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Ministry: An Expanded Concept of Leadership

"All I've ever wanted to do was to be a mother and a hairdresser, so that must be my ministry." Lee

In spite of the many pronouncements about the role of the laity in the world, there seems to be within the church a very restrictive view of what constitutes ministry. All too often, ministry is seen as activities which are sanctioned by the church, are formally set up through the agency of the church, or are led by people appointed by the church. Ministries are defined within local parishes, for example, as the functioning committees which address everything from social justice issues to property maintenance. This is ministry, but to define it only in terms of such church-related activities is to miss most of the opportunities for extending the kingdom of God.

With the increase in the number of women working full-time outside the home and with all Americans spending more time on the job than did their parents, they have few hours available to devote to formal church ministries. We believe that the church documents alluded to above hold the answer: that the work people do day-to-day should be considered their ministry. For the church to be effective in achieving a gospel-bound, mission-focused vision, a leadership which understands a broadened concept of ministry and behaves accordingly is needed.

The authors share a deep concern about ministry, both ecclesial ministry and that ministry carried out in people's day-to-day lives, especially in the marketplace. As we undertook our research project, we wanted to know how people see their work in relationship to the concept of "ministry." Some acquaintances advised against even asking such a question, suggesting that the term "ministry" would be a turn-off for most people. We tested it, however, and decided to retain the question, asking people if they view what they are doing in the marketplace as ministry. The response was almost universal; their work is indeed their ministry, some even describing it as their call. A number said that they made a definite choice to continue in their present occupation because they view it as ministry. Others went so far as to equate their occupation with their "mission." Interestingly, while these people are clear in their understanding of what they do as ministry and value it in those terms, their most compelling remarks indicate that they are doubtful their pastors and other church leaders share this conviction. They never hear their work so characterized.

What is the gap between formal church pronouncements about the role of laity and their church experience as they interact with religious leaders?

Ministry as Described by the Wisdom People

Too often definitions limit our understanding and appreciation of the things defined. We hope that the insights provided by the wisdom people will expand leaders' thinking, stimulating a reevaluation of their own concepts of ministry, and ultimately removing an impediment to leadership effectiveness.

Lee's conversation, quoted at the beginning of this chapter, tells the story of her awakening to the fact that her ministry is as compelling and powerful as any which is carried out under the direct auspices of the church.

Lee was the only person in the group interviewed who was recommended by two different people. Those who nominated her claimed that when visiting Lee to have their hair done, they felt ministered to. Yet, when asked if she saw what she was doing as ministry, she hesitated. She suggested that prior to being invited into the interview, she had viewed ministry as "something done in the church." She would not, therefore, have conceived of herself as a minister. As she prepared for the interview, however, she thought about what she does in a different way, triggered by the fact that those who nominated her saw her work in larger terms than she herself did. Her reflection led her to realize that she is ministering, she is a minister.
It was from this thought process that she now describes ministry as, "Touching other people's lives in a positive way." When we asked if her pastor would see what she is doing as ministry, Lee replied, "Probably not." Clearly, his definition of ministry is a limited one, one which he and others apparently passed on to Lee. She had never before been challenged to think of what she does as ministry.

Interestingly, soon after our interview with Lee, we had the opportunity to conduct a clergy education program in the diocese where she lives. Sharing her story, including her perception of what her pastor's response would typically be, we added that he might be among those attending. Lee later reported that the Sunday after the clergy education conference, her pastor preached on the value of the ministry of Christians in the workplace!

After Lee's initial reticence in the interview, she became quite eloquent about her emerging understanding of ministry. It was an exhilarating experience to feel her excitement as she dealt with her new insights. She had an enhanced sense of self-esteem and power, a feeling that she might do even more, buoyed by the confidence in her that others had expressed. Her new understanding of ministry truly came as a gift from those who nominated her. She can now appreciate herself as a minister. She better understands where her ministry lies, seeing herself as most effective when addressing the needs of her women clients. She helps them feel better about themselves, not in a narcissistic way, but healthily appreciating and valuing themselves.

Lee also mentions that she ministers to the families of recently deceased people through the care she takes in arranging the hair of the deceased at a local mortuary. Her compassion is evident as she reflects on the pain that the families are experiencing and how her ministry is a consolation to them. Her witness is using her professional skills to live out a corporal work of mercy.

Lee concludes her reflections on ministry with her remark about being both a mother and a hairdresser. Then, and with a broad smile, she adds two additional roles: "a friend and a psychologist" to those she serves.

Like Lee's astute definition of ministry as a way of touching people's lives, other wisdom people provide similarly profound insights to challenge some common and narrow definitions of ministry, presenting a more expansive concept of what ministry involves.

Dawne expands on the idea of ministry as something encompassing one's entire life, describing how she came to realize the breadth of ministry in her work:

"The paperwork at first was something I felt was a job. Gradually, I have begun to see that the letters I write are also an opportunity to minister. The words that I choose, the tone of the letter, the promptness of it, not keeping people waiting, giving them what they want or need in whatever form that might take is ministry."

Clearly, Dawne can see in the subtleties of all she does how ministry is fostered in how she reaches and impacts others.

Ministry is touching people in profoundly Christian ways in all that we do. Ministry may be implicit in the manner in which one extends himself or herself to another, as in the way Lee supports her customers, listening to their pain and comforting them. Or it may be explicit, with the minister specifically seeking people out and letting them know that she or he is there to minister. Examples of this would be showing a willingness to discuss troublesome ethical issues or calling a group to its broader social responsibilities as it makes business decisions.

Nancy acknowledges that what she does daily at the office is truly ministry, which she describes as an attitude and an approach, rather than a specific occupation:

"I think all life is a ministry and you are called to do whatever you are doing. Ministry is a way of doing something, rather than a particular occupational role."

Serving as a lawyer for congress, she drafts legislation which will have positive social impact. She knows the law intimately and speaks with animation and glee as she describes her role in assisting a native American tribe to successfully litigate a claim. Her work is so important to her that she says:
"Even if I knew I was going to die two months from now or a year from now, I would definitely continue in this job, because it is meaningful and important. With my background and skills and interests, it's the best thing I could be doing right now. I feel that this is a job where I can really be of service to the public. I can really think in terms of what really makes the most sense from an overall policy perspective ... just being able to take a larger, social approach..."

Joe shares the insight which came to him when he attended a business vocations conference. His ministerial awakening occurred as he listened to one of the speakers. What struck him was the realization that through his position at work he has the opportunity to influence the lives and behaviors of people in a most forceful and meaningful way:

Up to that point, I never thought of my work as a ministry. The lights went on and now I see it as a ministry. It's not that I'm doing anything differently, but I am seeing it as a ministry.

Joe becomes lively as he describes his excitement in being able to have a positive influence on the development and growth of employees throughout the organization. The thing that is most evident about this man is the enthusiasm he has for his work, his ministry:

"I really enjoy working. I like my people. I like the environment. I like impacting, making things happen. I like hiring people. I like seeing people grow."

While Joe's awareness was sudden, triggered by the conference speaker he heard, others come to an appreciation of their career as ministry in more gradual ways. Caroline had been a Catholic school principal for eight years before she realized in a full sense that she had a vocation, a calling, a ministry. She describes how a "simple little booklet" about the role of the principal provided the stimulus for her reflection, leading her to new, exciting, and energizing insights about what she is doing. She relates how she "imaged" her role, ceasing to look at it as merely a job, and seeing it as something to which the Lord calls her. She now views it as "a vocation."

For Sharon, it was a traumatic incident which enabled her -to develop an understanding of how her role as a personnel director is her ministry. The catalyst for her was the devastating impact that layoffs in her company were having, not only on the people who lost their jobs, but on the entire organization. Recalling the varied responses of people to the crisis of losing their jobs, she came to realize the importance of her own role. "I had never experienced such a profound sense of ministry as I had on that day." She is grateful for the support that she receives from others in her field who have faced similar challenges. She especially praised one person employed as a human resource specialist in a hospital who often gives her a reinforcing message, "You know, this is our ministry."

Peter differentiates between what he sees as ministry with a capital "M" and ministry with a small "m". "I see what I do in the workplace as a small "m" meaning just being of service to others, trying to serve others and giving something back." In Peter's statement there is, perhaps, the key to the difficulty that some leaders have with ministry; they see only capital "M" Ministry as valid, that done under the specific auspices of the church, neither recognizing nor supporting that which is carried out by people each day.

Jim, who heads a construction company, tells of his struggles with making daily decisions which are complicated by tensions between the pressures and practices of the industry and his personal life as a Christian. He talks about the pain he felt as he attempted to deal with day to day decisions, going so far as to seek counseling to bring some of his conflicts to resolution. The result was that he came to a new and creative awareness: "I've got to make my job my ministry." He saw the need to be true to himself, to live by his values of compassion and fairness, if he was going to be at peace with himself and still run a successful company. When we pressed Jim to define what makes what he is doing in the construction business a ministry, he identified a number of elements:

"We really believe that what we do is to serve God. We have an obligation to everyone who works here to take care of them. We have an obligation to take care of our subcontractors ... to be fair with people ... to set a good example. It's like putting yourself in their place and knowing their hurts and their troubles. They have to make a living and they have families to support."
Ministry as a Call
Traditionally in the church we have referred to a vocation as a "call." Like Lee who is clear that her call and ministry are to be a mother and hairdresser, others also use the term "call" to express their conviction that what they do daily in the marketplace is their ministry.

Elizabeth describes the nurses in her unit as consciously identifying what they do, not only as a ministry, but as a calling. Like Lee, ministry for Elizabeth and her co-workers is touching other people. But the touching is special; it is not merely physical care, it is reaching deeper. "We touch people at the core of their being."

Scott expands on this concept:
"Organizing is not a career and not a profession: it's a vocation. You really feel called to do it. I don't know where that comes from and I don't know why I feel like that. If I'm not doing this, I'm not doing what I'm supposed to be doing. In my case it's so clear ... I have a call."

Marge describes the evolution of her understanding of her work as a call. Her major ministry is working in a school with children and their families.

When I first went into this work, I saw it as a job I'd be involved in for awhile, and then maybe I'd get into more formal church ministry. There's a sense of reality [to] what I'm doing there that's so powerful. You can be such an agent of change in that situation. It's just incredible. When asked what she means by being a change agent, Marge responds, "What you are, even more than what you do, has an impact on people in the workplace." She gives a number of poignant examples of "little throw away things" which carry strong messages to others, illustrating the fact that living one's values consistently ultimately has a strong influence on people. Marge's one caution is that a person must always be alert to "discern that I'm being called to do something in this situation to impact people." Self-awareness, not self-consciousness, is needed to know how best to serve and to convey to others the strength of one's values. For Marge, her gift is "standing with people," being present to them. From her experience she encourages church leaders to stress with people how significant each one is. It is through one's individuality and gifts that a person makes a difference in the lives of others. Such affirmation helps people to discern their call and enhances the value of their ministry.

Christians With a Mission
Many equate their careers with ministry. Some go even further, referring to what they do in the marketplace as their "mission." This view was not restricted to those who are in the traditional helping professions. It cut across the entire spectrum of occupations.

Richard had been the victim of racial prejudice and bias. It is out of this reality that he describes "my mission to help others and myself to continue to grow and learn." He uses the painful as the vehicle for transformation to the good, not allowing bitterness and cynicism to gain ascendancy.

Mirta who, like Richard, is a member of an ethnic minority, describes her mission in terms of "co-creation." She is an enabler. As she has learned to grow through life experience, she helps others to free themselves to be themselves.

A strong sense of mission infuses Chris's view of his dual role as manager and publisher:
"I see what I do here with my employees as my ministry and my mission. That's important. In a sense, you accept responsibility for people when you accept a management role. I see the mission in what I do. I really believe that the gospel message of love in this crazy world is the only solution to the problems we face, and in some small way, I think here, through our publishing, we can bring [out] the gospel values, reinterpreting those values and making the gospel relevant in the contemporary world."

Chris believes this so strongly that he decided to stay with his present company even though it meant foregoing an opportunity for financial and professional advancement. He was not convinced he could do the things he believes are important in publishing had he gone with another company.
As is evident from these examples, the wisdom people are clear in their understanding of ministry: it extends far beyond their church-related activities and flowers primarily where they live their daily workplace lives. Their view is not novel or radical. It is consistent with the long-established teaching of the churches, restated by the Second Vatican Council in the 1960s and by the recent Synod on the Laity, held in Rome in 1987.

All the baptized participate in the mission in the world, the church's secular vocation, but do so in different ways. For lay Christians their presence and activity in the world is not something simply incidental; rather it is central to their vocation; the "world" is the environment and the means by which a lay Christian lives out his or her vocation.

The Church and an Expanded Concept of Ministry

One of the sad lessons learned from this research is the gap alluded to earlier. On the one hand, we have the clear, powerful, and forthright documents issued by the institutional churches, stressing the validity and value of the ministries of laity in the marketplace. On the other, there appears to be very little acknowledgement, affirmation, and support of that concept by many church leaders. All too often their bias—and we speak of church teachers, pastoral council members, religious education directors, pastoral ministers, clergy, and religious—is to favor church-sponsored ministry, failing to recognize that many people do not have the interest, skills, or time for such ministry. People are heavily challenged by what they do daily and would dilute their effectiveness were they to take on additional ministry-work. Interestingly, while people see no higher value in church-sponsored ministry (merely because it is church-sponsored) than what they are doing, many in church leadership do differentiate, stressing the significance of church-sponsored ministry over that performed in the world of work.

This is not the viewpoint taken by Bishop Howard Hubbard of the Diocese of Albany. In a recent pastoral letter, he asserts that the preeminent ministry is ministry in the world. All other is in support of that: the liturgical, sacramental and educational ministries of the church exist to prepare people to assume their ministry in the world.

The thinking of Hubbard is not new. It was Archbishop Ireland, one of the first Catholic archbishops in the United States who stated:

"We are certain of failure if we are in the sanctuary when we should be in the highways and byways. If we are on our knees, when we should be fleet of foot."

For many the criterion of sanctity was the amount of time one spent in private prayer. Ireland challenges that assumption, maintaining that true Christianity and true spirituality are social in nature, exemplified in compassionate action and not sedentary piety.

The Synod on the Laity produced many statements supporting and encouraging the ministry of the laity in the marketplace. Perhaps no one captured it as well as Cardinal O'Feigh, the Primate of Ireland, who stood in the midst of that august assembly and declared:

"Patty O'Shea was a man who went to church; he never missed a Sunday, but when he died, he went to hell for what he did on Monday."

At the same synod, Archbishop Worlock of Liverpool declared:

"More people, priests, religious and laity, share in the life of the church than ever before. But I have to ask myself the extent to which the renewal of the secular order has been a primary concern within the church. Have the laity turned away from their vocation in the world and from public life and politics because they have not wished to be contaminated by the corruption of the "affairs of the world?" Or has there been so much concentration on the renewal of worship and structures of the church that lay persons have been drawn into new ministries and structures of dialogue and perhaps overlooked their secular responsibilities?"

Monsignor Peter Coughlan, then Undersecretary of the Pontifical Council for the Laity, sums up one of the major points of that synod:

"Today, in the world of economy and work, transformations are taking place which area cause for serious concern. The lay faithful should be in the front line in working out
solutions to the extremely serious problems of growing unemployment. They must fight
overcome in a timely way the numerous injustices that arise from unacceptable ways
of organizing work. They must strive to make the workplace a community of persons who
are respected in their uniqueness & in their right to participation: They must arouse new
forms of entrepreneurship & review the systems of commerce, finance, & the exchange of
technology."

Lest you think these are recent concepts in the American church, we offer the insights of Archbishop
Spalding who in 1902 complained that the denial of apostolic opportunities to the laity does not flow from
the nature of the church. Rather, "those who happen to share her course and policy at the moment are
narrow and unintelligent."

With such clear documents illuminating the expansive concept of ministry, it is disheartening to realize
that those engaged in ministries in the world are not often acknowledged by church leaders. What we
heard from the wisdom people is that there is little encouragement and support extended to those laboring
in the world. There are few homilies which deal substantively with the issues they regularly face. Adult
education programs that they might attend are mostly focused on church-related themes. Their occupations
and skills are recognized and supported only when some value from them might accrue to the church
organization. The wisdom people tell us that rarely is their responsibility for carrying Jesus' message to the
world proclaimed, explored, and celebrated.

We believe that one of the roots of the problem is a limited view of spirituality on the part of church
leaders. Rather than seeing full integration of all that one is and does as the substance of the spiritual life,
they emphasize the explicitly spiritual activities with which they are primarily concerned. Sadly, the result
is that many people find leaders' messages somewhat irrelevant. What they emphasize does not deal with
the realities of daily life where spiritual concepts and values are tested. Just as we want legislators to
incorporate Christian values into the laws they write to recall the point that Hillman makes we want to see
church leaders who understand the challenges their people face as they attempt to live out their Christian
values and beliefs.

Conclusion
Reflection on the insights of the wisdom people and the pronouncements of church commentators quoted
above might assist Christian leaders in evaluating their own understanding of ministry. We suggest that all
Christian leaders enter into dialogue and listen to people like those we have introduced. They have much
to say and much valuable information to impart. They need support and can become even more effective
in their ministries if leaders are willing to invest time and energy.

The benefits which accrue to leaders and to the community from support of workplace ministries of the
laity are significant:

- The influence of the church in promulgating Christian values is greatly extended.
- The workplace serves as; the crucible in which the strength of homiletic messages can be
tested. Support of laity is empowering, conveying their vital role as co-disciples in
bringing the kingdom of God to reality.
- Recognizing the gifts of the laity builds a stronger sense of community.
- The involvement of laity in such ministry provides the church with ears to hear the needs
of the broader community.

Reflection Questions
1. How do I define ministry?
2. Is this definition of ministry broad or narrow?
3. In what ways does my church organization/group support the ministries of people in the world?
   In my organization/group, does ministry with a capital "M" takes precedence over that with a lower
case "m"?