prefers in response, requires moving ahead into a "new paradigm of mission, rebuilding and reinventing the church as we go". "This choice would be clear", he adds, "if we knew what the new paradigm really is ..."⁵

¹ *Book of Common Prayer* collect for Good Friday, as modified for inclusion in *An Australian Prayer Book* (1995), pp. 498-9

² Quoted in *The equipping pastor : a systems approach to congregational leadership* / R. Paul Stevens and Phil Collins. - Washington: Alban Institute, 1993, p.146

³ *The once and future church: reinventing the congregation for a new mission frontier* / Loren B. Mead. - Washington : Alban Institute, 1991, p.3 (author's emphasis).

⁴ *ibid.* p. 4-5 and *passim*

⁵ *ibid.* p.6

Mead posits two great paradigms from the past:

- an Apostolic paradigm, where the church formed strong local congregations which nurtured people to reach out in a hostile environment with the good news of Jesus; and
- a Christendom paradigm, dominant for the millennium and a half up to the mid-twentieth century, in which church and secular empire grew together, good citizenship and good church membership were the same, and "church" was an establishment ideology.

A new way of being church is still being born, Mead suggests.⁶ If new vision of church life and mission is emerging, this essay asks, what must happen to the ministry of the whole people of God? Thirty years ago, Mead argues,⁷ the overwhelming majority of lay people in congregations understood what was expected of them:

- to support the church through a local congregation, including with loyal attendance and giving of money;
- to be good citizens and diligent and productive workers; and
- to be secure and moral family members.

Today life is more complex and confused.

The shift in paradigm which Mead describes seems less applicable to Australia than America. The church in nineteenth century and early twentieth century Australia certainly enshrined European values and tastes. However it was not an arm of the state, and nor particularly wedded to the established order - at times some churches stood distinctly apart from civil authority. Australia did not establish a church-going God-fearing norm of community life to the extent that occurred in the United States. On the other hand, social and technological changes now happening in North American and Western Europe are strongly echoed in Australia and New Zealand. Though there has been a steady decline in Anglican church attendance in Australia since the 1950s, for example, there has long been a high degree of nominalism. Figures for

⁶ *ibid.* p.28

⁷ *ibid.* p.35

Melbourne in 1881-91 give average Anglican attendance at 19% of adherents. Other late nineteenth and early-twentieth century figures are similar.⁸

In 1997, the Synod of the Anglican Diocese of Canberra and Goulburn held a one-day conference to prayerfully deliberate on changes to the Diocese's structures which might better accommodate its vision for ministry by and for all of God's people. In one of the conversations, an Archdeacon was heard to remark (in effect), "First get your ecclesiology right, if any of this is to work." At the time, I thought this a hindrance, but I do not think so now. If there is to be understanding of changes the church is experiencing, it will be found not merely in study of history and society, but by searching out the purposes of God, theologically and prayerfully.

The Faith and Order Commission of the World Council of Churches has devoted much effort to achieving common understanding of ministry. A 50-year process of consultation and drafting emerged in 1982 as the statement *Baptism, eucharist and ministry*⁹, ("BEM" - also known as the "Lima text"), in which there was a remarkable degree of agreement. The BEM text, in its section on ministry¹⁰, begins from the foundation that God calls the whole of humanity to be his people. In the church, "the Spirit calls people to faith, sanctifies them through many gifts, gives them strength to witness to the Gospel, and empowers them to serve in hope and love"¹¹ The BEM text was placed before the Council's member churches for response. The responses unanimously welcomed the BEM paragraphs on the "Calling of the Whole People of God" and affirmed the approach making this calling the context for reflection on ministry.¹² In particular, the respondent churches appreciated a rhetorical question posed in *Baptism, eucharist and ministry*:

⁸ Figures from various sources are quoted by Trica Blombery in *The Anglicans in Australia*. - Canberra : AGPS, 1996, p.68

⁹ *Baptism, eucharist and ministry*. - Geneva : World Council of Churches, 1982 (Faith and Order paper: no. 111)

¹⁰ *ibid.*, pp. 20ff

¹¹ *ibid.*, para M.3, p4

¹² *Baptism, eucharist and ministry 1982-1990: report on the process and responses*. - Geneva : World Council of Churches, 1990 (Faith and Order paper: no. 149), p. 75

How, according to the will of God and under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, is the life of the Church to be understood and ordered, so that the Gospel may be spread and the community built up in love?¹³

It is clear from the BEM text and its commentators that we do not progress very far in a discussion of the ministry of the whole people of God before we begin to consider the roles of lay people compared to those of ordained people, and the differences between them (if any!).

At least within the Anglican communion, there is an unresolved theological division which greatly affects our understanding of the position of the laity¹⁴ in the Church. Some Anglicans hold that priests are sacramentally distinct from other believers. Others believe that clergy differ from other Christians only in function: they are simply set apart by the church to be those who serve through leadership and by equipping God's people for ministry¹⁵. As the BEM text notes, though there is a priestly role for all believers, the New Testament does not use the concept of "priest" or "priesthood" to designate or describe any office, other than the unique priesthood of Christ himself.¹⁶

Similarly, some believe that the minister's authority and call depend solely on God. Others consider these things to depend (at least in part) on recognition and appointment by God's people.¹⁷ Ministry, in this later view, is a matter of function, not office.¹⁸ Commenting on the BEM text, again from an Anglican perspective, one author observes that, "coherent theology of the laity must involve an acceptance of the way in which they and ordained priests share a common priesthood and the way in which an ordained priest has a particular priesthood to exercise".¹⁹ If our theology of the clergy is confused, our

¹³ *Baptism, eucharist and ministry* (1982), pp.20-21

¹⁴ ... by which I mean, by way of shorthand, "other-than-formally-ordained people". Of course, clergy and non-clergy are equally part of the "whole people of God."

¹⁵ Ephesians 4:12.

¹⁶ *Baptism, eucharist and ministry* (1982), Commentary to para. M.17, pp.23. Paul does, however, describe himself as, "a minister of Christ Jesus to the Gentiles in the priestly service of the gospel of God." Romans 15:16 (NRSV)

¹⁷ These theological divisions are noted, for example, in *All are called: towards a theology of the laity : essays from a Working Party of the General Synod Board of Education*. - London : CIO, 1985, p.5

¹⁸ see for example, *The ministry of all Christians: a theology of lay ministry / Norman Pittenger*. - Wilton, Conn.: Moorehouse-Barlow, 1983, pp. 1-12

¹⁹ Jean Mayland, "Theology of the laity - an ecumenical viewpoint" *in All are called...* pp.39-44

theology of the laity will be confused, and our understanding of the work of the whole people in community will be no less confused.

Central to the role of the laity are vocation and ministry in society - the world at large beyond the church. But the clergy/laity dichotomy is also an important challenge in the liturgy and worship of the gathered people of God. If the congregation is to worship truly, it is essential that liturgy indeed be the "work of the people" and that the congregation be participants and contributors - not spectators only. Liturgy can involve all the people more fully than has been traditional - *An Australian Prayer Book* (1975) and *A Prayer Book for Australia* (1995) do this. But much more can be done to make the gathering together of God's people an occasion for ministry of the whole people of God. Once again, the foundations of change are Biblical and theological:

When you come together, each one has a hymn, a lesson, a revelation, a tongue, or an interpretation. Let all things be done for building up. (I Corinthians 14:26)

Summing a discussion concerning orderly use of spiritual gifts, this verse offers a description of what should be happening at church gatherings. It echoes a concern of chapter 12 - that each one has an opportunity to participate in the corporate ministry of the body.²⁰ I Corinthians 12 emphasizes that the Spirit gives gifts to whomever the Spirit chooses.

"... 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." (I Corinthians 12:7-8, NRSV)

Though some ministries are explicitly mentioned later in the chapter (v.28ff), the gifts and "varieties of activities" described early in the chapter are clearly *not* given solely to a designated class of ministers, ordained or otherwise. Speaking of the importance and honour to be given to the lowliest parts of the body, the letter stresses the role in ministry of every member of the body of Christ. None of the gifts of the Holy Spirit listed is intended for use other than to edify the body when God's people are gathered together.

²⁰ *The First Epistle to the Corinthians* / Gordon D. Fee. - Grand Rapids : Eerdmans, 1987 (New international commentary on the New Testament) p.690

This is a basis for overt contribution to ministry by many members of the congregation when the whole people of God gather. A task of the (ordained) leader is not to perform all the work, but help see that it is done toward building up, and that all things are done "decently and in order."²¹ This is a teaching task.

The gifts he gave were that some would be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, some pastors and teachers, to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, until all of us come to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to maturity, to the measure of the full stature of Christ. (Ephesians 4:11-16 NRSV)

The leader equips *the members of the body* to perform the ministry. It is no coincidence that the only qualification which distinguishes a bishop/elder (episkopoj) from a deacon in I Timothy 3 is that the elder must be an "apt teacher". The saints perform their ministry both outside the church and within it (there is no exemption mentioned for liturgy).

Some consider that the particular ministry of the laity is outside the church. Bruce Kaye writes that because the challenge of developing a lay vocation has been "too difficult" for the Anglican Church in Australia, "we have taken the soft option and developed lay ministry in the church".²² As the distinction between church and society re-emerges, he argues,

"we have been left with a pattern which sees the vocation of the laity in society eclipsed in favour of the easy option of lay ministry in the church. It is for that reason that there is significant confusion about the relationship between clergy and laity. And it is because of that confusion that we find an increasing tendency to try to make lay people more and more like clergy".²³

A focus on the integrity and divine value of lay vocation in society will be true to the incarnational character of church, Kaye argues.²⁴

Of course it is desirable for every person's activity in society to be truly and divinely vocational - but this holds for church worker and secular worker alike. I can see no distinction. Indeed, such a distinction risks returning us to the old paradigm, in which the role of the church member is simply to be a good and godly citizen. The scriptures we have examined, and the changing

²¹ I Corinthians 14:40

²² *A church without walls: being Anglican in Australia / Bruce Kaye*. - North Blackburn: Dove, 1995, p.202

²³ *ibid.*, p203

place of church in society (the so-called paradigm shift), emphasize the need for all of God's people to be ministers both *within* the church *and* in society - each according to his or her calling, gifts and opportunity. In this, Kaye rightly emphasizes a need for the church in Australia to change so that all of God's people may fulfil their mission and vocation in the world. Fenhagen comments,

Although we talk about ministry in the marketplace, the ministry of the laity for most people is that which takes place in the parish church on Sunday morning or for the church in the parish house during the week. It is these ministries that are given primary recognition and authority.²⁵

Fenhagen cites as a key structural problem requiring change, the difficulties the (Anglican) church has had in giving genuine *authority*²⁶ to the laity's ministry outside the institutional church.²⁷

Following Mead, Jeff Woods, also in a Alban Institute publication, documents church decline in America and identifies "megatrends" which characterize changes which are taking place and must continue in the future church.²⁸ Among them are:

- from mass evangelism to relationship evangelism:

Mass evangelism:

- takes place outside the church,
- is done by ordained leadership,
- takes place at designated times,
- is momentary
- appeals to a common need

Relational evangelism:

- takes place in church and home
- is done by all of God's people
- is spontaneous
- occurs over time
- appeals to each person uniquely

- from tribal education to immigrant education;

we teach Christian life to those coming into the congregation, as well as those raised in it

- from surrogate missions to hands-on missions;

we go ourselves to meet needs, rather than sending a specialist someone else

- from reasonable spirituality to mysterious spirituality;

we take part in and experience spiritual things, and not simply agreeing with spiritual ideas

- from official leadership to gifted leadership;

²⁴ *ibid.*, pp 227-232

²⁵ *Ministry for a new time* / James C. Fenhagen. - Washington: Alban Institute, 1995, p.89

²⁶ my emphasis

²⁷ *ibid.*, p88

²⁸ *Congregational megatrends* / C. Jeff Woods - Washington: Alban Institute, 1996

leaders are those gifted by God to lead in a task, whether or not they hold a designated office.²⁹

All of these megatrends involve equipping of church members to perform ministry themselves.

Also in an Alban Institute publication³⁰, Stevens and Collins recommend a methodology by which ordained leadership might liberate the laity for mission. The details are beyond my scope here, but the point to be emphasized is that an equipping approach (a systemic methodology which the authors suggest to be more helpful than other methods of training) is advanced as the way to liberate God's people for ministry in the church and in society.

Change is compelling new ways of understanding the church's mission and the ministry of all God's people to fulfil its mission. And yet those ways are not so new. The ministry of the church is the ministry of the whole people of God. In my understanding, and that of most of the writers we have surveyed, this ministry will be more better fulfilled as we seek out the best possible ways for leaders to, as Ephesians³¹ says, " equip the saints for the work of ministry."

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²⁹ My summary, based on Fenhagen's book as a whole (*ibid.*)

³⁰ *The equipping pastor: a systems approach to congregational leadership* / R. Paul Stevens and Phil Collins. - Washington: Alban Institute, 1993

³¹ Ephesians 4:12 (NRSV)

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