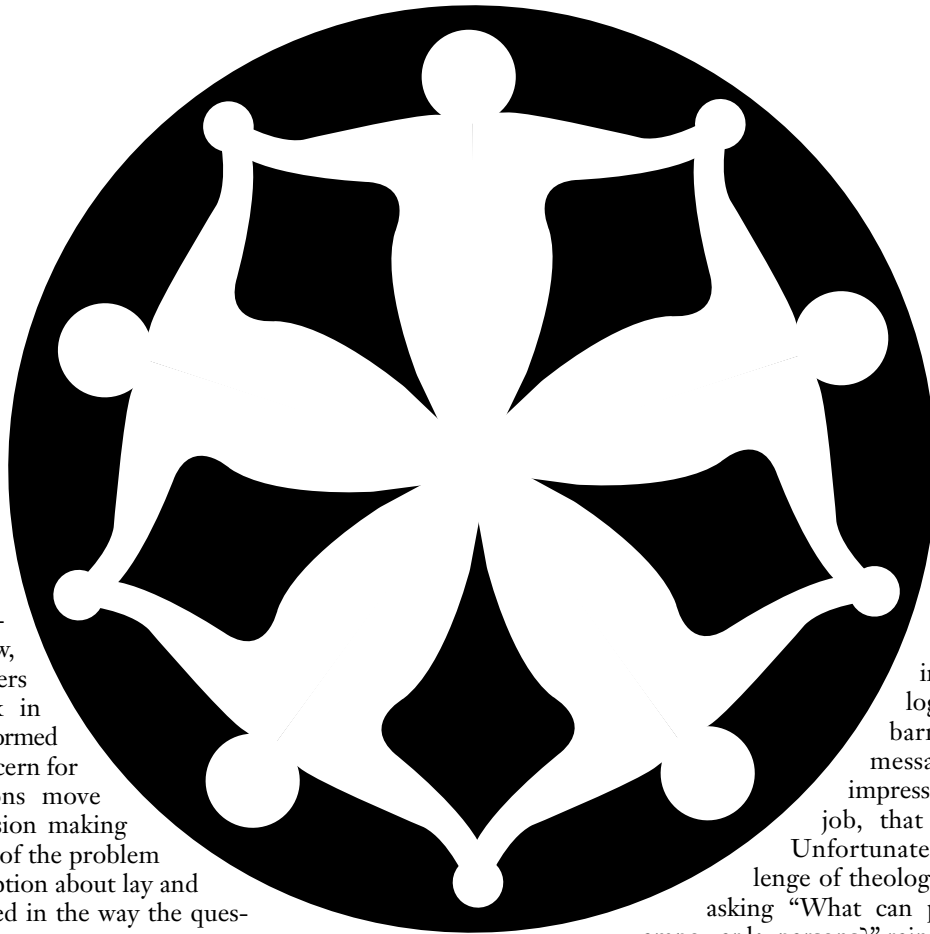


Fostering a Culture that Engages Laity as Theological Decision Makers

Clergy sometimes complain that church members approach congregational issues with the same mindset they bring to their corporate or workplace decisions. How, they ask, can lay leaders be trained to think in more theologically informed ways? While the concern for helping congregations move beyond secular decision making is a serious one, part of the problem may lie in the assumption about lay and clergy roles embedded in the way the question above is framed.

Secular thinking about decision making is not the only cultural baggage that gets carried into church meeting rooms. Engrained deeply in both the culture of the church and our broader culture is the expectation that ministry is the work of the clergy while laity are recipients of ministry. Clergy attend to sacred matters while laity concern themselves with the secular. Clergy are the experts while laity are amateurs.

Despite the tremendous growth in lay activity in recent



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decades, this dualistic paradigm of ministry still lingers in the collective consciousness of church and society. These attitudes are, I believe, an underlying factor explaining why some church members are reluctant to venture into the realm of theological decision making. A barrage of subliminal messages reinforces the impression that it is not their job, that they are unqualified.

Unfortunately, framing the challenge of theological decision making by asking “What can pastors do to train or empower laypersons?” reinforces the basic assumption that clergy are the theological experts. Moreover, it wrongly assumes that clergy do not also fall victim to secular ways to thinking. A more appropriate question would seem to be, “how can congregations – clergy and laity together – approach decision making more theologically?”

Congregations can and should employ a variety of tools to enhance their ability to make decisions theologically. Helping individuals mature spiritually through basic Bible study, spiritual

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disciplines, and dedica-
tion to Christian service
are basic building blocks.
And engaging group
processes, such as apprecia-
tive inquiry or spiritual
discernment, can reorient
corporate processes. But these
methods can only succeed to the
extent that church members
believe themselves to be theological
actors and partners in ministry. So, how
can we reform our thinking and acting to
bridge the cultural divide between clergy and
laity? How can church culture affirm the engagement of
laity? The answer seems to lie, at least in part, in counteracting
the vestiges of the dualistic paradigm of ministry.

Role reversal. Clergy are often cast in the role of prayer
professional and resident theologian. These are, after all, things
they are educated and prepared to do. These functions are part
of their pastoral identity and authority. But the role of religious
professional can become a trap when congregations fall into the
habit of relying exclusively on their clergy for spiritual suste-
nance. How could laity be encouraged to engage in these tasks?
It could take some behind-the-scenes encouragement, since
many laity are conditioned to defer to the clergy on these
matters. It might be as simple as working up a schedule of shared
prayer, doing some coaching, or resisting the temptation to func-
tion as the theological expert by turning questions back to the
group and inviting discussion. Encouraging meaningful partici-
pation in activities assumed to be the domain of clergy will build
the theological confidence of church members and begin to
reshape the culture.

Words, words, words. Feminist theology has helped reveal
how language affects our theological world view and our self-
understanding. Much of the church is now very intentional in
using gender-neutral language to signal its openness toward
women. Unfortunately, there has been less focus on how
language – words, titles, names, and metaphors – frames thinking
about clergy and lay roles.

During my formative years as a Christian adult, the lead cler-
gyperson in my church had a wonderful way of referring to
himself. “I’m one of the ministers of the church,” he would
always say as a group went around the table with introductions.
His refusal to assert the title Senior Pastor was a deliberate effort
to level the playing field, to elevate the rest of us, and to take our

ministries seriously. In
my lifetime, I have
noticed a shift in the title
that clergy use, away from
“minister” and toward
“pastor.” I have wondered
how much of this stems from
a desire to maintain clerical
distinctiveness, or even status,
in an era when the concept of the
ministry of all Christians has
received renewed emphasis.

But the use of pastoral imagery for
clergy leadership is troubling at a more subtle,
perhaps deeper, level. Shepherding is a potent biblical
image of God’s loving care for humankind. But this divine
metaphor becomes problematic when it is transferred to the
realm of human interaction. If pastors are shepherds, then
congregants are sheep – not exactly the most challenging or
enlightened image of Christian personhood and discipleship.
And yet, this is the way we talk about church members – as a
flock of helpless animals. James O’Toole, a contemporary leader-
ship expert, critiques shepherding, the dominant Christian
metaphor for leadership, as paternalistic and anachronistic.
“How far,” he asks, “would a business get today acting on the
assumption that employees are a flock to be herded by the orga-
nizational equivalent of the yank of a crook or the nipping of a
sheepdog at their heels?”¹ Is it any wonder that some lay persons
are reluctant to venture beyond the metaphorical sheepfold?

I recently heard a highly regarded clergy leader refer to a
particular individual as “an M.Div. who is *just* a layperson.” Even
worse, I often hear laypersons describe themselves this way. The
regrettable tendency to qualify the word layperson with the “J-
word” is rooted in the secular definition of a layperson as an
amateur, a definition linked to the dualistic paradigm of ministry.
We must reclaim the biblically accurate definition of *laity* (from
the Greek *laos*) as “people of God.” Another linguistic trap is
using the term *church leader* as a synonym for clergy. Clergy are,
of course, church leaders. But when the term is used consistently
to refer exclusively to ordained ministers, it creates the impres-
sion that laypersons are not also church leaders. Great care
should be taken to avoid exclusive and exclusionary uses of termi-
nology related to ministry roles. When it is necessary to specify
those who have been set apart for a particular order of ministry,
the words *clergy* or *ordained* are probably more precise and appro-
priate than minister, pastor, or church leader.

Call, community, and Christ. Countering the vestiges of dualism in ministry also requires the articulation of a robust and compelling theology of lay involvement. This begins with the clear understanding that ministry is the work of all Christians, that all Christians, not just ordained clergy, are called by God. Taking great care to address the issue of clerical calling within the larger context of God's call to all Christians prevents lay persons from feeling that God's call does not extend to them.

The doctrine of the Trinity, which emphasizes God as an interdependent, dynamic, community of three equal, distinct, inherently interrelated persons, provides a compelling model for collaborative ministry – a model for how laity and clergy can work side-by-side in a relationship that is mutually affirming. Paul's poignant image of the church as the Body of Christ comprising a variety of interdependent, indispensable parts (1 Cor. 12) is another helpful image of collaborative ministry. As with the Trinity, this model has the advantage of allowing for the distinctness of various ministries,

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while reinforcing mutuality and mutual respect. And it reminds us again and again that Christ is the head of the Body (Col. 1:18) — not a particular category of ecclesial servants.

These theological images and ideas are not new, but they require renewed emphasis in preaching, teaching, and dialogue as congregations strive to engage laity more fully in congregational decision-making and theological reflection. They are key components in the construction of a cultural narrative that fosters greater inclusivity in the service of God. □

¹ James O'Toole. *Leading Change: The Argument for Values-Based Leadership*. Ballantine Books. New York. 1996. p. 6

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