

Disclaimer: Please note that this paper does not represent the views of the Methodist Church of Southern Africa or DEWCOM, unless specified otherwise.

Status of document: Adopted by DEWCOM

URL: <http://mcsadewcom.blogspot.com/2007/03/ecclesiology-with-particular-reference.html>

THE METHODIST CHURCH OF SOUTHERN AFRICA

DOCTRINE, ETHICS AND WORSHIP COMMITTEE

Discussion Paper

An ecclesiology with particular reference to the mission of the Church as it concerns the apostolate of the laity

Tim Attwell

Biblical background:

The Old Testament:

All humanity is contemplated in Genesis 9: 12-17 as included in God's covenant of mercy and therefore are "the people of God."

However, the Old Testament contemplates a special "People of God", called into being for a specific purpose. These are commonly referred to as *ó λαός*, the laos, from which the word "laity" is derived.

As a sign and example of God's covenant of mercy, God liberated the people of Israel from slavery in Egypt and made them "The People of the Covenant" – a specific Covenant (Leviticus 26: 12-13) in which the people respond to God's liberating (saving) acts by obeying the Law God gave through Moses.

It is the calling of the people of the Mosaic Covenant, in their obedience to the Covenantal Law, that because "The whole earth is mine [God's] you shall be for me a priestly kingdom, a holy nation" (Exodus 19: 5b-6) and that they be "a covenant to the people, a light to the nations." (Isaiah 42:6). This would be in the sense that they are signs and instruments of God's healing and liberation for all humanity (Isaiah 42: 7) and the communicators of God's grace and healing to "many peoples" (Zechariah 8: 20-23).

The Gospels:

The saving, liberating acts of God are continued and brought to their highest point in the ministry of Jesus Christ. Jesus proclaims the advent of God's reign and immediately calls disciples to share with him in this proclamation and the expression, here and now, of signs of God's Reign. (Mark 1: 14 – 3:35)

Jesus deliberately identifies himself with the healing and liberating work of God (Luke 4: 16-21) and hence the calling and mission of the People of the Mosaic Covenant. Jesus identifies his followers with the same calling and mission (Matthew 5: 13-14). He commissions twelve (Luke 9) and then seventy (Luke 10) to be instruments of God's healing, liberating and saving work. Jesus empowers them with the Spirit that empowers him and identifies their calling with his and Israel's calling: "As the Father has sent me, so I send you. Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained." (John 20: 21-23). This apostolate ("commission") directs them towards the healing, liberating and salvation of all humanity (Matthew 28: 18-20).

Disclaimer: Please note that this paper does not represent the views of the Methodist Church of Southern Africa or DEWCOM, unless specified otherwise.

Status of document: Adopted by DEWCOM

URL: <http://mcsadewcom.blogspot.com/2007/03/ecclesiology-with-particular-reference.html>

The Epistles:

The New Testament Church understands itself as continuing within history, post Resurrection and Pentecost, the healing, liberating and saving work of Jesus Christ and of Israel. (Acts 1: 6-8) and recognises signs of the Reign of God within its own life. (Acts 2: 17-21; 43-47; 4: 32-37). The Church, furthermore, recognises that the saving acts of God are intended for all humanity and not only Israel. (Acts 2: 1-11; 17; Acts 10).

God's mercy and grace is understood by the followers of Jesus Christ to have been experienced by them precisely in ways that enable them to be instrumental in that mercy and grace reaching others in life affirming and transforming ways. (2 Corinthians 5: 11-6:10; Ephesians 2: 1-10.)

On the basis of this calling and commission, the Church comes to understand itself as participating in Jesus Christ's intercession and mediation with God for all humanity (2 Corinthians 5: 20; 1 Peter 2: 9-12). It is in this sense that the Church as a whole is understood as "priestly" and collectively exercises a priestly function, in partnership with Jesus Christ, in the relationship between God and the world. It is in this sense that "the priesthood of all believers" is best understood and should be distinguished from "the priesthood of each believer."

The fulfilment of the calling and commission of the Church necessitates a wide diversity of functions, all of which are made possible by the empowering of the Holy Spirit. (Acts 6: 1-7; Romans 12: 3-8; 1 Corinthians 12; Ephesians 4: 11-13).

Some functions relate specifically to the maintenance of the Church's faithfulness to the earliest accounts of the life, death, resurrection and teaching of Christ as transmitted by the Apostles (Acts 4: 33; 2 Timothy 2: 1-2). Connected with this faithfulness is the maintenance of unity and peace within the Church (2 Timothy 2: 24- 4:5)

Other functions relate to the maintenance and management of the Church's resources (Acts 6: 2-3) and various acts of loving service both within the Church and to all people (Acts 9: 36; 1 Corinthians 12: 7-10)

Gradually a differentiation begins to develop in the New Testament Church, between those whose function it is to maintain the integrity of the church's teaching, unity and apostolic authority and those who exercise other forms of ministry. It is the function of the former to teach, exhort, lead and equip the latter for ministry in various forms. (1 Timothy 5: 17; 2 Timothy 3: 14-17)

Bishops (ἐπίσκοποι) emerge as "guardians" and "overseers" of the Church's ministry (Philippians 1: 1; 1 Timothy 3: 1; Titus 1: 7) while Elders (πρεσβυτερος, ἄ, ον) appear to be more plentiful and play a role in exhorting and preaching among the believers. Their function and influence appears to be normative in the life of the Church (Acts 11: 30; 14: 23; 15: 2, 4, 6, 22ff; Titus 1: 5; James 5: 14; 1 Peter 5: 1)

Deacons (διάκονός, ον) also appear. The word means 'servant', 'helper' or 'steward' and is used in association with help given to members of the community of believers (Romans 16: 1; Philippians 1: 1; 1 Timothy 3: 8-10, 12.) The word is also used extensively and in a general sense by Paul to describe himself in relation to both the Gospel and the Church. This suggests that the term 'deacon' serves the double function of denoting a specific office within the Church and indicating a general attitude of servanthood.

Disclaimer: Please note that this paper does not represent the views of the Methodist Church of Southern Africa or DEWCOM, unless specified otherwise.

Status of document: Adopted by DEWCOM

URL: <http://mcsadewcom.blogspot.com/2007/03/ecclesiology-with-particular-reference.html>

The specific offices of the Church mentioned here (Bishops, Elders/Presbyters and Deacons) all refer to functions within the body of the Church, for its governance, leadership, teaching and pastoral care. The New Testament Church is repeatedly exhorted to refer to these functionaries in order to maintain its good order and faithfulness to the tradition of the apostles. Elsewhere Readers, an honour and office carried over from the synagogue (Revelation 1: 3), and Widows as respected intercessors (1 Timothy 5: 3ff) appear as specific offices within the life of the Church.

However, these are not the only functions of the Church's life, nor are they definitive of the Church's primary function as the "priestly" community through whom God is present in the world in continuity with the incarnate God, Jesus Christ, to signify in the present God's coming reign and the healing, restoration and renewal that reign will bring (cf. Revelation 21: 1-8.) 1 Corinthians 12 explicitly links the incarnation of God in Christ with the Church in verse 27: "Now you are the body of Christ." This collective continuity with the incarnation of God in Christ is made possible by the equipping of diverse people with diverse abilities ("gifts"), no individual is continuous with the incarnation of God in Christ, but the whole community, in its many parts, is. 1 Corinthians 12 lists some of those abilities: those who speak wisdom, utter knowledge, exercise faith, heal, work miracles, prophesy and discern spirits. These are not specific offices, but forms of ministry exercised, both within and on behalf of the community, by individual members of the Church, empowered by the Holy Spirit. These various abilities and their resultant forms of service are authenticated as continuous with the incarnation of God in Christ by love (1 Corinthians 13: 1-13; 14: 1; Ephesians 2: 11-22; 4: 1-16)

A distinction began to emerge between offices that were for the ordering of community life, the continuity of the apostolic tradition, the empowering of believers and the more general acts of mercy, evangelism, service, healing and renewal that belonged to the whole Church in its identification and continuity with the mission and ministry of Jesus Christ, God incarnate. The former offices were intended to be supportive of the greater work involved in the latter, hence Ephesians 4: 11-12. This greater work is the work of *ὁ λαός*, the laos, the People of God, who have come to be understood as "The Laity."

Some anecdotal observations from Church history.

The post-apostolic Church saw the emergence of clearly defined ordained offices of Bishop, Priest and Deacon whose principal work was the ordering and leadership of the Church as an organized institution and, increasingly, presiding over the sacraments.

Meanwhile the mission and ministry of the Church in its service and evangelization of a wider world were taken up by people who were not principally drawn from the ranks of these ordained officers. In the western Church the developing lay movements that were to become monastic orders took up the tasks of intercession, hospitality, teaching, learning, writing, music, art, architecture, agriculture, establishing religious communities and evangelism, among others. The interface between the Church and the world, where the Church met the world in healing, renewing and transforming ways happened at the level of the laity. The task of

Disclaimer: Please note that this paper does not represent the views of the Methodist Church of Southern Africa or DEWCOM, unless specified otherwise.

Status of document: Adopted by DEWCOM

URL: <http://mcsadewcom.blogspot.com/2007/03/ecclesiology-with-particular-reference.html>

integrating the science and skills of the now disintegrating Roman world with institutions the descendants of the barbarian invaders were forming fell to these lay movements. They did not merely preserve Greco-Roman skills and *modi operandi* and impose them on the new population of the areas once ruled by Rome; they reshaped them in the light of their interpretation of the Gospel and the needs and cultural predispositions of the new inhabitants of the lands once under Roman rule, enabling an entirely new form of society to emerge.

To be sure, bishops provided vision, legitimation, counsel and resources for these lay missions, and sent presbyters to provide sacramental and institutional support, discipline and leadership. But in case after case the initiative and energy was lay driven. The main method in the western church was the formation of religious communities (e.g. monasteries and convents, where it must be remembered that members of these religious communities were not ordained clergy, but laity.) With those communities as base, they provided hospitality and care for the sick and dying, education, scholarship, administrative skill, literacy, organizational, building and agricultural technology and skill, legal expertise, the supervision of markets and a host of practical knowledge that served to stabilize otherwise unformed societies. Their services were often indispensable to the communities they served right up until the age of Charlemagne in the late eighth and early ninth centuries CE. The laity ("The Laos", the People of God) were deeply involved in the emergence of stability throughout the "Dark Ages" and contributed decisively to the economic development of a previously war torn and economically devastated western Europe. There is scarcely an institution in Europe today that does not have its roots in the work of countless thousands of devoted lay men and women in religious communities. Reading, writing, schools, universities, hospitals, childcare organizations, the civil service, legal systems (Roman Law itself was codified by the Christian Emperor Justinian in the sixth century CE), agricultural technology, guilds of tradesmen (mediaeval forerunners of trade unions), music, art and so on were developed by Christian laity living and working according to the monastic pattern of life: *orare et labore*, prayer and work, in equal and balanced measure.

(*A mischievous observation of my own*: It is no wonder that when the age of idolatry and hubris - otherwise known as The Renaissance - dawned in the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries CE, people, who had replaced devotion to God and disciplined anonymous membership of communities devoted to the *opus dei* - the work of God - with selfishness, vanity and narcissism, cast greedy eyes over the influence and resources of the Church and religious communities and stole by violence both the material resources and the influence of those devout lay people. Chief among these robbers was Henry VIII of England, who committed the ultimate blasphemy of naming himself head of the Church in England, England's very own Antiochus Epiphanes! This disastrous era in human affairs gave immediate rise to a catastrophic widening of the gap between rich and poor, incessant struggles for power and influence, horrendous exploitation and marginalization of the poor and accelerated the enthronement of capital as the true "ultimate concern" - and therefore "god", and a fertility god at that - of the modern era.)

The calling and commission of the laity:

Disclaimer: Please note that this paper does not represent the views of the Methodist Church of Southern Africa or DEWCOM, unless specified otherwise.

Status of document: Adopted by DEWCOM

URL: <http://mcsadewcom.blogspot.com/2007/03/ecclesiology-with-particular-reference.html>

It is the calling and commission of the laity, set out in the Old and New Testaments and demonstrated in Church history and the history of Europe (it is difficult to separate the two) to renew, transform, educate and shape the structures and ethos, not so much of the Church, but of Society as a whole. It is in fulfilling this mission that the laity's true participation in the "Priesthood of all Believers" is found. It is in the boardrooms, shops, factories, fields, schools, universities, trade unions, hospitals, stock exchanges, parliaments, art galleries, newspapers, neighbourhood organizations, building sites, civil service offices, law courts, prisons, entertainment palaces and so on and on that the mission of the laity is put into effect. It is there that the laity incarnates the Body of Christ for healing and renewal. The mission of the laity is too important and too vital to society's health and healing for the laity's mission to be confused with the secondary and supportive role of Bishops, Presbyters and Deacons. Lay ministry in society is too critical to the overall health of human society to be downgraded to the level of amateur, part time, stop gap work because professional clergy are not available.

The rhythm of the Church's life:

The pattern of "prayer and work" that gives religious communities their vitality is the pattern of the whole Church's life. The Church lives and serves in a rhythm of gathering and dispersal.

When the Church gathers it does so for worship of God, prayer, fellowship, learning together, tending one another's wounds, the empowering that the sacraments provide and the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. Bishops, presbyters and deacons are called and ordained to the conduct of this aspect of the Church's life. Their purpose is to empower the laity for their calling and commission, to "equip the saints" for the greater work they will perform when they disperse.

When the Church is gathered it is "at rest". It is specifically not engaged in mission, it is not continuous with the incarnate One. It is receiving nourishment and empowerment.

When the Church disperses its mission begins. That is the moment when Jesus' words: "As the Father sent me, so I send you" become real and active. The Church truly becomes the Laos, the People of God, sent out in mission when it disperses into the world to be salt and light, to "tread on scorpions". When the laity crosses the frontier between the culture of the gathered Church and is dispersed into the cultures of the world to transform and heal them, the Church becomes truly "catholic" and "apostolic."

On seconding clergy to work properly belonging to laity:

When an ordained clergy person feels constrained to serve in ways other than the leadership of worship, prayer, fellowship, learning and teaching, tending wounds, presiding over sacraments and interceding for the empowerment of the Holy Spirit for laity who have gathered to receive these ministries, that person is experiencing a call to leave off ministry to the gathered church and enter the mission and ministry of the laity.

On the employment of laity in service to gathered Church:

Disclaimer: Please note that this paper does not represent the views of the Methodist Church of Southern Africa or DEWCOM, unless specified otherwise.

Status of document: Adopted by DEWCOM

URL: <http://mcsadewcom.blogspot.com/2007/03/ecclesiology-with-particular-reference.html>

When a lay person understands his/her service of Christ as primarily within the gathered community, performing tasks normally associated with those of clergy, she/he is experiencing a call to ordination and the clergy.

The Church is not the Church when made up of clergy only.

The Church is not the Church when made up of laity only.

The Clergy embody and serve the Church in its gathering, the Laity embody and serve the incarnate God and become the Church as the Body of Christ when it is dispersed among the nations.

On the Presiding Bishop and the Lay President:

The Presiding Bishop represents the Church as an institutional whole, but especially the clergy and its ministry to the gathered Church.

The Lay President represents the Church in its dispersal, in its role as salt and light in society, in its engagement with the world in the myriad forms of healing and transformative ministry and mission that God's people perform in shops, factories, offices, boardrooms, hospitals, schools, universities, farms, mines, councils, parliaments and so on. It is to the Lay President that the Church as a whole, but the laity in particular, should look for inspirational leadership in its dispersal. The Lay President's primary role is to provide inspiration and leadership for the laity as the laity enters into the world of work and society, bringing excellence and service, for healing and transformation, into the world outside the four walls of the gathered Church.

The Presiding Bishop and the Presbyters provide the Church, as institution and in its gathering, with sacramental grace, teaching and vision, prayer and pastoral care. The Presiding Bishop and the clergy are essentially the "support staff" of the Church in its mission in the world.

On the value of the Clergy and the Laity's work:

The value of the clergy's work is measured by the amount of encouragement, support and empowerment the laity experiences when it gathers to be empowered for its work with God in Christ, in the power of the Holy Spirit, outside the walls of the Church, in the world that God loves so much that he gave his only begotten Son.

The value of the laity's work is measured by the extent to which the world is healed and transformed.