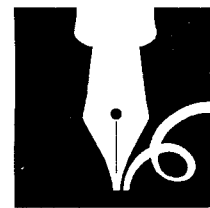


Connections



A monthly letter calling the church to faithful new life

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God calls each of us to ministry

Many Christians mistakenly assume that ministry is the responsibility of clergy alone, and our words often reflect and reinforce this assumption. We say "minister" when we really mean "pastor," "ordained minister," or "clergy."

Go into all the world and
proclaim the good news...
Mark 16:15

We tend to act as if laity should be only spectators in the church, and receivers of clergy's ministry.

However, the present sharp distinction between clergy and laity was unknown to the early church.

God calls every Christian to some kind of ministry. This includes laity. Our baptism is our call. So no Christian needs to ask, "Is God calling me to ministry?". All we need to ask is "Which ministry does God want me to do right now?".

The world is where ministry is needed



We also tend to assume that ministry is done only through the institutional church. But the places where people live, work, and go for social and leisure activities are actually the places where they are most likely to be reached with the Gospel that God calls us to proclaim. And those places are where lay people spend most of their time. So that's where a lot of ministry needs to happen, and lay people, not clergy, are in the best position to do it.



This doesn't mean that we should collar people at work or at social events and ask them "Are you saved?". It doesn't mean we should act religious all the time or try to look perfect. Doing those things would probably make people want to avoid us and to avoid the church.

What can we do instead? How can lay people do effective ministry in the everyday world?

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God is in the world

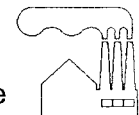
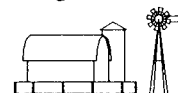
One of my all-time-favorite books is *The Divine Milieu*, by Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, a Roman Catholic priest, theologian, and scientist who lived from 1881 to 1955.

Teilhard said he wrote this book "for those who love the world." He saw the world—the entire cosmos, in fact—as the arena where God was at work and therefore where God called Christians to be at work.

Christianity isn't mainly religious practices

Teilhard saw Christians believing that in order to be good Christians they would have to take on a burdensome assortment of religious practices and a sanctimonious manner. He assures us that "Christianity is not, as it is sometimes presented and sometimes practiced, an additional burden of observances and obligations to weigh down and increase the already heavy load, or to multiply the already paralyzing ties of our life in society. It is, in fact, a soul of immense power which bestows significance and beauty and a new lightness on what we are already doing."

It bothered Teilhard that Christians considered their daily work in the world less important than the formal religious practices that took place in church sanctuaries or in special times set aside for personal prayer. "The general run of the faithful dimly feel," he writes, "that time spent at the office or the studio, in the fields or in the factory, is time taken away from prayer and adoration."



God's partners work in the world

God is in the world of everyday life, not just in church sanctuaries or official church activities. And every Christian is meant to work in partnership with God in ministering to the world. So being a minister doesn't necessarily mean taking on a job within the institutional church. It may mean ministering to your students and fellow teachers, and influencing the school system, if you're a teacher. It may mean ministering to your co-workers through daily conversation in the plant where you work. It may mean developing or working in a community volunteer project to meet a need. What's your ministry?

"Try, with God's help," Teilhard urges us, "to perceive the connection ... which binds your labor with the building of the kingdom of heaven..."



(continued from page 1)

▪ **We can notice needs and respond to them**



Ministry in the everyday world means being an understanding listener and a perceptive observer of people's needs, and then helping to meet those needs.

Sometimes we can meet them on our own, but often we have to develop plans and enlist other people to work with us. Often we are most effective in ministering to people who are near us and like us, but sometimes God calls and enables us to minister to people who are very different from us.

▪ **We can be open and honest**

Effective ministry includes letting others see our real selves. Revealing our weaknesses, doubts, and problems is often what lets people realize that they can risk revealing theirs in order to find much-needed understanding and help.

▪ **We can stand up for justice and ethics**

Ministry includes letting people know where we stand on questions of ethics and justice. Claiming that we have all the answers or the only right one is rarely convincing or helpful, but saying how our faith has led us to examine various viewpoints and to come to our present conclusion often is.

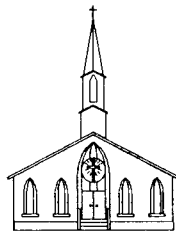


▪ **We can reveal how we seek and find guidance**

Ministry includes letting others see how we seek God's will for our lives and God's guidance for making decisions and coping with problems.

▪ **We can show how the church helps**

Ministry also includes letting people know how being part of a church helps us find kindred spirits and spiritual guidance, worship God, and join other Christians in ministries that can best be done by a group working together.



Ministry by laity leads people to Christ

Ministry by lay Christians in their everyday world is often the church's most effective form of evangelism. It goes where nonchurchgoers are and communicates the Gospel to them in ways that are appealing and convincing but not threatening. It attracts people to Jesus Christ and to the church without using manipulation, pressure, or deception. ❖

A layman in ministry

William Diehl is a Lutheran layman who for 32 years was sales manager of Bethlehem Steel Co. He has written several books about the ministry of the laity. In *The Monday Connection* (HarperSanFrancisco, 1991), Diehl says that most churchgoers see Sunday worship as a refuge from the world. They say that in worship they get strength for the rest of the week, but "when asked how the strength shows up in their daily lives," Diehl finds, "they become vague. ... They find no spirituality in daily life."

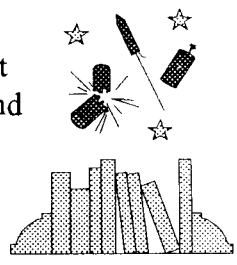
Diehl doesn't see many churches doing much to remedy this problem. "The corporate culture of churches," he says, "looks inward rather than outward. We believe that we serve the church by serving in its structures, not in the structures outside the church. Consequently, few national or local church bodies affirm, equip, and support their members for ministry in the world."

A huge wall between Sunday and Monday

"The mission of the church is to transform lives," Bill Diehl reminds us. "Its failure to do so in recent years can be measured by its own body count. The rhetoric of the church is a call for all its members to serve God in their daily lives; the reality is that there is a huge wall separating people's Sunday experience from their Monday experience."

For years my feelings about the church were like many that Diehl reports. "Joining a church seemed to be the right thing to do," he says, but "there was a problem, a major problem. ... The words that came to me from the Bible and the pulpit made no sense to me in my weekday world."

Diehl finally became frustrated enough to take action, but he wasn't willing to leave the church. He found help where I did, in books. One of them, especially, "went off like a Roman candle," he says. "It sent sparks in all directions, and opened the way for me to begin to see what the church can and cannot do to support ministry in daily life."



His congregation didn't help

Diehl was dismayed, just as I was for many years, that none of the helpful books were brought

to his attention by his pastor or anyone in his congregation. And he found, as I did, that serious discussions with small groups of Christians in informal settings outside of the institutional church helped him much more than did any programs of his local congregation or his denomination.

In fact, like many other lay people who want to examine their faith seriously and to grow, Diehl found that people in his church saw him as disloyal and threatening. They criticized his God-inspired efforts to develop a mature faith and to find ways to use his God-given abilities and interests in ministry. Unfortunately, for many lay people who want to ask serious questions about the church and the Christian faith and who want to do ministry *as laity*, the church is a hard place to find help or empathy.

How can we change this unhealthy state of things? How can our churches help lay people see how the Christian faith relates to their real everyday life? How can we help them examine their beliefs openly and honestly, and mature in faith? How can we encourage and help them to discover and do the ministries that God calls them to do?



Occupational support groups

One helpful thing Bill Diehl did was to develop support groups in local churches, for lay members who worked in similar fields. He finds that such a group works best when it consists of 6 to 12 people who meet regularly to share specific concerns that arise as they try to live out their faith in daily life.



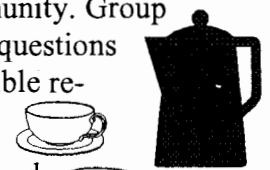
For such a group to be most effective, Diehl finds, members need to come from similar work situations but not from a single company or institution. And they can't be too like-minded. A business-oriented group needs to include lower-level employees as well as senior managers, and a group from the health-care field needs to include nurses and desk clerks as well as physicians.

The Monday Connection



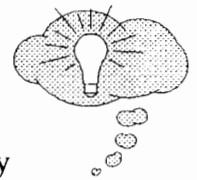
Diehl's support group is called The Monday Connection. It meets once a month for breakfast at a restaurant, from 7:00 to 8:00 A.M. To each session one group member

brings a short written description of a real-life problem he or she is facing, usually in his/her work but sometimes at home or in the community. Group members read the description, ask questions for clarification, then explore possible responses to the problem.



Diehl's pastor usually attends, and so does the congregation's Director of Lay Ministries. However, they attend as listeners and resource people. They aren't allowed to dominate the discussion or act as all-knowing authorities. They attend mainly to learn how to support laity. Attending also helps the pastor plan sermons and other parts of worship services that will relate to laity's real concerns.

You could start a group like this



Starting groups like this would be an ideal project for a congregation's Lay Leader. But any lay person or pastor could do it.

First you'd need to choose an occupation that was well represented in your congregation—teaching, maybe, or business, or health care—and to call a meeting of people currently active in that occupation. If you don't already know who they are, you could probably get a list from your pastor or church secretary. Or you could begin instead by forming a group to read and discuss Diehl's book together. Then you could develop occupational support groups as an outgrowth of the book-discussion group. Why not try it? ❖

The church gathers and scatters

The church is mainly Christian people, most of whom are lay, doing God's work in the world. It is not primarily a building, a place, or an organization.

At certain times those people gather. They gather to worship. They gather to teach and learn about God and about how to be effective in ministry. They gather to encourage, inspire, and support each other. They gather to plan for ministries they will do as a group, and to prepare for their worship.

Most of the time, however, they are scattered in the world, *doing* their ministries. We tend to overlook this part of being the church, but it may be the most important part, especially for lay Christians.

God calls laity to be the scatterers

Clergy are called mainly to ministry within the gathered church. The clergy's role is to inspire, organize, train, and support the laity, and to lead them in worship.

Laity need to help with the church's gathered functions by doing jobs like teaching, singing in choirs, planning, managing the church's funds, and helping to care for their fellow church members, but those jobs within the gathered church aren't meant to be laity's main function or to be ends in themselves. They're only the means to an end.

The end is the ministry that we do outside the church, in the world. That's where the main needs and opportunities for ministry are, and that's where lay Christians can be the experts. They are meant to be the church's main scatterers.

When we church members put the main emphasis on ministering to each other, being ministered to, and attending church gatherings, we've got our priorities wrong. God calls us out into the world. ❖

Barbara



Connections

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Lay Christians at work



Gathering and scattering are both important

Being a Christian means being the church seven days a week wherever we happen to be. It means seeing God's presence in other people, in nature, in current events, and in many other aspects of everyday life, not just in the church sanctuary during worship services or in other church activities. But meeting regularly with other Christians is important.

Here's how author Patricia Wilson puts it in her book *How Can I Be Over the Hill When I Haven't Seen the Top Yet?* (Upper Room Books, 1989):



"When I meet people who tell me that they never bother going to church because they can commune with God just as easily on a Sunday morning walk in the woods, I

remind them that we do not go to church to commune with God once a week. We can do that anytime. We go to church to meet with our fellow Christians, to share the burdens and joys of our lives, and to encourage one another on the journey ahead of us."

If your congregation's gatherings aren't serving this purpose for the people who attend, as revealed by poor attendance and participation, maybe God wants you to help make some changes in the kinds of gatherings you are offering.

Next month . . .

Prayer on the run—finding time to pray when you don't live like a monk

