

# **"Expanding Our Concept of Ministry"**

*Excerpts from Three Sermons by the Reverend Karl D. Schimpf,  
Senior Minister at North Shore Congregational Church in Fox Point, Wisconsin*

Presented by Robert C. Fredrickson on  
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**SEE ISALIAH 61:1-6a**

They say that sometimes you just can't say it any better than the original author. And preachers sometimes modify this bit of wisdom to make it relevant to the field of homiletics. The preachers' version goes like this: "If you run across a good sermon, steal it!" While not really "stealing" today's sermon, I did borrow it with the permission of the original author--The Reverend Karl D. Schimpf, the Senior Minister at North Shore Congregational Church, and a good friend of mine. I receive all his sermons in the mail, courtesy of North Shore's office staff, and I appreciate the spiritual lift they give me. Recently, Karl preached a three-sermon series on the ministry of the laity that I found to be especially impressive. The subject is extremely relevant to our congregation, too. After all, Ddg Wakefield's new position of Director of Lay Ministries is predicated upon our church's increasing emphasis on lay ministry, and I believe this same emphasis is the key to the future of our congregation, and that of the whole Christian faith. And so, with Karl's blessing, I present to you excerpts from his recent three-part sermon series on the ministry of the laity.

There is a little book published by the Alban Institute entitled "The Once and Future Church." The key fact of this book asserts that we are living at a time when the concept by which churches operate is changing, and yet we are living within institutions which have been formed by those same concepts; pulled by the new while constrained by the old.

In one sense it can be said that there have only been two models by which the church has existed in its nearly 2000 year history. For the first generations after Jesus, local congregations existed within a socio-political environment which was hostile and antagonistic to the church. This was known as the Apostolic paradigm where the boundary between the church and the world was the front door; and the act of mission was carried out by every member, every day.

All of that changed with the conversion of Constantine in 313 when the Empire became the church. Now, to be a Christian was to be a citizen, and conversion to the faith was as often carried out by soldiers as by missionaries. Mission was what happened on the frontier, carried out by professionals and supported by the membership. This was called the Christendom paradigm and almost all forms of the church down to this present day, have been organized on the assumptions of this model. But it is also this paradigm that has been losing its power for the past century, and a new model has yet to be born.

William Willimon and Stanley Hauerwas address this in their book "Resident Aliens." They write, "Our parents had never worried about whether we would grow up Christian. The church was the only show in town. On Sundays, the town closed down. You couldn't even buy a gallon of gas. Church, home and state formed a national consortium that worked together to instill "Christian values." Many of us could add our own chapter to this book! They go on to describe when things began to crumble and die and they do so in a humorous way: "It began on a Sunday evening in 1963 when, in defiance of the state's time-honored blue laws, the Fox Theater opened on Sunday. Seven of us made a pact to enter the front door of the Methodist church, be seen, then slip out the back door and join John Wayne at the Fox. That evening the Fox Theater went head to head with the church

over who would provide the world view for the young. That night in 1963, the Fox Theater won the opening skirmish."

We might have lost that battle but let me tell you how I think we are going to win the war. In the 1930's a new term appeared on the theological horizon: "the ministry of the laity." Under the Christendom paradigm no one would have thought to talk about such a thing, though the "Priesthood of all believers" had been bandied about since the Reformation. Up until that time no one seems to have taken seriously the possibility that an ordinary person was called to be anything other than simply a law-abiding citizen, but now we have this idea of the ministry of the laity, and I think that idea is both revolutionary and consistent with Scripture in terms of the New Testament model of the church.

What this means is that, in terms of the church, a 'lay person' is not the same as a "citizen." If laity have ministry, then a Christian who is a doctor or a teacher or a homemaker has something special that they are to do and say to the world, and the church is no longer the same as the Empire. It means that regardless of profession, our Other Vocation, to use an Elton Trueblood term, is Christian ministry. The implications of this are startling.

We can no longer assume that the community is a unit of the religious world, living out values derived from the Gospel. What this means is that we are, in a sense, returning to one of the characteristics of the Apostolic Age where the front door of the church becomes a door to mission territory, not just a door to the outside. The culture that used to pretend to teach faith no longer does so; and that reality challenges us to discover the patterns and disciplines that will be necessary to nurture ourselves in Christian understanding even as we reach out to others. I believe that if we concentrate on developing this concept, "the ministry of the laity," we will develop those systems within which we can live out our calling to the world. Unless we begin to form ourselves for mission in this emerging age and learn how to live creatively with diversity, the impact of our faith will not be felt.

If in fact we are at the front edges of the greatest transformation of the church that has occurred in 1600 years, let us seek to expand the circle of God's love through as many innovative and creative ways possible. We are in the business of providing our world with a religious environment. This we must not compromise. It is our only business because it is the only thing the world can't offer. The present world environment is ambiguous in terms of the church: not hostile, unless someone wants prayer in the schools; not accommodating unless it is determined that appealing to the religious inclinations of people produces votes; and indifferent most of the time because in the popular mind Christianity is defined as hardly more than being kind and neighborly and doing good as opportunity arises. What this means is that for any lay person to act faithfully is to be on the front line, frequently alone and requiring independent action. As each generation moves further and further away from the stories and illustrations of the faith, we are going to have to turn every local church into a seminary where every member can be involved in the lifelong pursuit of religious training. I am not at all certain that our civilization can survive without spiritual renewal.

Clearly it seems to me, we must reintroduce into our thinking at least one of the characteristics that existed in the first generation after Jesus and that is that the strength of the church rests in the ministry of each member who learns to carry the faith from the door of the church into the work-a-day world. One of the reasons that paradigm worked in apostolic times was that the environment in which the early church existed was a hostile one. Christian faith was essentially an underground movement. The environment in which the church of our day lives is mostly indifferent. But like the early church, increasingly I think, the mission field is right outside the front door as our society continues to move away from its Judeo-Christian roots.

But to cross that boundary in the formation of a new way of looking at the church in the context of a valueless culture will require that we leave some things behind, because business as usual is not going to get the job done. Mission, for instance, can no longer be seen simply as something done by professionals far away. Mission is all that we do, every one of us, as we seek to translate the faith in meaningful ways where we live, work and play in a society where Christian values are increasingly foreign. Ministry can no longer be limited to what the clergy do, but must be understood and interpreted within the context of the giftedness of each person, called by God, to live out the ramifications of the faith every day.

To suggest that there is some sort of distinction between clergy and laity, I think, is heresy. To serve means to minister and all professing Christians are ministers. We're not all called to be pastors, but we are all called to serve. Regardless of your profession, your other vocation is ministry and in the church of the future, we must cross the boundary which will cause us to become intentional about that serving. A congregation built on the idea of putting the staff and clergy on parade, rather than putting the laity on the firing line, can still become one of the great churches of the 1940's and '50's; but certainly not a dynamic church in our day. Rather we must seek to expand the circle of God's love as we stretch to reach our full potential as the people of God. We must focus on the ministry of the laity rather than on the ministry of the staff. How do we do that?

The primary way to move across this boundary I think is through adult education. I will not be satisfied until we have brought on line and are beginning to implement some way to be about the life and ministry to which God calls you. As George Eliot wrote, "Ideas are poor ghosts until they become incarnate in a person." Similarly convictions are of little use until they issue in some vocation of witness and service. I'm not implying that you take over the duties of the pastor. But I am anxious that we multiply the ministerial efforts of this church so that instead of 900 members with 2 ministers we have a congregation of 902 ministers. Each of us must develop a personal strategy in response to a personal call from our Lord Jesus Christ.

The issue is not whether we think God is real. The issue is whether God thinks we are real. I have never been convinced that the church gathered was the only church that matters. I am convinced that it is the church scattered that needs to be strengthened and enabled if we are going to have the faith impact the culture of which we are part. The boundary between this congregation and the world is more important than it has been since the Reformation.

When the church of the future arrives it may not include our favorite hymn or our principles of polity or even our church. It's not in our hands. What is in our hands is the chance to respond to God's call today, to put our skills and our wills to the task of looking for opportunities and to add our gifts to Body of Christ in our time. We have a vocation to work for that renewal which will create some sort of centering presence from which we may serve those who are around us. God's time is now.

As most of you know my seminary training was done at Earlham College in Richmond, Indiana among the Quakers or Society of Friends. They refer to me as Friend Schimpf. To say that I did my seminary training among the Quakers is almost an oxymoron; because one of the basic beliefs of the Quakers is that everyone is a minister and at least some Quakers would consider it very strange for people of that way to establish a graduate school for training persons in ministry. If you are a Quaker doctor, you are also a minister. If you are a Quaker homemaker, you are also a minister. They believe that the Inner Light or power of God that resides in every person has gifted that person and enables him or her to attempt acts of service to others in the name of God every day of the week. It should not be surprising then for me to have this emphasis in my understanding of ministry. When we define ministry in that context, the job of the pastor is to enable members to discover the reality of their

giftedness, through teaching and example to equip the saints for ministry, and to point in directions where the use of those gifts is needed.

Clearly it seems to me, we are living in a time of crisis. Disillusionment is rampant and covers everything from politics to religion. Every institution in the fabric of our society is being hammered by the cancer of distrust. The daily news inundates us with a deluge of negativity. Nothing seems stable; everything seems to be insecure. Whatever strength we gain as the Church Gathered on Sunday morning is soon lost in the struggles to exist as the Church Scattered. But I believe that a time of crisis is clearly a time of opportunity.

We've got to ask ourselves what it means to be followers of Jesus Christ not just as members of [this church] on Sunday morning; but in the corporations and neighborhoods and board rooms and social gatherings of greater Milwaukee. Each of us must build our lives around the fact that God is calling, and our Creator seeks to use us to bring the Body of Christ to life in our world. This is the mission and ministry of the laity and the key to that ministry is each one of us sharing with others the shape of our own relationship with Jesus Christ. It is as diverse as the number of people gathered in this place for worship on this Lord's day.

Once the president of McDonald's was asked in a New York Times interview what he believed in. He responded, "I believe in God, the family, and McDonald's, but when I get to the office I reverse the order." I hope he was being facetious, but whether he was or not he was describing what millions of Christians in this country do every day, which is the reason our faith is found to be privately engaging but socially irrelevant. If we were to draw a line and place the word comfort at one end and challenge at the other, where would you place the church? I suspect that most people would place the church closer to the comfort end of the spectrum than the challenge end. Comfort and refreshment we all need, and I wouldn't want to suggest that it should be something less than comforting to draw near to God. But we also need the challenge which comes from seeking to translate the mission and ministry to which God calls us into our everyday lives. If we are only in the business of comforting each other and not working to challenge each other as we seek to serve the highest and best, then the fact that Christian values are not impacting our society ought not to surprise us. It is here that we are inspired and trained and sent out into mission. It is to this place that we return in victory and defeat to renew our commitment as we go forth to try again. Yet I maintain that the primary arena for mission and ministry is in the world, not within the walls of this building.

On the day that Jesus ascended into heaven he delivered what I think is God's basic strategy for the church. It is recorded for us in the first chapter of Acts, verse 18; "You shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you and you shall be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in Judea and Samaria and to the end of the earth." Our mission and ministry is to be a witness to Christ in every arena of life as we seek to expand the circle of God's love. Let's do it! Amen.