

Theological Affirmations

By Ann A. Michel

A paradigm of ministry that is inclusive of the gifts and callings of clergy and laity alike rests on following beliefs about the nature of ministry.

1. Ministry belongs to God.

Ministry is part of the mission of God. The church and ministry exist to serve God's mission of redeeming and transforming the world. We are invited to be partners in God's mission. But the mission belongs to God. In every arena where we work, God is already at work. Ministry is not the possession, privilege, or prerogative of any human agent or institution. No one has a right to a particular ministry or task because ministry is not a privilege or a right, but a service.

In this era of expanding lay ministry, clergy often describe their role as "empowering laity for ministry" or "giving ministry away" to the laity. While such phrases are well-intended, they rest on the assumption that ministry is the clergy's to give away. The Holy Spirit, not the clergy, empowers the body of Christ. And we are given a role in God's ministry not by leaders, but by God. For ministry belongs to God.

2. Ministry is service.

The ministry of the church is an extension of the servanthood of Jesus. The English word ministry originates from with Greek work *diakonia* (in Latin, *ministerium*.) It is best translated simply as service. Over and against our tendency to define ministry in terms of position, power, or professional standing, we must reclaim the New Testament's insistence that ministry is service.

3. Ministry is infinite.

When ministry is properly viewed as service, ministry becomes infinite. There can never be too much ministry or too many ministers. Some allege that various forms of lay ministry dilute the ministry. When ministry is defined as institutional prerogative rather than service, it becomes a zero-sum game. It must be controlled tightly and doled out sparingly. Dividing ministry into smaller and smaller pieces limits the practice of ministry at a time when the service of God and the needs of God's world require more ministries, not less. A broad and diverse ministry is a natural outgrowth of the mission of the Gospel in the face of the multiplicity of human needs and the diverse circumstances to which the church is called minister.

4. Ministry involves doing.

Ministry is a verb. It involves doing something for the sake of the gospel in the world. Ministry is not an office or a designation. It is not a state of mind, an order of being, or an ontological classification. There can be no ministry without action. To affirm that ministry is service is to understand ministry as action.

5. Ministry is a sign of God's love in the world.

Ministry is necessarily about action, but it is also more than just work. Christians and non-Christians engage in service motivated by humanitarian concern or civic responsibility. An act of service becomes ministry when it is a visible sign of God's love the world. Motivation is important to ministry. Willingness to sacrifice is important to ministry. A task can become a ministry when it is undertaken in service to people in the name of the church.

6. Not every activity of Christian believers is ministry.

While ministry can encompass a very broad range of activities, not every deed or even every aspect of Christian life is ministry. One commentator has wryly observed that anything from gardening to golf can be referred to as ministry today. One could imagine situations in which an expression of ministry might involve gardening or golf. But gardening and golf are not in and of themselves ministries.

7. Ministry is relational.

Ministry is about people and relationships. Edward Hanneberg explains that “Ministry begins when one life touches another. It is a way of relating, a relationship.” It entails relationships of service that celebrate and advance God’s mission. In the postmodern era, the authority and credibility of ministry is more likely to be built on the basis of trust and relational credit than titles, credentials, or the symbols of the clerical office. “The post-modern world wants to know the heart of its leadership,” according to George Cladis.

8. Ministry is empowered by the Spirit.

Certain titles, offices, symbols, and statuses are thought to convey religious authority. But at the most fundamental level, the authority for ministry does not flow from any of these institutional trappings. The power that authorizes ministry is spiritual. From a theological perspective, power is not something that one possesses but a reality that one participates in by opening one’s self to the work of the Spirit. When power and authority flow from the indwelling of the Spirit, one individual’s power does not come at the expense of another’s.

9. Ministry grows out of the community of faith.

Ministry has a public character. While some ministries involve individual tasks or require discretion, it cannot be said that any ministry is a private or a personal ministry. Gifts for ministry are given to all the faithful to build and renew the church. They are not private gifts. Ministry is grounded in the faith community which is responsible for naming gifts and helping to discern whether a person is called to a particular ministry. Ministry is rooted in the body.

10. Ministry is accountable.

Just as ministry originates in the community of faith it is also accountable to that same community. The church sustains, nurtures, directs, and when necessary, redirects the ministries that emanate from its corporate life. It is particularly important, as lay ministry expands, that structures and relationships of accountability be provided.

11. Ministry is collaborative.

Ministry never rests on the accomplishments of a solitary individual. It cannot be reduced to a single office. Because ministry is relational and grounded in community, it necessarily involves interaction. Collaboration is part of God’s plan for multiplying ministry by engaging coworkers in the work of the kingdom. The New Testament is replete with examples of the openness of the invitation to ministry that make manifest the proclamation that “God’s Spirit is poured out on all flesh.” (Acts 2:17)

12. Different ministries are complementary of one another.

Various expressions of ministry do not exist at the expense of one another. The affirmation of one type of ministry does not entail the diminution of other types of ministry. The ear cannot say because I am not an eye, I do not belong to the body, because if the whole body were an eye, where would the hearing be? Diverse ministries complement one another.

13. Ordained ministry is but one type of ministry.

Ordained ministry is not the only expression of ministry. It is not the normative expression of ministry. It is not the best type of ministry. It is one of many ministries in the array of ministries serving God.

14. Ministry is non-hierarchical.

Leadership is a necessary ministry. It is a gift of the Spirit named in Scripture. But leadership undertaken as an expression of ministry is servant leadership. Ministry flourishes in open, organic structures. The church can never be reduced to a bureaucracy. Reflecting the nature of the Triune God, various ministries relate to one another in a spirit of equality. The non-hierarchical nature of ministry is made clear in Paul's exposition of the body of Christ being composed of a variety of interdependent, indispensable parts (1 Cor. 12) with Christ, not a particular category of ecclesial servants, as the head of the Body. (Col. 1:18)

15. Ministry can be paid or unpaid.

Some persons with significant commitments to ministry will be compensated for their efforts. Many clergy earn their living in ministry and an increasing number of laypersons do as well. But we must resist tying any understanding of ministry to employment, lest we devalue those in unpaid ministries. Ministry should never be reduced to a paycheck, a job title, or an employment contract. Yet it is also the case that for many lay ministry professionals, the fact of their employment constitutes a significant dimension of the recognition and authorization of their ministry by the church.

16. Baptism inaugurates a life of ministry.

The laying on of hands in baptism not ordination inaugurates a life of ministry. To be baptized is to be "ordained" into a very specific ecclesial relationship along with all who profess the lordship of Jesus Christ. Baptism is the first step in responding to God's call to serve.

17. All Christians are called to ministry.

Ministry is rightly understood as service and all Christians are called to live a life of Christian service modeled after the servanthood of Christ. Therefore, all Christians are called to ministry. However, it is incorrect to say, as many do, that every Christian is a minister, for not all Christians have responded to the call to a life of ministry through service.

18. There is one call.

There is a tendency to assume a hierarchical order to God's call — that some people called to certain tasks receive a calling of a different order or magnitude — a higher calling. This assumption is implicit in the way call is discussed in many theologies of ordained ministry. But when a particular calling is understood within the context of the one calling of scripture, it is untenable to suggest that certain categories of servants receive a calling that is more important or of a higher order than others. Moreover, the assumption of a hierarchy within call corresponds to the idea that there is a hierarchy within various expressions of ministry, which is equally untenable. God does not call some people more than other people. If some individuals have experienced God's call more intensely or urgently it is not an indication that they are more important to God or that the task they are called to is more worthy. It is more likely an indication that God had a harder time getting that individual's attention! All are called. All callings are equally important.

19. Laity are the people of God.

Describing the church as “the people of God,” the writer of 1 Peter used the Greek word for people, *laos*, which is the source of the words laity and lay. In common usage, however, these terms have come to mean inexpert, amateur, inexperienced, or ordinary. In some other cultures, they connote political anti-clericalism or the advocacy of reason and secularity against religion. Even within the church, there is a tendency to think of laity as secondary, as a lesser order of Christians. Reclaiming the full biblical meaning of the term *laos* is necessary to correct the abuse of the terms lay and laity in both secular and religious language. It is necessary to prevent the further denigration of lay ministry.

20. Clergy are not something other than the people of God.

The distorted understandings of lay and laity flow from the dualistic paradigm of ministry which places clergy and laity in counter distinction to one another. But this false dichotomy is unsustainable when laity is properly understood to mean the people of God. One does not cease to be a part of the people of God when one is ordained. Clergy are not the opposite of the laity. They are part of the people of God.

21. All Christians are of the spiritual estate.

The Catholic Church continues to maintain, even in the post-Vatican II era, that the ministry of priests differs from the ministry of the faithful not only in degree, but also in essence. While most Protestants no longer adhere to this doctrine formally, there is a tendency to think and act as if we do. Clergy are often assumed to be of a different order spiritually. While some clergy are more spiritually mature or better educated theologically than the average church member, they are not of a different order or spiritual class. Ordination does not create a different state of being. There is no ontological difference between the ordained and unordained. Nearness to God is not a privilege of the clergy. All Christians are equally spiritual because God has poured out God’s spirit on all flesh. (Joel 2:28)

22. The theological justification for ordained ministry is the same as for general ministry.

There is most assuredly a theological basis for the ministries that many Christian communions reserve for the ordained. But it is not different from the theological rationale that gives rise to the general ministry of the church. Distinctions between clergy and laity relate to matters of polity, relationship, and responsibility, not theology or ecclesiology.

23. Christ’s presence is represented by the whole body.

A lingering legacy of the sacerdotal paradigm of ministry is the idea that the clergy represent Christ or embody Christ’s presence in a unique way. Scripture makes it clear that the entire church as the body of Christ bears Christ’s presence to the world. Every Christian as a member of the body of Christ can be said to represent Christ, but only as part of the whole body. No category of ecclesial servants can assume the representative function that rightly belongs to the whole body.

24. Christ is the head of the Body.

Sometimes, pastors, priests, bishops, or popes are referred to as “heads” of the church. But in within the community of faith, Jesus Christ — not the pastor, priest, or pope — is the center of its life together. Christ is the head of the church. No category of ecclesial servants can claim the distinction of heading the church when Christ is held in proper esteem.

25. The church is a people called out and set apart.

Clergy are sometimes defined as those called out or set apart. But the distinctions of being called out, set apart, and being in a special covenant with God do not belong to clergy alone. They belong to the church as a whole. The New Testament word for church, *ekklesia*, comes from a combination of words which means “called out.” The church is a group of people who are called out of society into a special relationship with God. Because we have allowed clergy to symbolize the church and function as stand-ins for the ministry of the whole people of God, we mistakenly distinguish clergy with identifiers that rightfully apply to the church itself. The distinction of being called out and set apart is not unique to the clergy.

26. The church is not defined by the presence of ordained clergy.

The church existed through the first several centuries of its history without ordained leadership. Therefore, a Christian community without ordained leadership is not something less than a church. Today, we have a clergy-centric understanding of church. But the presence of clergy does not give the church its ecclesial identity. Defining the church by the presence of ordained leadership gives rise to the specious argument that a church that cannot support a clergy leader does not deserve to exist. The church does not exist for the sake of maintaining the ordained ministry. Rather, the purpose of ordained ministry, or any ministry, is to help maintain the church.

27. The growth of lay ministry is a sign of God’s renewal of the church.

The explosion of lay ministry in this day is not an expediency or the regrettable consequence of congregations in decline or clergy shortages. God raises up the leaders needed to serve God’s mission. The expansion of ministry is an act of the Spirit to renew the church.

