



let it shine

The Role of the Laity

The story has been told about an active church layman whose career was with the Department of Agriculture in Washington, D.C. When asked to talk about his faith commitments and the issue of hunger, he spoke about making contributions of cans of food to his church's food drive. He did not make the connection between his faith and the position he held in the government where decisions were made affecting the lives of thousands of hungry people.

The laity are more than the people who worship on Sunday mornings. They are more than the people who sing in the choir, teach church school, and serve on the building committee. They are all of these, but they are more. The laity are the living, breathing members of the Church, the body of Christ.

The United Church of Christ's *Book of Worship* states, "A person is incorporated into the universal church, the body of Christ, through the sacrament of baptism" (p. 129). Some have called baptism "**primary ordination**"; that is, as members of Christ's body by virtue of their baptism, laity and clergy alike are called to continue Christ's ministry in our own lives.

Confusion arises around the word "ministry." We have used the word "ministry" to describe the work that the ordained clergy do; they are our "ministers." It seems then, that ministry is what happens primarily within the church building: preaching, teaching, pastoral care, administration of the congregation's mission through boards and committees, and providing for worship.

But the laity spend most of their lives outside of church structures. They are present in schools, hospitals, and corporate boardrooms; they are

on factory shop floors, in government offices, and in sports arenas; they work with children, with other adults, and with the elderly. In short, the laity move into every sphere of activity that shapes our world. Yet too often the laity have not been challenged to think about the connection between the faith values preached on Sunday and their day-to-day life in the trenches of work and home. We have not been encouraged to wrestle with what our faith has to say about the myriad decisions we make each day or the moral implications of our business practices. We do not always consider whether our closest relationships or even our most casual contacts with other people reflect the love of God.

The role of the laity certainly includes serving Christ's Church with our gifts and our talents. But the far more fundamental role of the laity is to be Christ's body in the world wherever we go, serving the world, and bringing the light of God's love to each and every corner.

Reflection:

- How does the concept of baptism as "primary ordination" change the way you see your role as a lay person?
- What kind of support would you need to raise critical questions about how to minister in all the arenas in which you live and work? Where would you find that support?

Resources:

- *The Liberation of the Laity*, by Anne Rowthorn. Morehouse Publishing, 1986.
- *The Empowering Church: How one congregation supports lay people's ministries in the world*, by Davida Foy Crabtree. Alban Institute, 1989.

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