

Interim Report

Equipping Pastors Conversations

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 4:11–13

*A project to describe, empower and support pastors
who see their calling in terms of equipping members
for ministry in everyday life*

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Introduction

It was a simple request: a nearby pastor suggested that we find a few pastors who would be interested in gathering for a book study on what it means to be “an equipping pastor,” that is, what it means to be a pastor who sees their job principally in terms of preparing and empowering people for ministry in their everyday lives. I was immediately interested and started looking for a book that would serve as the centerpiece for such a study group.

I was amazed to find out that—as popular as the topic is—there are books aplenty aimed at helping the laity identify their ministry (William Diehl’s *Thank God It’s Monday* comes to mind), but there are few books designed to help pastors understand and become equipping pastors. Now I was even more intrigued.

What does it mean to be an equipping pastor? How is that different from what most pastors were trained to be and do? What implications does this hold for program, staff, structure, and day-to-day operation of a congregation? How does one shift from being a ‘pastoral’ or ‘program’ pastor to being an equipping pastor?

With these questions and this surprise discovery in mind, I sent out letters to 139 pastors in the Southeastern Iowa Synod of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, inviting them to participate in an informal conversation about how we might describe, empower, and support equipping pastors. I was hoping that 6 to 12 pastors might respond. I was delighted and surprised to receive responses from over 50 pastors. About 40% of our pastors wanted to be part of the conversation. That number in itself is stunning and significant.

How might we describe, empower and support pastors who see their calling in terms of equipping members for ministry in their everyday lives?

Wanting to ensure that these were conversations in which we all learned from and supported one another, I tried to limit the size of the groups to no more than 5 or 6. Eleven conversations were scheduled around southeastern Iowa in November and early December 2010. In the end, 53 ELCA pastors attended, plus 5 Presbyterian pastors who had been invited by their general presbyter. An additional 13 pastors who expressed interest in participating were not able to attend for a variety of reasons.

Each meeting was composed of an opening Bible study/devotion on Ephesians 4, an introduction to 8 books on the subject, and then an hour’s worth of conversa-

tion. The pastors talked to one another and I took notes, guiding the conversation with questions as needed.

This report is an overview of the 16 1/2 hours of conversations that occurred among those 58 pastors. This report does not describe uniform results (there were none), or the opinion of a majority. Rather, it describes discoveries and observations in broad strokes. Actual comments from pastors (that have intentionally been kept anonymous) are included to illuminate the discoveries, observations and points. This is not a final report. I hope you will use this interim report to pursue this conversation in your congregation, and then report back to me what you hear. In addition, I hope to pursue this conversation ecumenically to test the discoveries and observations in wider circles.

I want to thank all those who met with me and shared their stories. Some of what was shared came with significant struggle and pain. Some was brilliantly insightful and illuminating. It was an amazing privilege and gift to have the opportunity to hear your stories. Your dedication, faith, and persistence moved me. I trust and pray that this report will help us rediscover the call that God has given to all of us: to discern, proclaim and participate in God's redemptive mission in the world.

Dwight L. DuBois
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Intensely interested yet unsure what to do

According to one book, “For more than thirty years the Western church has been exposed to a growing number of books and resources focused on the release of every member of the church for ministry and mission.” But, the authors note, “this proliferation of information has produced very little change in church life.”¹

It needs to be noted that this observation and lament was published in 1993. In other words, if the book were updated, it would need to say, “for nearly fifty years” we’ve been talking about ministry in daily life, the priesthood of all believers, the ministry of the laity, vocation—call it what you may—we’ve been publishing resources, attending workshops, and offering suggestions, yet little has changed. ‘Ministry’ is most often limited to what pastors do; it rarely reaches beyond what happens in and through a congregation.

The power of the priesthood of all believers, even these many years [since the Reformation], has not fully been unleashed. Why? ²

One of the most significant findings that came out of the Equipping Pastors conversations is that pastors are intensely interested in this topic; the large number of pastors who wanted to participate is evidence of that. When asked about why they had responded to the invitation to participate, many expressed deep interest: “I have a passion for this topic.” “It’s a key area of congregational health.” “There is a crying need to work on this.”

At the same time there was a palpable sense—and some even admitted it—that most pastors are unsure about how to work toward it. “Equipping people for ministry *is* our job, but we don’t get much help with how to do it.” “The topic caught my attention; I’ve heard about it, but don’t know much about it.” “Most Lutherans are concerned with equipping *pastors* for ministry. As Lutherans, ministry in daily life is an unsolved puzzle, yet it’s the heart of the matter for us.” “I have been trying to focus on ministry in daily life my whole career, but I haven’t been the best model.” “I came because I know we need to be equippers, but we don’t know how.” “I’ve been interested in this topic for a long while. I saw this as a good opportunity to raise my awareness of ministry in daily life.” And perhaps most piercing was the comment, “I’ve been a paid Christian for so long that I no longer remember what it is like to be a Christian in the world.”

1 R. Paul Stevens and Phil Collins, *The Equipping Pastor: A Systems Approach to Congregational Leadership* (Herndon, VA: The Alban Institute, 1993), xi.

2 Norma Cook Everist and Craig L. Nesson, *Transforming Leadership: New Vision for a Church in Mission* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2008), 203.

In response to the observation that no book was found on what it means to be an equipping pastor, one participant said, “There is no definitive book on what it means to be a pastor who equips people for ministry in daily life because we haven’t figured out what the role of the pastor is.” This wasn’t named, but it is possible that what this pastor was feeling is that the role of the pastor is in transition from Christendom assumptions to something different, new, and undefined. The pastor continued, “We’ve been trained how to do ministry in and for the church, but we’ve not gone beyond that. We know we should equip people for ministry in daily life, but we don’t know how.”

It is encouraging that pastors are interested in this topic; the widespread interest these conversations uncovered bodes well for the church. It is also encouraging that the pastors who attended these conversations were willing to admit their sense of inadequacy and even failure. One book published 20 years ago speculated that if we could get a handle on ministry in daily life, the ‘90s would become a very good decade. Obviously, we missed that deadline, and it’s not likely that getting better at this will provide a miracle cure for all that ails the church, but there is reason to hope. Our willingness to admit that the power of the priesthood of all believers has not been fully unleashed is the first step toward bringing about change. In addition, to remember that ministry in the world is, after all, God’s purpose for the church, gives us a worthy goal to work toward.

Awareness of systemic blocks

Another significant finding that came out of the Equipping Pastors conversations is that there is widespread awareness of systems, structures and cultural understandings that block congregations from being centers for ministry in daily life.

It takes ordination to be a minister

The stumbling block that was often mentioned first is the common understanding that pastors ‘do ministry’ and congregational members come to church to partake of it. The perception of many pastors is that congregations “hire” pastors³ to “do ministry” on their behalf, and then members receive or consume that ministry. Pastors often buy into this systemic expectation to justify their existence, to keep people happy, and to assure the continual flow of paychecks. Common statements include: “The people want me to do everything.” “Ministry is the pastor’s job at

3 Pastors intentionally used the word ‘hire’ in contradiction to the use of the word ‘call,’ reflecting the North American cultural assumption that workers are hired to do specialized work on behalf of others; further, the assumption is that if ‘job performance’ (in the case of pastors that often includes ‘fixing’ the congregation or attracting a certain demographic) does not meet expectations, then that person is fired and a replacement is hired. For most pastors, being ‘called’ is very different from being ‘hired,’ and a ‘call’ is very different from a ‘job’ (see John 10:11-15).

my church.” “People come to church to consume a product, be it music, preaching, or community.” “Pastors are seen as ministry specialists.” “I can tell you what ministry is not: ‘I’m in charge of everything.’ That’s not ministry!”

*Pastors end up taking on all kind of roles and tasks, even if they’re ill equipped to perform them, simply because they accept the understanding that “it’s what they pay me for!”*⁴

“Pastors are seen as CEOs. As CEOs they are responsible for everything that happens. Pastors don’t share responsibility for ministry with members; there is no ‘shared responsibility’ at the top of Exxon.” “Pastors succumb to congregational expectations to ‘do ministry.’ Congregations hire pastors to do ministry and they follow. People might manage big companies, but when they come to the church they look to the pastor for direction in everything.” “I arrived [as the pastor called to a specialized ministry in the congregation] and the people working in that area were relieved, thinking, ‘Now we don’t have to do anything.’ Now I’m watching people leave, claiming that their reason is that I’m not doing my job.”

*The hire-and-fire mentality of the North American society has reduced the pastor’s ministry to a buy-and-sell commodity. A pastor with a vision to equip all the members for ministry...is apt to run into the mentality, “We hired you to do the ministry.”*⁵

Institutional survival

Another systemic block that pastors mentioned is that ‘ministry’ is largely seen as something that happens ‘at church’ because of intense pressure to keep the institution alive. In an age of declining institutions across society, the pressure is enormous to either keep the congregation healthy or to bring the congregation back to what it used to be.

Pastors said things like, “The structure (that is, the ‘institution’) keeps us from enacting the vision and hopes that called us to pursue ordination in the first place.” “Pastors want to be equipping pastors, but the people want us to be chaplains.” “The church building can and should serve as a hub for ministry in the world, but we need to remember that most members spend most of their time away from the building, in the world. I don’t like to equate ‘active faith’ with being on 3 committees. People are involved in ministry in the world, and we need

4 Sue Mallory, *The Equipping Church: Serving Together to Transform Lives* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan, 2001) 40-41.

5 Stevens and Collins, 2.

to recognize and support that.” At the end of one conversation, one pastor noted that “It’s interesting that we talk mostly about in-church stuff,” an accurate reflection that much of the conversation at that location had focused on ministry as something that happens in the church.

In a casual conversation after the eleven gatherings were finished, one pastor was lamenting having missed participating. This pastor expressed a need to have been part of the gatherings because of the perceived difficulty of identifying and training congregational leaders. When reminded that the focus of the conversations was about equipping members for ministry in daily life, this pastor replied, “But I need leaders in the congregation too!”

Congregations need qualified and equipped leaders. Congregations need Sunday school teachers, worship leaders, grounds crews, small group leaders and a host of other volunteers. It *is* important to stoke the fires of the organization. But in the vast majority of congregations, these things become the end instead of the means. We forget the ‘so that.’ We have Sunday school teachers so that children and adults can be prepared for their ministry in the world. We need willing and able small group leaders so that members can talk about and practice for ministry in daily life. Without the ‘so that,’ congregational systems and programs become focused on keeping members in rather than sending them out.

Form does not follow function. The church exists for mission, for the sake of the world. Yet it is organized to build itself up as an institution. It draws people to itself, but fails to send them back out. It blesses the work its members do within the institution, but pays no attention to the work they do ‘outside’ the church.⁶

The split between Sunday and Monday

Bill Diehl’s books in the 1980s and 90s (e.g., *Thank God It’s Monday*) and others like them have drilled into our consciousness the divide between what happens on Sunday and what we do during the rest of the week. We talk about the divide easily and frequently. Study after study report that people are leaving the church or not even giving the church a chance because “what happens there has no connection to my life.”

The pastors who came to the Equipping Pastors conversations were well aware of this divide. In addition, they were able to take the divide further than just a matter of what happens in each distinct environment. “Lutherans struggle with faith in society. We’re not supposed to talk about sex, politics or money!” “People *want*

both a ‘spiritual world’ and a ‘real world.’ In my congregation, when we began to deal with this, at first there was resistance to admitting this was true. I felt I was going to be run out of town for raising the question. Now they’re admitting more honesty and trust. Culture expects us to be ‘Good Christians’ and ‘Good Americans,’ which are very different things. They are different systems with different rules and behaviors. To have status and honor or just to survive in both, I may feel drawn to act like a different person in each.” “It’s not just a matter of there being a split between Sunday and Monday, but it’s a split between church and society, between the sacred and the secular.” “The split between sacred and secular is reinforced by the fact that we use language in the church that doesn’t get used in the ‘real world’.” “In our small town there is a distinct difference between ‘church’ and ‘community.’” “We have to move beyond church as being between ‘me and Jesus’.”

Religion is at best one piece of a busy life, perhaps impacting one’s ‘soul’ or ‘heart’ as a means to help cope with the hectic pace of the rest of life, where other values rule... In such a vision of modern life, love of neighbor may rule the soul, but love of a bargain rules in shopping, love of taste and beauty rules in the arts, and so on. In giving our allegiance to these various sphere-centered values, we in a sense make them gods. ... Most churches and pastoral leaders have accepted the demotion to one sphere of life—that of things ‘spiritual.’⁷

Other systemic blocks

In addition to the three major categories reported above, pastors also reported other factors that block their ability to focus on ministry in daily life. While none of these were reported by large numbers, they are worth including in this report.

The busyness of pastors and members leads to a sense of paralysis. “Length of commitment is a problem for busy people.” “Most people think that they only need to come to worship at my church. They’ll volunteer for worship tasks, but little outside of that.” One pastor repeated the story told at a recent conference about a family that had become so busy that they felt a need to prioritize everything that they do, and then to thin out their activity. When it came to their involvement in the church, this family could not see how the church was making a difference in their lives, and so they decided to stop attending. (This family was encouraged to talk to their pastor first, which led to some congregational changes and a renewal of the family’s commitment.)

⁷ Christian Scharen, *Faith as a Way of Life* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2008), 15, 24.

There is a growing awareness of the difference in expectations between older generations and younger generations. “Boomers called me to be the ‘program’ pastor, but people don’t want programs, so I feel crappy. We are experiencing the breakdown between the boomer church (that expects programs) and the next generation.” “My frustration with ministry in daily life is that I have to talk to people in the ‘church culture’ (who pay the bills) and people who inhabit the ‘tech society’ (who see community in Facebook) at the same time, and that is hard.”

One pastor looked deeper and said, “We’re all looking for the perfect tool to fix our congregations, but we lack the arms to use that tool, even if we found it. We lack prayer, investment in the community in which we are located, and biblical knowledge. Is the western church in need of a miracle, an influx of the Spirit?” Another added, “Our prayer needs to be ‘Lord, stir up the power of the Holy Spirit.’”

And finally, one comment summarized what often happens in the face of all of these systemic blocks: “Pastors retreat to their comfort zone and ministry in daily life is not one of them.”

Confusion about ministry in daily life

Another significant finding that came out of the Equipping Pastors conversations is that there is considerable confusion, both among pastors and among members, about what ministry in daily life is. In most cases, ministry in daily life is restricted by confusion about what ‘ministry’ is.

Internal confusion

As reported in the section above (“It takes ordination to be a minister”), ‘ministry’ is often restricted to what pastors do; at best members are encouraged to find their ministry, but that is often limited to what they can or should do in and through the church.

Put yourself in worship on a Sunday morning in late August. The pastor opens with announcements. And, of course, being late August there is sure to be a pitch for filling the last two slots for Sunday school teachers. That’s all well and good; Sunday school teachers play a vital role in the lives of congregations. But on this particular Sunday, in order to add urgency to the request, this pastor adds, “I hope you’ll consider teaching one of these classes; it’s one of the most important ministries you’ll ever perform in your life.”

Or take for example an article that appeared in a newspaper about how shrinking attendance and shrinking contributions make it hard for many congregations

to support full-time pastors. Unable to afford a full-time priest, and unlikely to attract another like the one who recently served the congregation, the paper reported that one congregation engaged a program that was meant to inspire members to take on many of the traditional ministerial roles. On this congregation's website, one frequently asked question about this program was, Who is it? And the answer is: "All the baptized: Everyone is a minister and has a way to help with God's work. That's why we call it 'total' ministry instead of using other names like 'team' or 'mutual.' Examples: chalice bearer, coffee maker, lector, altar guild, bulletin folder."⁸

The pastors involved in the Equipping Pastors conversations were very much aware of the the fact that we often confuse the 'ministry of the laity' with what it takes to maintain a congregation. One pastor said, "I think institutionally we focus on keeping the machine alive." A second pastor added, "It's easy to get sucked into the machine, and then I get frustrated." In another instance, a pastor said, "We get caught up in needing to keep people in worship, or attracting more people to worship, in order to keep the building in shape and the bills paid."

A few pastors, sometimes very pointedly, had a hard time grasping that 'ministry' could or should be an external activity. Speaking from the context of a congregation that was struggling to survive, one pastor defined ministry as "the need to survive" as an institution.

External confusion

Even when we shift our attention out of the church and into the world, our understanding of ministry in daily life is less than it could be. In many cases, ministry in daily life is seen only as a matter of being 'nice' or 'moral.' One pastor offered, "My ministry [when I was a lay person] was more how I related to people. People knew I was fair. It was a matter of how I lived my life so that when someone suffered loss they would come to me." Often ministry in daily life was described as being faithful to friends, coworkers, not engaging in gossip, speaking of having gone to worship or on a mission trip.

Sometimes ministry in daily life was seen only as "people know that I am a person of faith and so they come to me with spiritual questions." An example of this was, "A friend of mine kept a prayer list on a sticky note on her computer at work; people could see that she prayed for others, so they would bring prayer requests to her."

In a slight twist, at one site pastors spent most of the time talking about ministry

8 July 9, 1999, "Small-Town Episcopal Churches Prepare for the Future," St. Cloud Times, available at www.mother-flash.com/spirit/timesjuly9.html. The page that provided the quote is no longer available on the web.

in the world as evangelism, or at least that evangelism has to be part of what we do or it's not ministry.

One pastor offered, "When I ask people about how their faith is active in their daily life, I get back stories of working in volunteer positions." Another pastor said, "People feel that serving at a food pantry is all they need to do to fulfill their call to ministry—oh, that, and attend worship." In addition, there was a persistent need at many of the sites to talk about ministry in terms of how we place people in volunteer ministries inside (and sometimes outside) the church.

One pastor described a prior call which included the task of equipping members for ministry. The work was focused, not just on filling the congregation's volunteer slots, but on making a concerted effort to "tap their gifts in the world," which, in this case, meant filling slots for volunteer organizations in the community. That is commendable, and certainly reaches further than many congregations. But when this pastor was asked a hypothetical question about how that congregation helped accountants understand their ministry, the first response was "that wasn't always their ministry giftedness." The second response was, "we didn't address how to live faith in daily life."

*For the majority of churchgoing people, Sunday morning is the time to get away from the cares of the world and to think about 'spiritual' things... When pressed to explain how the Sunday experience relates to their daily lives, people frequently respond that they gain strength for the rest of the week. When asked how the strength shows up in their daily lives, however, they become vague. They try to be more patient, more friendly, they say. They try to be more ethical. But when asked if they experience God's presence in their daily activities, the answer is almost universally, 'No.'*⁹

Ministry in daily life certainly includes volunteering, being nice, moral, kind, and fair, but that is only part of what it means to unleash the power of the priesthood of all believers.

Measurement, success, effectiveness

One of the more surprising factors seen in the Equipping Pastors conversations was that there is a good bit of concern about whether pastors are being effective, and even if they are, how that would be measured. One pastor asked pointedly, "Where is our measuring stick that shows us we have effectively equipped

people?” Another said, “Unless you are ‘successful,’ ministry is tough. We need a reality check.”

Several pastors asked, “Am I making a difference?” One asked, “Or are we measuring ourselves against an unrealistic dream?”

Part of the agenda of the conversations was consideration of two of my ‘marks’ of a congregation in renewal. One of them is that “Pastors will be as adept at equipping members for ministry as they are at providing ministry for others.” One pastor asked, “Define adept. Most pastors don’t see the growth of the seeds they plant, so how can you measure success?”

A pastor who had just told a story about helping a mechanic see his ministry asked, “How can I measure my effectiveness?”

Another said, “Evangelicals equate ‘ministry’ with ‘saving souls,’ which is more measurable. Can we give signs or criteria for knowing whether pastors see that they’re making a difference?” Another added, “How do we measure the effectiveness of sowing seeds? Our work is measured by stories told, eyes opened, possibilities expanded. We should find stories and have them told.”

And finally, one participant admitted, “I still evaluate myself on results, but I’m trying to move away from that.”

Second career perspectives

Several second career pastors attended the Equipping Pastors conversations. While the meetings began with confessions by a seasoned single career pastor, some of the second career pastors were able to provide a different perspective. “As a second career pastor, I don’t have the struggle to know what daily life is like. I’m able to share stories of my life as a lay person and how my faith interacted with it.”

“As a second career pastor, I remember when my life was separated into ‘church time’ ‘work time’ ‘family time’ and ‘self time,’ and my faith didn’t intersect with those different areas. As a former insurance underwriter, I don’t do a good job of talking to people about how, say, an insurance underwriter lives out his/her faith. Now, when I go into those various spheres (such as my child’s soccer game) as a pastor, I notice that I change the atmosphere. People start asking faith/spirituality questions. Spiritually speaking, this is a good thing; it gives me an opportunity to lift up our reason for hope. But at times it is a pain because you might find yourself as not be treated as a human.” Later in the conversation, though, the same pastor said, “As a lay person, the church didn’t see the value of my work as an insurance underwriter.”

Another pastor said, “Before I became a pastor, I experienced faith intersecting with life. My self-understanding is that I never stopped being a lay person—I’m now just set apart for a particular task.”

Theological grounding needed

Based on these findings, it is apparent that some theological grounding would be both appropriate and helpful. Questions such as the following would be helpful to pursue:

What is the nature and the purpose of the church?

What is God’s desire for the world and how does God work to achieve that desire?

What is ministry? How is it different from mission? from vocation?

How do lay people define ministry, and is it different from how pastors define it?

What is “the ministry of the church”?

Where is ministry done, and who does it?

Is ‘equipping’ the right word?

The pastors who attended the conversations offered a great deal of comment that centered on these questions. Some pastors offered helpful insight, while others raised the questions or confessed that they were confused or unsure about the answers.

It is beyond the scope of this interim report to lay out the theological grounding that is needed for a fuller understanding of ministry in daily life. For the time being, suffice it to say that ministry in daily life is much richer and fuller than we have allowed it to be. The ministry of all the baptized is rooted in God’s desire to be incarnate (enfleshed) in the world—in us—so that the world might be restored to what God intended it to be from the very beginning. Often called the *missio Dei* (the mission of God), ministry is God’s way of being present and active in us for the sake of the world. We are all called to ministry in our baptism; some of us (a very small percentage of us!) were ‘set aside’ or ordained for the ministry of Word and Sacrament or the ministry of Word and Service, for the “building up the body of Christ” (Eph. 4:12c). The work of building up the Body is an important—*critically* important—ministry, but not for its own sake; biblically speaking the Body, the people of God, the called-out ones, are always for the sake of the world.

their time *in the church*, working for the building up of the Body, as they should. But it seems that we forget that those who have not been set aside for this particular task spend their lives *in the world*, where ministry also takes place. Ministry

*We are a sent people. We don't wait for someone to send us out and then we go; we're already there.*¹⁰

happens in the farm field, where food is grown so that people might be fed. Ministry happens in classrooms, where children and adults receive education necessary for their welfare and for the sake of the world. Ministry happens when a parent changes a diaper, clothes and feeds, shelters and raises their child. Ministry happens when an adult child cares for their aging parent. Ministry happens in the workplace where products are produced, where countless decisions are made, where people and all creation are protected and served.

To that end, the church exists, God's people, called out of the world—not to escape it—but to be cleansed and nourished, forgiven and fed, prepared, empowered and commissioned to serve in the world.

God is at work, ministry is happening

It is encouraging that some pastors who attended the Equipping Pastors conversations were intent on naming and claiming the reality that God is at work in the world, that ministry *is* happening, in an astonishing variety of ways. Pastors were also aware that most people just can't name or articulate it.

"People are out doing incredible ministry; we should just spotlight that," said one participant. Another asked, "Are we making too much of our failures? My people are doing all kinds of ministry." Another said, "I have folks (especially those with a non-Lutheran background) who see their faith at work in their lives."

"What is ministry?" one pastor asked before continuing: "People are already doing ministry, they just don't know it. Our stewardship committee decided to celebrate service, generosity & faithfulness. We invited people to speak to what they are doing in those areas."

One pastor cited author Kelly Fryer who says that ministry in daily life is not a matter of 'taking Jesus out there,' but joining God out there, who is already at work. Another added, "God is everywhere; God is equipping all the time." And another said, "So maybe we go to a member and ask, 'What is God doing in the insurance business these days?' We've given people a deficient image of God at

¹⁰ From a Church of the Brethren judicatory leader, as we reflected on the findings from the eleven conversations.

work in the world. The 2nd and 3rd articles of the creed are about God’s work in the world.”

What pastors can do

A question at the end of the conversations about the way forward resulted in several people asking for a list of ideas that came out of the conversations, especially those that might be tried at home. It is encouraging that a number of ideas came out of the conversations about what pastors are doing, can or should do in order to encourage a better understanding of ministry in daily life in their congregations.

One pastor stated, “This all starts with our attitude—that we value what people do and we encourage their ministry.” It seems abundantly clear that this is a critical factor. Regardless of the systemic expectations and obstacles that we encounter, reminding ourselves constantly about what we are trying to do is central in keeping our work focused on the ‘so that,’ the movement of the church into the world. The same pastor who said that this starts with our attitude went on to add, “For instance, when someone cannot do something at church because of another commitment, we affirm that that is their ministry right now and we find someone else to do what we need to have done.” At another site a participant said, “My attitude is first; ministry in daily life is central to what I do.” That pastor went on to offer an interesting mental image: “I find myself wanting to walk my people to the door. How do we get the good news that we celebrate here out of the church and into the community?”

Another participant told a story of how they had ended a ministry in the congregation, but extended ministry to larger circles: “Yesterday we said ‘job well done’ as we closed a WELCA circle. We recalled the history of the circle, and we offered a prayer of thanksgiving for all that they had been and done. We emphasized that the ministry of the circle was ending, but not the ministry of the women in their lives.”

One pastor asked, “How can we celebrate the ministry we all have outside the church?” At another site a participant offered, “Luther said, ‘Whatever it is people are doing is holy work.’ I spent a year visiting people in workplaces, helping them see how they are in ministry. I helped my mechanic see his work as ministry (that is, care) for my son, who was about to drive his car across the country.” Another said, “Ask people ‘Where has God been present this past week?’ Most people at first would probably expect to see smoke (e.g, the burning bush) before they’d make the connection. Most people say that they see God in difficult situations. Some have thought about this, some haven’t. Some people would say ‘God

is not going to be found in my accounting business; God is in church.’” Another said, “Conversations about how to be faithful and a parent would be welcome in my congregation.”

Having just come back from a conference, one pastor said, “In his sermon, Roland Martinson mentioned the conversation he had with someone at work in the world. It spurred me to see ministry in a vegetable farmer in our congregation who is intentional about stewardship of the land, and a banker who sees his ministry as helping farmers face hard decisions.”

Returning to the opening suggestion about our attitude being first, of the need to change our own perceptions about how faith intersects with life, and what ministry is, one pastor confessed, “On my day off, I don’t want to do church work.” This comment raises the question of pastors’ perceptions of what ministry is, and how we focus only on internal aspects of it. The same pastor continued, “We focus on, like to have, feel like we’re doing ministry right when people are at the church. What we don’t do well is to tell the stories of people at work, joining God, in the world.”

In other settings, one person said, “The teachers of ministry in daily life are the laity.” Another offered, “We need to train ourselves to see ministry in daily life before we can help lay people see it.” And again, “We (pastors) don’t know about the ministries members are doing in the world.” Another added, “So pastors need to listen to the stories members are telling one another. We need to name the ministries members are doing. People do this casually...” Another added, “But it helps when it’s intentional. They are powerful stories, and people will remember those more than my sermons.” (See the section on Testimony below.)

The most direct way to equip the saints for the work of ministry is not to devise strategies for equipping individuals but to equip the church (as a system). Then the church will equip the saints.¹¹

To summarize this work, participants identified that the pastor’s task is to provide a place where people can articulate the ministry that they are already doing. Most helpful, perhaps, was the comment, “The central task of an equipping pastor is to attend to and name the ministry you see or hear from the members. It’s not a program to teach them how to do it, it’s helping them see that they are doing ministry.” One person wondered out loud, “What if I called somebody on Wednesday and asked them, How have you ministered so far this week?” Another offered, “I can train people to ask, What is God doing in the world and how am I called to help?”

11 Stevens and Collins, 41.

Some participants talked about the difficulty of engaging congregational leaders in conversations on topics like these. Many said that councils are not willing to spend time on scriptural engagement, prayer or other ‘non-business’ items. Some said that council members would come to the meeting late if they knew something like that was first on the agenda. One pastor suggested, “My council won’t go on retreat, but after a few extended conversations about our mission statement, I eventually managed to get a block of 20 minutes on our agenda. It’s called ‘time apart’, and it’s the fourth item (so that members cannot come late or leave early to avoid it), and during that time we look at meaning, purpose and values.” Another pastor added, “I know of a church that has meetings that alternate monthly between business and vision.”

*Pastors are not called to get people to assist them with their ministry; rather, the pastor is called to assist the people, the laity, with **their** ministry both in the church and in the world.¹²*

One idea for what pastors could do to encourage ministry in daily life came not from the participants, but from Bill Diehl’s book, *The Monday Connection*.¹³ In the book he briefly describes a group that he started in his church by the same name as the book. The group met monthly, and a participant volunteered to bring a real-life case study of a problem they were facing, often (but not always) related to work. The group would explore the problem with the presenter, but they would never try to tell the person what to do. The pastor was present as a biblical and theological resource person, but never as the “all-knowing authority on all subjects.” They intentionally looked for connections between Sunday worship and the case study.

Testimony

One pastor wondered aloud, “Is the disconnect between what we do at church and what people do in the world due to the fact that people are not hearing the stories of ministry from others?” One of the surprises in the Equipping Pastors conversations was an unexpected openness to what is commonly called testimony. Four years ago I conducted a survey, looking for topics that would be of interest to potential workshop attendees. Participants were asked to rank 20 topics on two scales: Importance in the life of their congregation, and likelihood of people attending a workshop on that topic. Testimony, one of the options, scored considerably lower on both scales than all of the other topics. One

¹² Elton Trueblood, *The Company of the Committed* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1961) as quoted in *The Equipping Pastor*, 2.

¹³ Diehl, *The Monday Connection*, 52-55.

participant reflected the commonly held distrust of testimony with the most paradoxical statement made in all the conversations: “Our outreach committee has a rule: We will not speak to people outside the church about faith.”

At the Equipping Pastors conversations, though, some pastors revealed that they are using testimony; even more pastors indicated an openness to trying it, and an awareness that it might be an appropriate way to support and encourage ministry in daily life. “Do people at my church talk to one another in God terms? If they don’t do that here, how can we expect them to do it at home or at work?” “I want to gather people and have them talk about how they connect faith to life.” “Somebody in our conference did testimony during Lent—it was *powerful!*” “So the equipping pastor helps people to identify and tell their stories of God at work in their lives. After the creed we have people tell their neighbor a story of where they’ve seen God at work this week.” “A blue collar congregation I know of uses video blogs to tell short stories of people at work, then they’re shared by email.”

Speaking to the both the skepticism that Lutherans feel about testimony and its potential, one participant said, “We’re considering implementing testimony in worship. Our council admitted, though, that they are afraid to name ‘God’ outside the church. I’m encouraging people to reflect on and talk about where they’ve seen God at work in the last week. I’m scared of testimony, but until we speak ‘God’ to one another, we won’t/can’t do it in daily life.”

A word of caution about testimony is in order: In keeping with earlier observations about how we “talk mostly about in-church stuff,” the conversations also revealed that testimony is often redirected from reflecting on ministry in daily life to ‘how this congregation has helped me.’ This frequently happens at stewardship time when leaders are trying to help members see the value of contributing to the organization. One pastor admitted, “We made time available once a month during worship to talk about how life in the church has affected them. But we ran out of people who were willing to talk in 18 months.”

And finally, one person who came from a non-Christian background spoke from a very different perspective than those of us who grew up in church: “As someone who has not always been a Christian, I am around people who have recently come to Christ. We freely talk about Christ and what he has done in my life. Life-long Christians seem to be afraid of offending others if they dare to talk about Christ.”

Anxiety about “another program”

It didn't surface frequently, but there was some concern about adding “something else” to already overworked pastors and congregations. One pastor asked bluntly, “Is this another program, something else I'm supposed to do or something that I'm supposed to do differently?” Thinking that any effort to focus on ministry in daily life would mean getting people to do something more or other than what they're already doing, one pastor said, “Programs are OK, but can I get the right people to sign up—those who need it?”

Wisely, though, one pastor said, “This is not a matter of starting a new program or adding anything to over-burdened lives. It's a matter of looking at how God is working through me in a play or at the boosters. I'm not sure how to systematize that. I have the most luck when I stop in at people's workplace to visit.”

Hear the good news: this doesn't need to be another program, something “more” that people can, should, or ought to do. As one theologian in the missional church movement said, our task is to “guide people to identify God's calling, to recognize the gifts and opportunities they have, to provide them the biblical and theological training to incarnate the gospel in their particular fields, and then to commission them to that ministry.”¹⁴

As the pastors said, God is already at work in the world. God is seeking to restore the world to what it was intended to be, and God is doing that work through us. As one pastor said, “I want to help people see ministry as an everyday activity. I want to help people use faith language. It'd be like the Pentecost story where the listeners say, ‘Hey! They're speaking in my language!’ ”

Next steps

The final question at each of the conversations was about appropriate next steps for this work on Equipping Pastors. The conversations had been billed as a one-time, 90 minute commitment. We were interested to know if participants saw a way to keep the process going, or if they were aware of something they would like to do or participate in.

Just about every group expressed the desire to meet again. Some spoke of holding these conversations again in six months to see what progress people had made. Others spoke about forming accountability groups or colleague groups. “This conversation has been helpful. The small group gave us time for sharing and stories.” “Ministry is frustrating. I want to talk with colleagues and find out

how we can work together. I want someone to reflect with about what I'm doing and why. What do I need to do?" "I would drop everything and clear my calendar for the opportunity to talk like this once every quarter." "We need more conversations like these, but we need to focus on what works so that we don't focus on our failures." "I would like to have an accountability group. I have lots of ideas, but I don't always follow through." "The concept of the Equipping Pastor is worth more conversation. Maybe next time we should talk about what 'the ministry of the church' is?" "I like the option of gathering again. Accountability is good."

Interestingly, at one site it was suggested that "we should involve lay people in this conversation. What would lay people say an equipping pastor is?" I am looking for a way to do this, either via focus groups with pastors observing behind two-way mirrors, or taping the conversations and showing the video to pastors.

This report was one of the next steps suggested at several sites. Participants felt that it would be good to summarize the conversations and what was learned. Some asked that we compile the ideas that were presented that others might want to try in their congregations. Others asked that, like the Needs Assessment Report of 2007, we add reflection questions that could be used to foster similar conversations in congregational meetings and/or groups. Some suggested that the report include a bibliography, including the annotations provided for these conversations. We are glad to supply these requests in this report, and in the accompanying study guide.

One pastor wisely suggested, "Maybe the way forward will become clear after you write the report." This is still, very much, a work in progress. As stated in the introduction, this is not a final report. We hope you will continue this conversation in your congregation and then report back to us. Finding a way to continue these conversations, according to the insistence of those who participated is important. In addition, I hope to expand this conversation to involve pastors from other denominations in the near future. I am also exploring this topic with seminary professors in several denominations.

For further reading

Richard Bruesehoff, *Pastor and People: Making Mutual Ministry Work* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2003). See especially chapters 1 & 2.

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William E. Diehl, *Ministry in Daily Life: A Practical Guide for Congregations* (Herndon, Virginia: Alban Institute, 1996).

William E. Diehl, *The Monday Connection* (New York: HarperSanFrancisco, 1991).

William E. Diehl, *Thank God It's Monday* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1982).

Norma Cook Everist and Craig L. Nesson, *Transforming Leadership: New Vision for a Church in Mission* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2008). See Chapter 16.

Norma Cook Everist and Nelvin Voss, *Where in the World Are You? Connecting Faith and Daily Life* (Herndon, Virginia: Alban Institute, 1996).

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