

Lutheran Mission Matters



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Encountering Mission

One Pastor's Efforts to Nurture: A Congregation of Priests

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Abstract: The author describes his efforts in a small congregation in Dahlonega, Georgia to help it understand its role in God's mission from the perspective of the priesthood of all believers. The priesthood is a corporate reality, but the way a congregation accomplishes its priestly service is through the individual members working together, with each doing his or her part. Paying close attention to the role of priests in the Old and New Testaments, the author helped the congregation to see that their role as the priesthood of all believers was to present God to the nations through their witness and service and the nations to God through their prayers. Consequently, this pastor sought to help his whole flock realize how their conduct is an integral part of their service. He taught the vital role intercessory prayer plays in God's mission. He highlighted the critical role listening plays in knowing how to witness to people in their various situations. He emphasized how Scripture reveals the all-sufficiency of Christ, who meets the entire range of human needs. If the priesthood is to declare the wonderful deeds of God, the priests need to know the story of salvation. He showed how special occasions provide opportunities to connect a congregation with the workplace, marriage and family, and society for their witness, service, and prayers.

In December 2013, I began serving in my retirement a small Lutheran congregation seeking to get established in Dahlonega, Georgia. The town has a population of roughly six thousand. As the country's first gold rush community (1828) in the midst of scenic mountains, it conducts a brisk tourist business. It is also home to the University of North Georgia's main campus. The challenge for me was to learn how I could help this little flock live under the Good Shepherd's care and enable it to take its place in Jesus' mission to bring in others who are not yet part of His fold. Focusing on just scattered Lutherans was not a promising prospect, since all

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Lutherans in Georgia comprise only 0.6% (.006) of the population. In Dahlonega, the percentage is even lower, and most people have no idea what Lutheranism is. My challenge was heightened by the fact that my wife and I do not live in the community.

The question that stood before me—and stands before every congregation with some variation—is this: What approach should we take to meet our evangelistic challenge? I intend to walk readers through our process in the hope that it will encourage thought on theirs. I will share the gist of Bible studies, sermons and services, and activities which we have undertaken to help the whole congregation see itself as “A Congregation of Priests.” A bit of background will be helpful for understanding our approach.

While serving as the Executive Director of the Luther Institute—Southeast Asia, I developed a course entitled, “Equipping the Whole Priesthood for Its Ministry.” Its purpose was to unpack the biblical teaching on the priesthood of all believers so that national pastors could equip and empower their congregations, with all of their members, to serve as priests in and to the world.

One module highlights the pastor’s role. He should model for all the priests what it means to witness, serve, and pray. As a steward of the Gospel, he should teach them so they know and can witness to the mighty acts of God. He should equip them to see their placement in a middle position between God and the world and how to fulfill it. I determined this approach could be applied in Dahlonega. I focused on fulfilling this pastoral role to help the whole congregation function as God’s royal priests. Having the whole priesthood serving, witnessing, and praying seemed to hold greater promise for doing the Lord’s mission than just the pastor and a few people trying.

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After having served them approximately ten months, I shared a proposal to help them see themselves as a “congregation of priests.” One aspect of this congregation’s DNA—commitment to service in the community—encouraged its approval of this proposal. And, in fact, the congregation readily committed to learning what it meant to be God’s kingdom of priests in this community.

This commitment now challenged me to develop resources (for Bible classes, sermons, and services) and activities that would foster their understanding of the priesthood concept—and, importantly, how they could put it into practice as a congregation and personally. The intent was not to adopt a program but to foster the practice of the priesthood in the many relationships of their everyday lives.

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Laying the Foundation: Helping the Congregation Understand Its Priestly Identity and Role

Our first Bible study, consisting of three lessons but covered over nine sessions, was designed to help us understand the biblical teaching on the priesthood of all believers. While the New Testament witnesses are few in number, they highlight significant aspects of it. Key references are present in Revelation, 1 Peter, and Hebrews.

The references in Revelation (1:5b–6; 5:9–10) help us understand that the church is the priesthood because it has been ransomed by the blood of Jesus Christ to be a “kingdom, priests to our God and Father.” Notably, the references in Exodus to Israel being the kingdom of priests are in the future tense, but in Revelation they are in the past tense. Christ’s redeeming work accounts for the transformation! We are the priesthood by virtue of what Christ has done for us.

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The juxtaposition of “kingdom, priests” leads us to understand the corporate nature of the concept. “Kingdom” is a collective noun, singular in number, but implying many citizens. However, this is a kingdom of “priests,” and the character of kingdom will be expressed by the attitude and action of the priests. This understanding is reinforced in 1 Peter 2:9–12, where the juxtaposition of the singular collective nouns, “race, priesthood,

nation, people” (v. 9) is made with the plural, “sojourners, exiles” (v. 11). Just as a committee needs the individual members to each do his part to achieve its goals, the priesthood will accomplish its service—and the priesthood is primarily one of service—only when the priests do their work.

The collective nouns, however, stress that our individual work is part of the corporate personality of the church and should serve a common end: living and serving in accord with the King’s will. Our individual work should cohere, serving the divinely given common purposes. The New Testament refrains from using the term “priest” for its leaders (they are called apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors, elders, deacons, and bishops), but instead uses the collective noun “royal priesthood” to denote all Christians. The priesthood belongs to all the people, and thus the title is meant to highlight both the corporate and personal nature of this high calling: “a congregation of priests.”

Behind the passages in 1 Peter 2:9–10, three Old Testament passages highlight the missionary dimension of this concept. The first is Exodus 19:3–6, where we find expressions echoed in 1 Peter: treasured possession, holy nation, and kingdom of priests. Israel’s identity as God’s people is not established at Mount Sinai, but originates from the call of Abraham. God has chosen him and his descendants. He

calls them “my people,” again and again even as they languish in Egypt. Through the plagues climaxing in Israel’s deliverance from the house of bondage, He is revealing Himself to them as the Lord (Ex 6:2–8) who will rescue them. It heightens the significance of their identity as His people. The covenant at Mount Sinai is God’s call to them to live out their identity as His people and to fulfill the missionary responsibility to which He is calling them. All the earth is the Lord’s. Israel is God’s treasured possession out of all the peoples. He has separated them unto Himself. They are His “holy nation.” Their job is to reflect that identity to the surrounding nations among which they live, that all the earth may come to know its Lord.

This missionary dimension had already been suggested earlier with the exodus and the plagues. For example, consider the reason God attached to the seventh plague, that of hail: that Pharaoh may “know that there is none like me in all the earth” (9:14); “but for this purpose I have raised you up, to show you my power, so that my name may be proclaimed in all the earth” (9:16); and “the thunder will cease and there will be no more hail, so that you may know that the earth is the Lord’s!” (9:29) Now the witness continues through the people’s service.

To be a priest is to be a mediator, and when the people of God are called His royal priesthood, they stand in a mediate position between God and the world. They are called to represent God to the world through their witness and service, and they are called to represent the world to God through their intercessions. Priests serve. Priests witness. Priests pray.

God’s grace motivates the priests’ service. A glance at the performance of the Israelites before they arrived at Mount Sinai suggests that God is not calling them to this service because of their stellar performance in the past. They reflect the faithful and faithless behavior of all of us. When Moses and Aaron first informed them that God was going to set them free, they believed them. When the taskmasters no longer provided straw for the bricks, they complained. When God told them to observe the Passover, they followed the instructions; they believed! But when they were sandwiched between the Red Sea and Pharaoh’s army, they questioned God bringing them out of Egypt: “to die?” When God delivered them through the opened sea, they rejoiced, but when the water was bitter at Marah, they grumbled.

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Just such “saints and sinners” are the ideal members of the priesthood, for they can testify to God’s rescuing, redeeming grace. They have experienced it. It gives them content for their witness, power for their service, and a basis for their intercessions for the nations to which they are being sent. The pastor has the

awesome privilege of anchoring the priesthood's ministry securely in the grace of God.

In Isaiah 43:20 ff., we have the passage that Peter echoes when he writes "that we are to declare the excellencies (mighty acts, wonderful deeds) of Him who called us out of darkness into His marvelous light" (1 Pt 2:9). Israel was God's chosen people to witness for Him and to declare His wonderful deeds. They had that vocation, not due to their own accomplishment, but solely by God's grace. As the latter part of Isaiah 42 indicates, Israel was deaf and blind, dull to the Lord's word and way; that is why they were being disciplined, stuck in exile. However, Isaiah 43 reverses that judgment with the astonishingly good news, "Fear not, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name." They are God's witnesses (43:10, 12). Just as in Exodus, God's redeeming action results in their vocation of witnessing for God.

The third Old Testament text (Hos 1:6–9; 2:1, 23) highlights God's forgiving action in declaring old Israel to be His people. It records the transformation that God effects for the children of whoredom that Hosea and Gomer had. "Not my people," became "my people," and "have not received mercy" became "have received mercy." God's mercy, His undeserved grace forms the basis of the wonderful reality that we are God's kingdom of priests. This amazing reality motivates us to fulfill this priestly role with humility and faithfulness.

In this Bible study on the basic background on the priesthood of all believers, the class spent a significant amount of time discovering how Jesus Christ fulfilled what Old Israel had failed to accomplish. Instead of Israel's remaining faithful to God, they repeatedly caved in to temptation and worshiped the gods of the neighboring nations. Instead of reflecting the light of God's grace to the nations, they let the darkness of paganism cover them. Jesus Christ, however, did not fail. He came as the servant of the Lord, as God's light to the nations. He fulfilled the law, rather than ignoring it and disobeying it.

The Gospel of Matthew helped the class see how Jesus embodied Israel in His person and was indeed the true Israel. He lived out His Baptism by which He was identified as the Servant King of Psalm 2 and Isaiah 42. By resisting the devil's voice and obeying God's, He showed He truly was the Son of God. He used His power to demonstrate His authority over disease, the demonic, nature, and even death. With parables He opened the eyes of the disciples to see the gracious rule of God in action in His own person. Finally, He fulfilled the mission inherent in His Baptism by dying for the sins of the world and then rising again. His kingdom was not of this world; rather, it demonstrated to the world that He indeed was God's King.

We directed our attention next to the Epistle to the Hebrews to see how Jesus also served as the perfect priest, one with us in every way, except for sin. By His own death, He offered the perfect sacrifice once for all so that no more sacrifices have to be made. He now lives to make intercession for us. We can draw near to God

through Him, since He has given us access to the throne of grace. The best part is that through Holy Baptism we are united with Him, made the beneficiaries of His saving work. We now have the astounding vocation of being His priests in the world. The living sacrifice of our bodies dedicated to His purposes in the world can now be offered to God through Him (1 Pt 2:5; Rom 12:1–2), as well as the “sacrifice of praise to God, that is the fruit of lips that acknowledge his name” (Heb 13:15).

To sum up our role as God’s kingdom of priests, we now stand in the mediate position between the world and God. We are in the world but not of the world. Our role is to serve the world through our witness to Jesus Christ and our service to others in His name. At the same time, we take the world and its needs to the throne of grace as priests for the world. Our life together within the congregation nurtures and fosters the priestly vocation of the whole people of God. We gather together for worship, instruction, and mutual encouragement that we may be scattered into the world of family, work, and neighborhood as priests for the Lord.

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Helping the Priesthood Understand that the Priests’ Conduct Is Part of Their Priestly Service

Into the Lenten season, the class pursued a double track. On Wednesday nights for midweek services, we sought to explore what it meant to be God’s “holy nation.” We knew that holiness meant that God had separated Israel and the church to Himself, to be His people in the world. It recalled 1 Peter 1:14–16: “As obedient children, do not be conformed to the passions of your former ignorance, but as he who called you is holy, you also be holy in all your conduct, since it is written, ‘You shall be holy as I am holy.’” The class remembered how we had been “ransomed from the futile ways inherited from our forefathers, not with perishable things such as silver or gold, but with the precious blood of Christ, like a lamb without blemish or spot” (1 Pt 1:18–19).

The class then looked at the Ten Commandments in Exodus 20:1–17. If God had prescribed them for old Israel, they undoubtedly still have value for us providing guidance for our conduct today. Experience teaches that people whose lives and lips are not congruent have the words from their lips falling to the ground; they do not hit the mark of the ears, minds, and hearts of their hearers.

The critical emphasis of the sermons was how the cleansing work of the Lord Jesus enabled us to pursue a life of holiness. The sermons focused on the Commandments topically as follows: First, Ninth, and Tenth Commandments: “Hearts that are Holy”; Second and Third Commandments: “Keep God’s Word

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Holy”; Eighth Commandment: “Keep Our Words Holy”; Fourth and Sixth Commandments: “Holiness in our Homes and Relationships”; Fifth Commandment: “Holiness for Life”; and Seventh Commandment: “Holiness in the Stuff of Life.” On Maundy Thursday, we drew on 1 Corinthians 10:14–22, “Let Christ’s Holy Meal Strengthen You.” On Good Friday, we read John 18 and 19, divided into seven segments under the overall title, “Behold Your King!” with brief meditations for each segment.

Helping the Priests Understand Their Important Role as Intercessors

The second track we began to follow in the Lenten season was the role of priests as intercessors. On Sunday mornings, we began a new Bible study: “Prayer in the Service of Our Mission as God’s Kingdom of Priests.” We saw how Jesus links prayer with His mission. At the end of Matthew 9, He teaches His disciples to pray to the Lord of the harvest for workers in the harvest; and at the beginning of Matthew 10, He enlists and commissions those very persons as His messengers. In Jesus’ prayer in Matthew 11:25–27, He reveals how God’s kingdom works. Jesus alone makes the Father known. In verses 28–30, He then invites the weary and heavy laden to come to Him. They receive Jesus and now are called to take His yoke on themselves and learn from Him, undoubtedly a call to His mission. In Mark 1, we see additional evidence of the connection between prayer and the Lord’s mission. After praying all night, Jesus knew that He must press on to the next villages, for “that is why I came out” (1:35–39). Further, Jesus’ high priestly prayer (John 17) reveals His own dependence upon God, His concern for His followers, and His prayer for the church’s unity that it might reflect the unity of the Father and the Son, surely a magnet to draw people into communion with them. We recall how Jesus had taught His followers earlier, “By this all people will know that you are my disciples if you have love for one another” (Jn 13:35). Although He says that He is not praying for the world (Jn 17:9), He does have a strategy to reach the world: His disciples and those who believe through their word. That means the church is His means; we are His royal priesthood assigned the task.

What power there is for that mission in our intercessions! United by our baptisms with the one mediator between God and man, the man Christ Jesus, we can go to the throne of grace confidently (1 Tim 2:5; Heb 4:16). Nothing blocks our access. We can plead urgently through the presence of the Spirit who enables us to go to God as our “Abba, heavenly Father” (Gal 4:6; Rom 8:15). And when we do not know how to pray, the Spirit Himself will intercede for us so that we may faithfully carry out our priestly duties for the world. We are not carrying out this mission by ourselves.

Our study of prayer also examined how Paul prayed for the congregations he was serving, his partners in God’s mission. In his letters to the Philippians, Colossians, and Ephesians, we saw the rhythm of thanksgiving and intercession

followed by instruction and encouragement, which reflects the flow of the mission—out from God to His people and then through them to those beyond the church. This dynamic process can also be suggestive for our intercessions. In 1 Timothy 2:1–8, we have Paul linking prayer for all people with the work of Christ, who gave Himself as the ransom for all. If prayer is conversation with God, then listening to the Word of God will inform our praying so that our intercessions might respond to who God is and what He has done. When that happens, our intercessions will approach God on the basis of His character, for God’s unchanging characteristics of right, faithfulness, and grace inspire our prayer. We can count on Him to be true to Himself!

Taught by our Lord, our prayers will be offered in His name, be filled with gratitude, be persistent, confident, submissive to His will and purposes. By praying for the people we wish to serve and to whom we want to witness, we enlist God’s help in reaching out to them and will surely find our own hearts and minds opened to sense their situation, their struggles, and the way we might best minister to them.

Finally, we worked our way through the Lord’s Prayer, drawing heavily on the insights of Georg Vicedom’s *A Prayer for the World*.¹ In his book, Vicedom, first a missionary to New Guinea and then professor of missions at Neuendettelsau in Bavaria, reflects the wisdom of the *Missio Dei*. He guides its readers to see how the Lord’s Prayer indeed is a prayer for His mission and powerfully shapes us in our efforts to share the love of Christ with the world He has redeemed.

Gaining Wisdom for Our Witnessing

To further equip our people for their role as the royal priesthood in the world, I led a course entitled “Listening and Witnessing” on Wednesday evenings during the Easter season. This course focused on the parable of the sower in Matthew 13:1–23, together with the two preceding chapters. I sought to help the participants to see that the seed that produced as much as ten times the amount of a bumper crop was good, because it encased the Lord Jesus. The previous two chapters suggest some of the ways in which Jesus’ goodness is evident. He only reveals the Father, the Lord of heaven and earth. In contrast to the burden of keeping the Law for salvation, He gives rest, and so empowers people to take up His yoke and follow Him. He is greater than the temple, Jonah, and Solomon. He, the Son of Man, is Lord of the Sabbath. He comes as the Servant of Isaiah 42, with humility and compassion for the bruised reed and smoldering wick. He is the King whose power conquers the enemy. The context helps us realize the goodness of the seed and helps us see that we have something truly good to share—the Lord Jesus Himself, a great encouragement to confident witnessing!

The wider context of the parable also confronts us with the opposition the Seed will encounter. The Seed comes in lowliness and vulnerability; He can be resisted. In our study we identified two common forms of opposition to Jesus’ lordship: our

desire to remain in control (especially Matthew 11) and to do it ourselves, seeking to earn our salvation by keeping the Law (Matthew 12). Being transformed by the goodness of the seed is a testimony to God's grace. The priests of God are recipients of the revelation, telling us that it is a matter of grace, not of works (Matt 13:11, 16). For that reason, they are not discouraged in their task of witnessing, knowing that God will open the hearts of many to receive the revelation. Also, since it is a matter of grace, the priests of God will continue to be receptive to the Word, seeking to understand it so that they may grow to produce a bountiful harvest themselves (Matt 13:18–23).

The diversity of people we meet calls us to listen carefully to them so that we might present the Gospel in ways that will connect with them where they are. Jesus' all-sufficiency suggests that no matter what concerns our listening to others alerts us to, Jesus can be presented in a way that meets those concerns. Our ongoing efforts to learn the Word and discover meaningful ways to present it are worthwhile. We can end up being scribes trained for the kingdom, who can pull out of our storehouse things old and new to meet the opportunities we encounter.

With this course, we hoped to help our people realize that witnessing is not project or program, but rather listening to the people in one's own home, at the workplace, in the community, and then responding in sensitive ways to their concerns. The everyday witnessing which takes place in such ordinary settings is often better received than the witness which is part of an organized campaign to win one's community for Christ. The seeds we plant often grow, we know not how, as the farmer in Jesus' parable in Mark experienced (4:26–29). By listening, however, we learn the needs and situations to which our witness should be directed and how it can be expressed in a way that connects, whether in our own family, congregation, or neighborhood.

As a follow-up to our course on "Listening and Witnessing," one Saturday in June, together with support from several neighboring congregations, we went on a "listening canvass," in a number of neighborhoods in the community. We asked people two questions, "What concerns might you have that you would like us to pray for?" and "What needs in the community do you think the church should be addressing?" Our purpose was to help our people realize that when we go as a listener, we are often introduced to points of contact to which we can respond with the good news of Jesus Christ. Upon our return, we spent time in prayer for the needs which were identified and in discussion how we might respond in caring and faithful ways. Through this "hands-on" activity, we gained wisdom for our witnessing.

Ongoing Efforts to Help the Congregation Practice Its Priestly Service

By God's grace and the hard work of the members, our congregation relocated to a new facility this past summer. In our new location, we are close to probably forty medical offices and social service agencies. To make ourselves known to our

new neighbors, we hosted an open house over the lunch hour one day. We personally delivered invitations to our event to these offices and were thrilled that probably thirty people from the immediate neighborhood came. We shared that our facility was open for prayer and meditation, as well as conversation about matters of concern. We invited those interested to join us for “Conversations over Lunch” on Wednesdays over the lunch hour. While this program has not been successful, we believe that our reaching out to the community has sent the signal that we are not just trying to recruit members for our congregation, but are seeking to be servants and witnesses to the grace of God.

The dedication of our renovated facility was meant especially for our members and those from sister congregations. We naturally celebrated the hard work the members had done which enabled the renovation. Our service reflected our joy over the accomplishment and asked God’s blessing on its use as we dedicated it to the glory of God. We emphasized that our new facility is a place to help us carry out our responsibilities as God’s people. The sermon title suggested it: “A Physical House to Help Us Live as God’s Spiritual House,” based on 1 Peter 2:4–12. A Project Connect booklet from Lutheran Hour Ministries was given to each of the worshipers to reinforce the message, “*Live the Six*,” the “six” being the days of the week from Monday through Saturday. It was another way of saying that we are “A Congregation of Priests.”

On occasion, we have used Sunday worship services to highlight the priestly dimension of our lives. The Fourth of July weekend, we drew on 1 Peter 2:9–17 to help our members sense how our identity as God’s people, His holy nation, can and should inform our participation in our American society so that the wisdom of God might be brought to bear on decisions made in the public sphere. We did a similar thing on Labor Day weekend; Ephesians 6:5–9 gave insights into how our relationship with God provides guidance for our roles in the workplace. A Sunday in late August had Ephesians 5:22–33 for the Epistle. This was a great opportunity for us to encourage husbands and wives to be priests to one another and see their home as a place to practice the meaning of the priesthood: praying, witnessing, and serving, in effect mediating the grace of God to one another.

We continue to grow in the joy of the priesthood. In Luther’s “Address to the Christian Nobility of the German Nation,” he asserts, “We are all consecrated priests through baptism, as St. Peter says in I Peter 2 [9], ‘You are a royal priesthood, and a priestly realm.’”² Beginning in mid-November, our Sunday morning Bible studies will have us exploring how Baptism can direct and empower our priestly service. Following that study, we will undoubtedly spend time on vocation as a way to help our members realize that functioning as God’s priestly kingdom takes place in all of our roles, wherever we may be. As a way to sense how the priestly role plays out in a most concrete way, we will wrap up our basic introduction to the priesthood of all believers by discussing the matter of suffering. We will alert the priests to see it as an opportunity for their serving, witnessing, and praying.

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As we go into the future, we will likely discover additional ways to sustain the priestly movement in our midst, such as through service projects in the community and workshops on topics like establishing a family altar in the home and witnessing in the workplace.

In conclusion, let me emphasize that our congregation has grown together as a community through our focus on the priesthood of all believers. We sense and are committed to the mission God has entrusted to us and are reaching out in natural and responsible ways to share the goodness of our God. We already see signs that our priestly service is taking root. In due time, we believe we will reap the harvest God is causing to grow from the seeds which we are planting. We commend this concept to you, the readers, for your consideration, as a biblically faithful way to help all the priests in your congregation take their place in the mission of God to His world.

Endnotes

¹ Georg Vicedom, *A Prayer for the World* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1967).

² Martin Luther, "Address to the Christian Nobility of the German Nation" in American Edition *Luther's Works, Vol. 44: The Christian in Society I*, ed. J. J. Pelikan, H. C. Oswald, & H. T. Lehmann (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1999), 127.