
Laity, Living Stones, and Saints: Equipped for the Work of Ministry

Phyllis Palsma

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. We must no longer be children, tossed to and fro and blown about by every wind of doctrine, by people's trickery, by their craftiness in deceitful scheming (Eph. 4:11-14).

Come to him [Jesus Christ], a living stone, though rejected by mortals yet chosen and precious in God's sight, and like living stones, let yourselves be built into a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ.... 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 (1 Pet. 2:4-5; 9-10).

Across the North American continent, from Canajoharie, New York, to Tulare, California, people gather in classrooms for a day or night of learning. By vocation, they are homemakers, elementary and high school teachers, computer programmers, small business owners, accountants, automobile mechanics, attorneys, factory line workers, chemical engineers, school administrators, nurses, and farmers. Their educational backgrounds range from high school graduates to those with doctorates. Male and female, they fall into every decade of age between the middle-twenties and the early eighties.

Each learner is active in local church ministry: church school teacher, deacon, elder, choir member, youth leader, or Bible study facilitator. Some are church janitors, organists, treasurers, or secretaries. They have served on various and numerous committees in their churches. Some have been in leadership in the mission and ministry of a classis, a regional synod, or the General Synod. They are the "laity" who desire to become better equipped for the work of ministry.

They enter the classroom both for personal enrichment and to develop their gifts for ministry. Whether it is to lead as liturgists, preachers, Christian educators, caregivers in the church, or to become a better-equipped consistory members, they have come to learn and to enhance their skills for leadership in Christ's church.

Who are the Laity?

Equipping laity for ministry is no new concept to the Reformed Church in America (RCA). While there is a long-standing tradition of highly educated ordained clergy, there is also the historical and biblical record, which underscores ministry by those who are labeled "laity." The Scriptures present numerous images of the people of God. R. Paul Stevens has outlined these images as follows:

- *Laos tou theou* (the people of God) is only one of the terms used in the New Testament to describe God's own family on earth. Others are:
- 'the church' (*hē ekklēsia*, a people gathered – called out, translating the Old Testament *qāhāl*, 'congregation' – 1 Thess. 1:1);
- 'saints' (*hoi hagioi*, a people dedicated to God – Acts 9:41; Eph. 4:12);
- 'chosen ones' (*eklektōi*, a people chosen by God for God's own possession – 1 Pet. 1:1; Col. 3:12);
- 'a royal priesthood' (*basileion hierateuma*, a serving people, bridge-building between God and the world – 1 Pet. 2: 9-11);
- 'the household of God' (*oikō theou*, a people sharing a common life – 1 Tim. 3:15);
- 'the Israel of God' (*Israēl tou theou*, a people of promise – Gal. 6:16);
- 'the body of Christ' (*to sōma Christou*, an empowered people continuing the ministry of Jesus – 1 Cor. 12: 12-26);
- 'a holy temple in the Lord' (*naon hagion en kuriō*, a people inhabited by God – Eph. 2: 21-2);
- 'a colony of heaven'/'God's commonwealth' (*politeuma en ouranois*, a missionary people – Phil. 3:20; 'fellow citizens with God' – Eph. 2: 19).¹

Stevens points out, "All of these terms are corporate. The church is not a collection of individual 'saints' but the 'saints,' 'the body,' 'the household.'"² The word "laity" or "laypersons" appears nowhere in the New Testament. In fact, there is neither laity nor clergy. As Stevens writes:

The word 'laypersons' (*laikoi*) was first used by Clement of Rome at the end of the first century, but was never used by an inspired apostle in Scripture to describe second-class, untrained and unequipped Christians. . . . 'Laity,' in its proper New

Testament sense of *laos*—the people of God—is a term of great honour denoting the enormous privilege and mission of the whole people of God. Once we were not a people at all, but now in Christ, we are ‘a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people [*laos*] belonging to God’ (1 Pet. 2:9; Ex. 19:6).³

Further,

the Greek word *laos* originally meant ‘the crowd’ and ‘the people as a nation.’ It was eventually employed in the Greek translation of the Old Testament (LXX) as the universal designation for ‘the people of God’ translating the Hebrew ‘*am*. In Acts 15:14 James at the apostolic council makes the deliberate connection of the Old Testament national Israel with the newly reconstituted people of God in Christ: ‘Simon has described for us how God at first showed his concern by taking from the Gentiles a people [*laon*] for himself.’ . . . This word may be properly translated ‘laity’ but to do so we would need to reinvent the word. It does not mean ‘untrained’ or ‘ordinary’ but ‘the people of God’ – a truly extraordinary people.⁴

The special purpose for which the people (*laos*) of God are called belongs to the entire people, laity and clergy alike. As church, they have the responsibility to “proclaim the mighty acts of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light” (1 Pet. 2:9).

The Reformed church, from its reformation roots, has held to the concept of the priesthood of all believers. The concept is most easily understood to mean that no Christian needs a mediator before God. The priesthood of all believers further affirms that there are a variety of ministries in the church, and that all Christians have a responsibility to assume leadership for those ministries within the church and in the world. Shared leadership in ministry does not diminish the importance or the significance of the work that is uniquely the responsibility of the clergy. It does, however, expand the understanding of the responsibilities of the laity for ministry and call into question the dichotomy that has developed between laity and clergy.

Alan Roxburgh reflects on these points this way:

Pastor/apostle leadership cannot function in a *sola pastora* model. Rather than the omniscient professional running the congregation’s inner life, there is a team, or multiple leadership, at the heart of the congregation. This does not imply professional staff. Indeed, it should not. Pastoral care, worship, proclamation, and administration are part of the work

of the whole people of God, not the designated territory of someone with a seminary degree and an ordination certificate.⁵

Equipping Laity the New Testament Way

From its first-century roots, the Christian church has been invested in mentoring and training its people for responsible preaching, teaching, and leadership. Ephesus, in the Apostle Paul's day, was the capital of the Roman Province of Asia. Originally a Greek colony, Ephesus had, by Roman times, become a center for international trade. A large, bustling seaport, it was the center of commerce and religion. The temple of Artemis (Diana), one of the seven wonders of the ancient world, was in Ephesus. In addition, a huge, outdoor Greek theater that would rival the domes and arenas of today's sporting world, seated 50,000 for stadium fights, races, and athletic contests. In this cultural context the apostle Paul lived, preached, and taught the gospel of Jesus Christ. During one of his missionary journeys, Paul spent over two years lecturing in the synagogues and halls of Ephesus while working as a tentmaker. Introducing Christianity to a pagan culture was a long, slow, sometimes dangerous process.

The news of Paul's teaching spread through Ephesus. Great things were happening. The sick were being healed. People were turning away from superstition. But while Paul's ministry was effective, it was also controversial. His teaching posed a threat to the economic well being of artisans who made their living from the cult of Artemis.⁶ Paul moved on, but not before he had established a Christian community. The Ephesians held to sound Christian teachings, and the church grew as Paul continued to encourage them by letter.

Another preacher in Ephesus was Apollos, an Alexandrian Jew. Described in Acts 18 as "an eloquent man, well-versed in the scriptures,"⁷ he spoke enthusiastically and boldly about Jesus. But when two Ephesian church leaders named Priscilla and Aquila heard him, they noted that his theology needed correction. They took him aside and explained the Way of God to him more accurately. And when Apollos wished to cross over to Achaia, Priscilla, Aquila, and the believers in Ephesus encouraged and assisted him in his further ministry there.

Eventually Paul, Apollos, Priscilla, and Aquila died, and the city of Ephesus fell into ruin. But the ministry of training, teaching, and encouraging the church to be the body of Christ, the priesthood of believers, remains throughout the world and continues in the church today.

Equipping the Laity – Reformation Awakening

As the church grew through the centuries, it became institutionalized. Governing structures evolved. Eventually a clear distinction was made between clergy and laity. Clergy were the educated, theologically trained, and ordained leaders of the church. They were the priests, bishops, archbishops, and popes.

Laity became a sort of lower class in church hierarchy. They were the ones for whom and to whom ministry was done. If non-ordained persons were involved in church ministry, they were, in large part, restricted to helping the clergy with the "menial tasks" of the church's ministry. With the Reformation came a renewed awareness of the priesthood of all believers and an attempt to bridge the chasm that had grown between clergy and laity.

While Stevens and others argue that the Reformation did not complete the task of reforming the church's understanding of the priesthood of believers and equipping the saints, the Reformation did open up new opportunities for the laity (meaning non-ordained clergy) to be involved in various forms of ministry. They were taught to read the Bible and were given access to learning about it. Catechisms were tools that enabled the people to learn the basic theological tenets of their faith.

Equipping the Laity in the Dutch Reformed Church

During the sixteenth century in the Netherlands, the office of *ziekentrooster*,⁸ which is generally translated as "comforter of the sick," was created in order to provide persons to assist parish clergy in the visitation of the sick. Although ministers of the Dutch Reformed Church were solemnly charged with this responsibility, it was often entrusted to the *ziekentrooster* due to the Dutch church's large parishes and chronic shortage of ministers.

With the passage of time, comforters of the sick were attached to hospitals, orphanages, poorhouses, the army and navy, and the merchant fleets of the East and West India Companies. Gradually, too, their duties were expanded to include much more than giving consolation to the sick. They were expected to lead the people in prayers every morning and evening and before and after meals and, on appropriate occasions, read a few chapters from the Bible and maybe a sermon from an approved book of sermons. They were also frequently asked to assist in the catechetical instruction of the youth. Although comforters of the sick were prohibited from administering the sacrament of the Lord's Supper, they were permitted, with special permission from the Church authorities, to administer the sacrament of baptism and to officiate at marriage ceremonies.⁹

In general, a *ziekentrooster* had very little education or theological training. A person interested in this office informed his local consistory. That judicatory then investigated the applicant's qualifications to determine whether to have him examined by a special committee that included several ministers. The candidate was required to show a knowledge of the Bible, to be able to read and write well, and to have a good voice for leading worshipers in singing the psalms.

Candidates were occasionally asked to demonstrate how they would comfort the critically ill.¹⁰

Because these officers lacked theological training, they were supplied with books to help them in their work. One of the most valuable of these aids was appropriately entitled, *Den Sieken Troost; twelk is een onderwysinge inden gheloove, ende den wech der salicheyt; om ghewillichlich te sterven* ("The Consolation of the Sick; Which is an Instruction in the Faith and the Way to Salvation to prepare Believers to Die Willingly"), but it was commonly designated by the shorter title, *Ziekentroost*.¹¹ Says DeJong:

Comforters of the sick also made use of the very popular *Huysboeck*, a Dutch translation of a collection of sermons written in 1577 by the Swiss Reformer, Heinrich Bullinger, on such subjects as the Ten Commandments, the Apostles' Creed, and the sacraments. According to Johannes Uytenbogaert, a leading Dutch preacher of the early seventeenth century, Bullinger's work was read more often in the Netherlands during the Reformation than any other book except the Bible. Other books helpful to comforters of the sick included Zacharias Ursinus' commentary on the Heidelberg Catechism and a book of Psalms with notes.¹²

Equipped Saints Ministering in the New World

In 1624, the Dutch West India Company sent two ships with approximately thirty families, mostly Walloons, to plant a colony in the New World. These colonists settled in Fort Orange, near what is now Albany, New York.¹³ Since there was no established church in New Netherland, there was no minister for the colonists. Also, due to the critical shortage of ordained clergy in the Dutch Reformed Church, no minister was available for mission in the new world. Yet, because of concern that the colonists have spiritual care and faith nurture, the Dutch West India Company sent along with them Bastiaen Krol, the first comforter of the sick to serve the colonists in New Netherland.¹⁴ Born in Harlingen, Friesland, in 1595, Krol was a fabric worker who developed an urge to become a comforter of the sick and to do his work with the Dutch East or West India Company. As outlined in his contract, his duties were:

First, to read common prayers morning and evening, as well as before and after meals. Secondly, to instruct and comfort the sick as needed. Thirdly, to admonish those who ask for help, or are in need of admonishment, by reading from God's Word. Fourthly, at opportune times, to read chapters from God's Word or from books written by Reformed authors or even a sermon.¹⁵

Because of the critical shortage of ordained clergy in the Dutch Reformed Church the consistory of Amsterdam eventually gave Krol permission to perform marriages and to baptize. When executing those duties, he was required to

study and read the appropriate liturgy, and if he thought it necessary to deliver a sermon on these occasions, to read one from an accepted book of sermons written by Reformed theologians. Krol was specifically instructed not to interject any of his own words into either the liturgical formulas or into the sermons.¹⁶

Krol was the only *ziekentrooster* in New Netherland until July 1626, when Jan Huygens¹⁷ arrived at New Amsterdam,¹⁸ now known as New York City.

Equipping the Saints Today

The story of the seventeenth-century comforters of the sick is a “back-to-the-future” experience for the twenty-first century RCA. We are asking many of the same questions:

Where do we find enough trained leaders?

What do we do when there is no pastor available for pulpit supply?

What do we do when there are too many needs for one pastor’s response?

What aids are there to equip elders for visitation?

What resources are available to help deacons live out their ministry of mercy?

In 1997, the denomination’s Commission on Theology presented to the General Synod a proposal for commissioning preaching elders. In addition to the problem of a shortage of clergy, the General Synod’s minutes record three key issues that underlined the need to equip laity for ministry, particularly as preaching elders:

1. Financial: “Many small-membership congregations find it difficult to afford a full-time ordained minister of Word and sacrament but find that there are lay people with gifts of preaching in their midst.”
2. Empowering the laity: “Some churches seek to use lay preachers, not as a substitute for the preaching ministry of an installed pastor, but as a supplement to that ministry and as a sign of the priesthood of all believers and the giftedness of all God’s people.”
3. Difficulties some candidates for ministry experience in obtaining formal theological education: “Lay people with gifts for preaching and church leadership may feel called to exercise those gifts

but may find it difficult or impossible to pursue theological education to fulfill ordination requirements. Such persons may find the option of a certified or licensed lay preaching ministry an attractive one. This may be particularly true among immigrant congregations where access to theological education in one's own language is difficult."¹⁹

Preaching elders would fulfill a function similar to that lived out by Bastian Krol in the seventeenth century. The "laity" are being trained to lead specific ministries in their own congregations. 'Laity,' as defined for these training opportunities, includes ordained elders and deacons as well as church members who have not been ordained to a church office. Participants may, at some future time, choose to pursue ordination as minister of Word and sacrament in the RCA. The latter has happened with at least three persons who were enrolled in Albany Synod's Ephesus Two²⁰ and Living Stones program for equipping laity for specific ministries (such as preaching elder) in their local congregations.

Various groups throughout the RCA have attempted to respond to the questions and concerns about leadership and a twenty-first century clergy shortage by developing training opportunities for church members. In Tulare, California, the Church-based Leadership Development (CLD) program was developed to meet the need for "church planters" and leaders in the multicultural area encompassed by the Classis of Central California. The CLD program envisions two things for participants: (1) deepened theological insights and understandings and (2) ministry skills and character development. The mission of the Pilgrimage School in northern New Jersey is "to strengthen Reformed expression of the Christian faith in congregations of the Classes of Greater Palisades and Passaic Valley by providing tools for spiritual formation, education, and leadership."²¹ In the Regional Synod of Albany, the mission of Living Stones is "to help church leaders develop their gifts and abilities in order to extend and expand the ministry of Jesus Christ."²²

The programs named above are from judicatories of the RCA. Groups representing partners in the Formula of Agreement—the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA) - Upstate New York Synod; the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) - Albany Presbytery; and the United Church of Christ-New York Conference—are also equipping laity for ministry. This writer's review of their laity training reveals a number of shared core values, goals, and training requirements.

Every school or program has specific course requirements to be successfully completed in order to be commissioned to a specific ministry. Requisites for every group include theological and biblical studies. Each denomination requires students to demonstrate an understanding of the basic tenets of the Reformed faith. Required Old Testament and New Testament studies reflect that biblical understanding and interpretation are highly valued. Courses in church history

and polity help students understand the context out of which ministry is done in today's culture.

Instruction is offered in such specific skills as preaching (sermon writing and delivery), preparing and leading the worship liturgy, public Scripture reading, visitation of the sick and home-bound, care-giving, and leading ministries of Christian education. Some programs offer one-day training events, while others require two or more years to complete before certification or commissioning to a specific ministry. Some courses are offered as weeklong summer intensive education; others are done in a series of weekend experiences. Most of Albany Synod's Living Stones courses are scheduled for weekly, two and one-half hour evening sessions, for seven or ten successive weeks.

After successfully completing a training program, an ecclesiastical judicatory or assembly may commission students to a specific ministry in a specified congregation or geographic locale. Some groups require annual continuing education for their commissioned laity. The ELCA Upstate New York Synod, for example, requires of area deacons ten hours of continuing education in each of their commissioned years. Most groups require an annual or biannual review of their commissioned church workers, whether they are deacons, preaching elders, lay pastors, or associates in ministry. All of these church workers are supervised by a classis, presbytery, or equivalent judicatory.

The programs in upstate New York make use of textbooks written at a first-year college level. In some cases, curriculum is written by the instructor to meet specific course goals and objectives. Although courses may be taught by a seminary professor, most are taught by area pastors, some of whom have degrees beyond the M.Div. Occasionally, the instructor may be a church member with gifts for teaching in a specific area. Whatever their backgrounds, instructors are men and women who are gifted teachers, willing to share their passion for a specific area of ministry. They are committed to equip the saints for ministry; to help elders, deacons, church members, and ministers work together to build up the body of Christ.

Equipped and Ready to Serve

When church members are equipped for church leadership, the quality of ministry in a congregation is strengthened. Skilled lay leaders can provide both ongoing leadership and an ongoing relationship with a congregation.

'Only a layperson' is a phrase that must never be found on our lips. It is irreverent and demeaning. It denies that God has adopted, called, empowered, and gifted us to receive the incredible privilege of being co-lovers of God, lovers of one another and those who share God's love for the world. This is our identity – a molecular social identity. The Duke of Windsor, recalling his upbringing in the royal house of King

George V, claimed that every day his father would say, 'Never forget who you are.' Better yet, is never to forget *whose* we are.²³

Saints. Living Stones. Ministers. Teachers. *Ziekentrooster*. Lay pastors. Deacons. Preaching elders. Pastors. Whatever name we give them, Christians are gifted for the work of ministry. No one person in the life of the church can have all the gifts necessary for the responsibilities of the church. The responsibility to build up the body of Christ falls to the many who are both gifted and equipped for ministry.

ENDNOTES

¹ *The Other Six Days: Vocation, Work, and Ministry in Biblical Perspective* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans and Vancouver: Regent College Publishing, 2000), 54.

² Ibid.

³ Stevens, 5.

⁴ Stevens, 29-30.

⁵ *The Missionary Congregation, Leadership, and Liminality* (Harrisburg: Trinity Press International, 1997), 64.

⁶ Acts 19:23ff.

⁷ Acts 18: 24.

⁸ Gerald F. De Jong, "The *Ziekentroosters* or Comforters of the Sick in New Netherland," *The New York Historical Society Quarterly*, LIV (October, 1970), 339-59. A *ziekentrooster* was also called a *krankenbezoeker*, which has virtually the same translation. Because a comforter of the sick was instructed to admonish a sinner to repent and refrain from further sins, the documents also occasionally refer to him as *vermaaner*, meaning "admonisher."

⁹ Gerald F. De Jong, *The Dutch Reformed Church in the American Colonies* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1978), 11-12.

¹⁰ De Jong, 12.

¹¹ "It was written in 1571 by the Reverend Cornelis Van Hille, a refugee pastor from the Spanish Netherlands who eventually located at Rotterdam. The *Ziekentroost* contained numerous texts from scripture, with lengthy explanations, describing man's depravity and inability to save himself, and emphasizing that only through belief in Christ could man be delivered from the cares of this world and be victorious over death" (De Jong, 14).

¹² De Jong, 14.

¹³ Arie R. Brouwer, *Reformed Church Roots* (New York: Reformed Church Press, 1977), 28.

¹⁴ His name was written in different ways: Bastiaen Jansz. Krol, Bastiaen Jansz. Crol, Bastiaen Krol, Bastiaen Crol, and Sebastian Jansen Krol. For more information see De Jong, 237, note 3.

¹⁵ Ibid., 12.

¹⁶ Ibid., 13.

¹⁷ Huygens's name is sometimes spelled Huyck.

¹⁸ De Jong, 13. In 1900 a memorial tablet was erected in the Middle Collegiate Dutch Church of New York City in acknowledgement of the work performed almost three hundred years earlier by Krol and Huygens.

¹⁹ *Minutes of the General Synod, RCA, 1997: 276-77.*

²⁰ Ephesus Two was the name of the laity training program in Albany Synod during the 1990s. In 2000 the program was revised and renamed Living Stones.

²¹ Newsletter of the Regional Synod of the Mid-Atlantics, August 2001. For detailed information about the program, contact the office of the Synod of the Mid-Atlantics in New Brunswick, New Jersey.

²² Mission statement from Living Stones catalog, 2000. Detailed information is available from the Synod of Albany offices in Schenectady, New York.

²³ Stevens, 64.

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