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Signs that They Take the Laity Seriously

by Mark Gibbs

I am more than ever convinced that theological seminaries are of fundamental importance in the development of a committed and responsible Christian laity. This is *not* primarily because they often run a few extra courses for laypeople, nor because many laypeople now take full-time theological courses without becoming ordained. It is because the priests and ordained ministers which seminaries educate have a tremendous and lasting influence once they start parish or other work. If seminary graduates sincerely believe in the vocation of the *laos*—all the People of God, ordained or unordained—and if they have learned how to encourage laypeople in their responsibilities, then in the future they can be effective and wise partners with their fellow Christians. If they still develop in their theological training and retain after their ordination paternalistic attitudes like "the clergy always know best," then they may do great harm wherever they work. Through the generosity of a grant from the LAOS group of the Lutheran Church in America, I have been able in the last few years to visit a number of LCA seminaries. Over the last ten years, in the course of other work with the Audenshaw Foundation, I have also been in contact with other North American seminaries and British theological colleges. It would be tactless and even impertinent to suggest which of the seminaries I have visited seemed to me best or worst at understanding and encouraging the vocation of laypeople in today's world. It is, however, possible to draw up some kind of a check list, by which we may attempt to assess how well or how poorly any given theological institution is doing in this respect.

The Formal Curriculum

A theological seminary which takes the laity seriously is one which emphasizes from the very start of any formal theological education a *basic theology* of the *laos*—the common calling of God to all human beings, irrespective of sex, age, wealth, class, race, education *or ordination*. One seminary I visited is careful to put this reminder of our common vocation in the first orientation course for new students —just when they may be feeling a little "superior" to laypeople because they have started a course of training towards ordination. (Others, not only by their formal teaching to the entering classes, but also by subtle hints in ceremonies and worship services, emphasize the distinctions now to be found between these students and "ordinary" Christians.)

Our "model" seminary emphasizes the ministries of laypeople as well as clergy, not only on Sunday in church activities but also on Mondays (in jobs, being unemployed, in buying and selling, in government and politics), and also on Saturdays (in entertainment and hospitality, in sports, on vacations, in watching and assessing television programs). It teaches about the ministries of laypeople to both church and secular structures, and not merely about personal relationships. It highlights the role of laypeople in attempting to achieve justice for many people they will never meet, as well in showing personal love and compassion towards their actual neighbors and acquaintances.

In an effective seminary this emphasis on the ministry of all Christian people forms an important part of the compulsory core curriculum. It does not become an optional course offering taken by a minority of students, like one course on the ministry of the laity which I found was available on request "every second year." Nor is it supplanted by courses which merely help pastors "use" the laity more efficiently in local church work.

We have almost no real histories yet of the whole People of God.

In addition to core courses focussing specifically on the laity, our model seminary also includes the perspective of lay ministry throughout its traditional curriculum.

1. *In biblical studies* such a seminary explains to students what is clear in the Old and New Testaments about our common calling; it urges them to take this teaching seriously and prayerfully into their future work for God. It also warns against using proof texts and uncertain traditions to build up theories about priesthood and pastoral clericalism which are simply not present in the early documents.

2. In teaching *Christian ethics* it is concerned with corporate as well as personal ethics, and with questions of responsible compromise and the wise use of secular power. Some case study work I have seen about ethical questions seems too "perfectionist" and based too much on personal one-to-one counselling situations. This leaves out the dimensions of practical, rough politics and corporate life with which so many laypeople are constantly involved. In other instances, the ethics course gains a great deal by using studies from actual lay experiences, Monday through Saturday.

3. Similarly, in its study of *church history* such a seminary tries to develop an understanding of the history of the whole People of God. It is sobering to reflect on the numbers of church history courses which not only encourage a kind of denominational exclusivity (does the Holy Spirit really not work through other kinds of Christians?) but also emphasize clerical and organizational controversies. Indeed we have almost no real histories yet of the whole People of God: in many church history studies the laity are the forgotten yet overwhelming

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majority.

4. Again, in teaching *ecumenics* it moves beyond the traditional explanations as to why, sadly, denominations and institutional churches disagree with one another. It discovers instead the practical ecumenism which the laity have long since developed. In studying plans for church unity, it is careful to consider what positions will be held by the laity, both men and women, both "churchly" and more secular, in future church structures. I want to affirm the way in which the different Lutheran churches in America are examining this question as they move toward a merger.

More than once, I have been dismayed by the comment, "the laity don't want to be called."

5. In studying *liturgy and worship* a seminary committed to the *laos* is genuinely anxious to develop participatory styles, so that pastor and people may work together. I am fascinated to note that some Roman Catholic seminaries are now far ahead of some of the most determinedly Protestant seminaries in designing ways in which liturgy and Christian worship—formal or informal—shall be a work of the whole congregation. Our model seminary examines ceremonies and sacraments—baptism, confirmation, communion, ordination (whatever this means in a particular Christian tradition), marriage, burial—to see what all these rites teach about the laity. Baptism receives particular attention, of course: how many seminarians really understand, in the depths of their Christian conviction, that baptism is an infinitely more important symbol than ordination? One or two seminaries I know are considering what kinds of ceremonies will best affirm the adult laity in their calling, yet even some of these experiments have developed their own bias: full-time church workers are affirmed, along with medical doctors and bank presidents, but what about taxi drivers or the unemployed? Our model seminary will scrutinize prayerbooks and hymnals, and traditions of informal prayer, to see in particular whether laity involved in more secular pursuits are affirmed and prayed for. It considers the topics and styles of preaching, and how these may be evaluated from time to time by congregations. It examines music and the architecture of churches, their furnishings, pictures, acoustics, and symbols, as well as the types of retreats, conferences and evangelistic missions which are undertaken.

6. It encourages styles of *Christian learning* which continually develop both clergy and laity. It expects a conversion and wholehearted commitment from every Christian, not merely those who are clergy or paid church workers. (More than once, I have been dismayed by the comment, "the laity don't want to be called.") It examines very carefully the Christian education of children and adolescents to see what attitudes about the laity are promoted or neglected. It looks with special care at the Christian training and development of blue collar laity and of handicapped and minority groups. (Instead of encouraging these people, churches often look down on their attempts to be Christian ministers and disciples.)

7. As students undertake *field work* or an *intern year* they work together with a group of laity and not merely with pastors; these laity include those more involved with the secular world as well as those active primarily in the church. Thus the students study lay ministries outside as well as inside the parishes.

The "Hidden Curriculum" of a Theological Institution

It is well known that all educational structures develop a "hidden curriculum"—a set of traditions, psychological assumptions and habits of living together which undergirds the community's life. This hidden curriculum often blocks change even when the formal curriculum is encouraging it. Seminaries are no different, and I have sometimes found a paternalistic clericalism in the hidden curriculum which would certainly not be proclaimed in formal teaching. A theological institution which takes the laity seriously will, I suggest, show in the following ways that it is in earnest.

1. It affirms that it is a *servant church institution.* It is prepared to learn new ways, even if the process is painful, so that the clergy can build a strong partnership with the laity.

2. Its administration, faculty, staff and trustees constantly attempt to assess and to redress traditional *clerical, privatist and sexist attitudes.* It is extraordinary how strongly these are held, often quite unconsciously.

3. It is prepared to examine, and where necessary to confront, *church and secular hierarchies*, as well as ecclesiastical and secular "class" structures. The laity include more than upper middle-class whites!

4. It constantly examines its *budgets* to see whether new ideas about the laity are really supported. Almost all church and seminary budgets are basically traditional: they finance what has always been financed unless the figures are constantly questioned. I have found matters concerning laity enthusiastically endorsed in theory but denied in the budget.

5. Its *library* reflects these concerns for the whole *laos.* In its selection of books and periodicals it covers the ministries of laypeople as well as those of clergy; it is concerned with Christian ministries and witness outside as well as inside the traditional parish structures. There is information about the laity in other denominations and countries, just as there is material about the international study of the Old Testament or church music.

6. Its brochures, newsletters and publicity materials equally reflect these concerns.

7. The seminary is eager to use *laity as teachers and resource people*, in full partnership with ordained faculty. When it does so, lay people are not treated as "second class citizens" in policy making committees and the like.

Laity as Students

Some theological seminaries have substantial programs for laypeople during term times, weekends or vacations. Insofar as our model seminary attempts to serve laity directly, either through full-time courses or shorter seminars and conferences, it consistently manifests its commitment to the importance of lay ministry. 1. It is scrupulously careful *not to regard these as "minor" events* or ways simply to use seminary faculty or buildings for extra income. I have sometimes found such attitudes expressed rather openly and insensitively, so that laity attending such courses felt that they were only important because of the fees they paid. 2. It honors the *vocation of such lay students* equally with that of the seminarians who plan to be ordained. If necessary it provides them with special tutors and advisers. At one theological college I visited, they were distinctly neglected in these respects, even being simply excluded from some classes on pastoral counselling. 3. Lay students are as a matter of course *fully involved with seminary worship and community life.* It has been painful to notice how insensitive some seminaries have been to the position of women students in particular.

The Potential for Change

Occasionally, I must admit, these visits to seminaries and theological colleges have been deeply disappointing. In particular, the "hidden curriculum" has seemed to resist progress toward any true partnership between ordained and unordained, a partnership in which the clergy would not be invariably the senior partners. Nevertheless, whether I visited Lutheran or Episcopal or Protestant or Roman Catholic seminaries, I have found a sincere desire—sometimes indeed a strong hunger—to find new ways of theological training. There is an interest in producing "strong pastors for strong laity," ordained ministers who know how to encourage, work with and *listen to* laypeople. In many places there is a real will to change; and though the personal and institutional costs of innovation are great in such traditional institutions, I believe we can be confident that changes will come.