
Life of Faith: Past, Present, and Promise

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Last fall, the congregation to which I belong committed to expanding the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America's (ELCA) "God's work. Our hands." emphasis from a single day of service to a two-month focus on the many ways that God is at work in our lives day in and day out. On the kickoff Sunday our pastor did a tremendous job of introducing the extended emphasis. He wove it into various parts of the service and handed out wristbands designed to draw our attention to the many ways that our hands do God's work in our lives throughout the week.

At coffee after worship that day, I overheard an older gentleman asking his friend if he had received one of the wristbands. (I was thrilled!) But then he said: "I guess we're supposed to wear them all week—to remind us to do something for the Spirit."

Our pastor's sermon was *clearly* about recognizing the work that God is already doing through our hands in our everyday roles and responsibilities. And yet this gentleman heard the message that he was being urged to do something more than he was already doing.

In light of that encounter, I told this story on the Life of Faith Facebook page and then asked: Why do people almost always hear us asking them to *do something more*? It did not take long before this response popped up:

I deliver mail. I stuff letters into mailboxes all day long. We don't often talk about this kind of thing being God's work. I am still trying to decide if it feels like God's work. This is my take. Thus, when encouraged to do God's work with my hands, I [feel like I need to do] more than [just deliver mail].

This response reflects what many of our people feel: What we do from day to day is not worthy of being called *ministry*. My recent work has shown that people feel this way because we—the leaders of the church—have taught them that ministry happens in and through our congregations. When our people get past the trap that ministry is limited to what the pastor does on our behalf, then their understanding of ministry is limited to such things as working at the shelter, teaching Sunday school, or serving as a worship assistant.

I have found that the most common definition of *ministry* is that it is *something extra* that we do—like an annual day of

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service—if we have the time and interest. In short, we have failed to teach our people that God's work is done in more ways *outside* the congregation than it is done *in* or *through* our congregation.

Stirring up a culture change

It is this common understanding—that ministry is something extra that is done in and through the institutional church—that the Life of Faith Initiative seeks to change. Our stated purpose is focused and clear:

The purpose of the Life of Faith Initiative is to stir up a culture change that frees us to make *the service by the baptized in the arenas of daily life* the central focus of the church's mission.

One thing has become clear: In an age of anxiety over the future of the church, leaders and members alike are focused on the vitality of the institution. We wonder why our worship attendance has dropped off, so we seek ways to attract people to our services and programs. We encourage those who have remained affiliated with our congregations to engage in ministry that is limited to participating in a project or program organized by the church: going on a mission trip, inviting a friend to worship, donating to the food pantry, or serving on a committee—in short, we ask them to do or give *something more*.

We are literally living out the popular definition of insanity: doing the same thing over and over again and expecting different results. The reality is that we live in an age where institutions have been replaced by networks.¹ While people long for community,

1. See Hayim Herring and Terri Martinson Elton, *Leading Con-*

meaning, and purpose, they no longer turn to organizations to find that. Participation in organizations is down across all categories, be they faith-based, philanthropic, or social. Yet we continue to look inward, to hope that if we only find the right program, the right music, or the right leader, people will come flocking back.

The Life of Faith Initiative offers a daring and counterintuitive promise: when we become as focused on equipping all God's people for the ministry that takes place in our everyday lives as we are at encouraging people to participate in the ministries that take place when we gather, we will find new meaning, purpose, and hope. When *service by the baptized in the arenas of daily life* is the central focus of the church's mission, burdens will be lifted from the threadbare shoulders of our leaders and joy will abound.

Clarity about two points is critical here: First, this initiative does not disparage the work of the gathered church. What we do when we gather is important and needs to continue. Worship is important, faith formation is important, building a deep sense of community is important, reaching out together in service in ways that we cannot accomplish as individuals is important. Focusing on the service by the baptized in the arenas of daily life might change the way we look at these gathered ministries, but such an orientation is not in competition with them.

Second, changing our focus from being inwardly to outwardly focused is not a matter of starting or beefing up outreach programs of the church. For instance, in a recent report on being freed in Christ to serve the neighbor, the author did an excellent job of connecting justification with the transformation of our relationships with our neighbors. The article opened and closed with references to a one-on-one encounter between a person of faith and people who see the church as an enemy of their cause.

The examples, however, used to illustrate being freed in Christ to serve the neighbor pointed only to corporate ministries: accompaniment and advocacy, world hunger, and global and domestic mission. When we have the eyes to see the service by the baptized as the center of our mission, such communications will use examples of people who maintain relationships with friends who have a different political orientation; employers who teach employees to work hard, care for customers, and learn what they need to move to higher paying or more meaningful jobs; or parents who struggle to raise children in a rapidly changing culture.²

The commonly held understanding that ministry is something extra that takes place in or through our congregations has been repeated and reinforced for decades; we have learned well to focus on the church, the whole church, and nothing but the church. I know this has been true of my work as a parish pastor; my livelihood depended on my ability to keep the congregation healthy. The members I worked with were equally focused on keeping the

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congregation going for their own personal reasons. While we often gave lip service to the ways God was at work in our daily lives, such references were almost always generic: love your neighbor, feed the hungry, advocate for justice. The concrete applications of these principles were always confined to internal or corporate activities.

The Life of Faith Initiative speaks to this limited vision of *church*. While we fully support the traditional, corporate expressions of ministry, we seek to provide a lens that shows how those activities equip and empower all the baptized to be God's hands at work in the arenas of daily life.

The roots of the initiative

While we claim events that happened in 2014 as the beginning of the initiative, the roots go back much further. The roots reach back as far as Scripture itself, with its many references to shalom and the kingdom of God as loving the neighbor, advocating for the powerless, and sheltering the vulnerable. Martin Luther's work on the universal priesthood certainly lifted up the service by the baptized as the center of the church's mission:

Look! My God, without merit on my part, of his pure and free mercy, has given to me—an unworthy, condemned, and contemptible creature—all the riches of justification and salvation in Christ, so that I no longer need anything, except faith to believe that this is so. For such a Father, then, who has overwhelmed me with these inestimable riches of his, why should I not freely, cheerfully, and with my whole heart, and from voluntary zeal, do all that I know will be pleasing to him and acceptable in his sight? *I will therefore give myself as a sort of Christ, to my neighbor, as Christ has given himself to me; and will do nothing in this life except what I see will be needful, advantageous, and wholesome for my neighbor, since by faith I abound in all good things in Christ.*³

In all reality Luther's vision was never fully realized. As it is in our day, practical and cultural pressure led to a continuing focus

gregations and Nonprofits in a Connected World: Platforms, People, and Purpose (Lanham, Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield, 2017), as a good example of the literature on this topic.

2. See <https://fullerstudio.fuller.edu/a-people-entrusted-to-your-care/> for an excellent article that applies vocation to our daily lives.

3. "On the Freedom of a Christian," LW 31:368–370, paragraph 28 [italics added].

on the role of the clergy and the life of the institution.

In more recent history, the concept of the priesthood of all believers has taken many forms: vocation, ministry of the laity, ministry in daily life, calling, purpose, and, most recently, spirituality in the workplace. Each of these was an attempt to adapt the language to fit the times, all with the goal of lifting up the service by the baptized in all the arenas of life. Each suffered either by dilution of the language (for example, “ministry of the laity” came to be associated with the understanding that lay people could and should serve roles that had once been reserved for the clergy, such as lectors and teachers), or was erased by the “autoimmune disorder of the body of Christ.”⁴ Like the actual disease, in which the immune system sees healthy tissue as a threat to the body, the church sees any effort aimed at releasing every member for ministry in their roles and relationships of daily life as harmful. We either sideline such an effort or seek to kill it off.

It is with this long history in mind that the Life of Faith Initiative came into existence. At a gathering of the Covenant Cluster Consultation in 2014, the conversation was focused on the recently begun work of the Theological Education Advisory Council (TEAC).⁵ Authorized by the ELCA’s Church Council, TEAC was charged with studying and making recommendations that would address the rapid changes in culture and the church that affect theological education for both rostered leaders (pastors and deacons) and all the baptized.

At the 2014 Covenant Cluster, we took the charge to address the theological education of all God’s people seriously. While many aspects of TEAC’s charge were discussed, some small group conversations reported back with questions such as:

- How do we reimagine or reconfigure a theology of ordained ministry so that it is oriented to equipping God’s people for their baptismal ordination to service in daily life for the sake of the world?
- How can the church more effectively equip members to “be Christians” when they are engaged in their daily vocations?
- Can we develop a theology of ministry that centers around the ministry of all the baptized for the sake of the world (in which rostered ministry serves in support to equipping the ministry of all the people in the world)?⁶

Later in 2014, at a gathering of people who resonated with these questions, the Life of Faith Initiative was born. We intention-

4. Dwight DuBois, *The Scattering: Imagining a Church that Con-nects Faith and Life* (Eugene, Oregon: Wipf & Stock, 2015), 78–81.

5. The Covenant Cluster Consultation in an annual gathering of ELCA continuing education providers in the central third of the United States.

6. It was very encouraging that the final report of TEAC (2015) included many references to supporting the ministry of all the baptized, including statements like this: “We call on our Church to reinvigorate its teaching ministry to equip the baptized for this ministry. Specifically, we propose a more integrated understanding and practice of theological education for all God’s people—an ecology and a network of complementary, interdependent opportunities.”

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ally built on the premise and success of the ELCA’s earlier Book of Faith Initiative, which pioneered a grassroots movement to invite everyone to open scripture and join the conversation. We sought to connect the Book of Faith Initiative to the many and varied forms of service to neighbors through family, workplace, school, local community, and world. In keeping with the understanding that this is a grassroots effort, the initiative seeks to encourage congregations, synods, and other organizations of the church to develop approaches and resources in order to make the Life of Faith Initiative a vital part of their reason for existence.

The vision of the initiative

Over the course of several meetings by the leadership team, the vision for the initiative came to include the following:

- We will be able to speak as easily and concretely about the ministry by all the baptized in daily life as we currently do about the ministry that happens in and through congregations.
- The center of gravity for our living out *missional church* will shift from what we do as the church gathered to what we do as the church scattered.
- The understanding of *ministry* will grow from *what pastors do* and *what we do as congregations* to include the love and service that is lived out in our everyday roles and relationships.
- We will become practiced at counting and reporting ministry in terms of the impact we are making in our homes, work-places, schools, local communities, and around the world—not exclusively in terms of money received and numbers of participants.
- All of us—from children to adults—will be able comfortably and confidently to speak and live the faith in our daily lives.
- Burdens will be lifted from pastors when they are no longer seen as the ones primarily responsible for the ministry of the congregation; they will find joy and fulfillment as ministry

multiplies through the lives of all God's people.

- *Church* will no longer be in competition with the activities and responsibilities of members, and *ministry* will multiply beyond our wildest expectations without having to ask people to add something more to their busy lives.

As we fleshed out the initiative, we came to identify the following objectives:

- Equipping people to live out their faith in family, workplace, school, local community, and world.
- Connecting faith to life as the church's shared endeavor: the body of Christ is embodied in service of neighbors and working for justice in everyday life experiences.
- Helping people discern their callings in the world and supporting them in following those callings.
- Preparing ministers of the Word to become more effective teachers at the interface of faith and life.
- Intensifying the church's focus on mission as service to neighbors in the world through the everyday roles and relationships of our members.

Moving the initiative forward

The team leading the initiative has been clear in its understanding that these objectives would be carried out by allies throughout the church: in congregations, synods, and the other organizations. While we have been clear that it is not our work to meet the objectives, there were some action steps that we took to involve as many people, organizations, and networks as possible. We have tried to:

- Enable congregations as teaching and learning communities to fulfill their mission of equipping the baptized for their ministries in daily life.
- Expand and strengthen the network of teaching and learning communities: lay schools for ministry, campus ministries, congregations, camps, social ministry organizations, service learning opportunities, schools, colleges and universities, and seminaries.
- Develop a network of support for those already involved in this work.
- Generate reflection and discussion on what we mean when we talk about church.
- Inspire experimentation and share what is learned about how to be a gathered-scattered church.
- Provide a web-based cache of resources, including a set of core resources available at no cost.

Over the four years of the initiative's existence, we have seen many of these action steps bear fruit, particularly with regard to networking. We have established a webpage (<http://lifeoffaith.info>) that offers a healthy beginning to the web-based cache of resources,

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as well as sharing experiments and best practices related to the initiative. We have created a Facebook group that has formed a network of interest and support for those involved in this work, as well as providing a venue for inviting more people to participate.

In 2015 and 2016, allies of the initiative sponsored resolutions at a dozen synod assemblies, by which those synods called on their congregations to foster Christian vocation through encouraging and equipping people, from children to adults, to discern and claim their call to speak and live the faith in their daily lives. Eight synods sent resolutions to the triennial assembly of the ELCA, which resulted in a reaffirmation of the universal priesthood and a referral to the ongoing work of the churchwide discernment process, "Called Forward Together in Christ."

In addition to our Facebook group, we have networked with people around the country (and around the world) who are working to "equip the saints for the work of ministry" (Eph 4:12). As a result, we are in conversation with and learning from people who are experimenting with new approaches in congregations, for example, the staff and members of Westwood Lutheran Church in St. Louis Park, Minnesota [see related article in this issue]. We are working with several ELCA churchwide staff members to connect efforts such as stewardship, discipleship, and revitalization with our work (for example, we helped shape the litany used for annual meetings of congregations, and we contributed the Life of Faith curriculum to the larger cache of resources available for "God's work. Our hands.>"). The resources page on our website provides links to people and groups who work to equip the saints.

One of our newest efforts is a Life of Faith community on StoryCorps.org. Because it is easy to report on ministries that take place in our congregations and organizations, and because it is much more difficult to report on our daily life ministries, we have turned to stories. Our hope is to gather stories that illuminate the many ways God calls us to love and serve our neighbor, and to inspire others to recognize God at work in our daily lives.⁷

Potential and challenges

The purpose of the initiative—to stir up a culture change that frees us to make *service by the baptized in the arenas of daily life* the central focus of the church's mission—is all at once beautifully

7. Instructions for getting to our story archive are on our website: www.lifeoffaith.info

simple and utterly complex. The theology of being freed *from* all that holds us captive to the powers of this world (sin, death, and the power of the devil) and freed *for* service to the neighbor—the theology of grace and vocation—is as close and as vital to Lutherans as is our breath. The path to bringing this to reality in our congregations is, as history has shown, not as obvious.

The potential of this work inspires tremendous passion in those who are pursuing this culture change. The reality of how difficult this work is—history demonstrates how this potential has been dashed on the shores of what may appear to be more tangible efforts—is enough to overwhelm even the most dedicated. But the Life of Faith Initiative persists, building on the work of all those who have gone before us, with the hope that the church will find its re-formation and its revitalization in equipping all God’s people for the ministry that takes place in our everyday lives.

The good news here, the truly *good news*, is that this is not an unfamiliar concept that we need to teach our people. In an age of despair and uncertainty, we can find our footing and our direction in grace and vocation. Good news is at hand, as well, in the reality that living out the theology of grace and vocation is not a matter of adding something more, either to our already busy congregations *or* to the already busy lives of our members; it is, instead, a matter of looking at and interpreting what we are already doing (both corporately and individually) with different lenses. Instead of asking people to do *something more*, it is a matter of looking at what we are already doing and asking: “How is God at work in all that we are already doing for the benefit of our neighbor?”

This work can be as simple (and challenging) as changing the way we evaluate congregational vitality. It has been said that when we are counting things that matter, it matters what we count. We are adept at measuring our effectiveness by counting how many people attend and participate in our programs. With that measure, renewal becomes a matter of constantly needing to get more people to “come in.” A vocational approach would involve learning to report on (and thereby *value*) what people are already doing, that is, the ways that God is already at work in our congregations to equip the saints for ministry, and in our daily lives for the benefit of our neighbor. This turns our perspective outward instead of inward. It takes the burden off pastors and staff to deliver programs and ministry. Instead of perpetually seeking something that will renew our congregations, it refocuses on God’s already abundant activity in our lives for the benefit of our neighbors.

To illustrate, we return to the story from the opening of this article. Shortly after the letter carrier posted that she had a hard time seeing her work as worthy of being called God’s Work, a

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friend of hers chimed in with this beautiful interpretation:

If you ever knew what quiet joy you bring to those on your routes, you would know this, too, is God’s work. Think how often your work will be the only time that day something new comes into the life of an older person living alone. Think about how important that letter from an adult child is to the parent living a thousand miles away; or that birthday card or anniversary card is to someone being remembered by a friend they have not seen in years. Think about that theology book I would never have gotten if it could not be purchased online and delivered to my driveway, and what I will get from it this winter. Yes your work is God’s blessing to more people more times than you could ever imagine. And it is hard Work. productive Work. important Work. blessing work. You are too close to it and inundated, but the individual who benefits from that work does know what a blessing you are as you do the work for them. If you step back and see with broad and long-term perspective, you may be bringing more of God’s love into lives than if you had been preaching to the forty faithful in a church on a Sunday. It is simply different in nature from being a mother, wife, or pastor but just as valuable to many people whom you likely never will meet in person.

Both the challenge and the promise of the Life of Faith Initiative are revealed in this loving and caring response. When we have the eyes to see the service by the baptized as the center of our mission, leaders will be freed *from* needing to convince more people to do more or give more, and we will be free *for* the work of encouraging and equipping people to be God’s hands at work in the everyday activities of their lives.