

# INFORMATION AND POSITION STATEMENT ON THE QUESTION OF “LAY MINISTRY” IN THE LUTHERAN CHURCH–MISSOURI SYNOD

THEOLOGICAL COMMISSION OF  
THE INDEPENDENT EVANGELICAL LUTHERAN CHURCH OF GERMANY (SELK)  
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## **A. Information**

“Lay Ministry” is understood as the temporary or permanent charge to laymen (those not ordained) to perform tasks which are normally the duties of the ordained ministers. This whole matter basically touches upon our understanding of the Ministry and of Ordination and, beyond that, the possibilities and limitations of emergency provisions and what may be derived from them. This is closely related to the concept of the Church and the priesthood of all believers.

The Lutheran Church–Missouri Synod (LC-MS) has appointed a “Lay Worker Study Committee”. It submitted its report to the 57<sup>th</sup> Synodical Convention of the LC-MS in Wichita, Kansas/USA in 1989. The recommendations of the “Report” as submitted and amended were accepted by the convention. They will certainly influence the practice of the LC-MS. The decisions made by the convention have caused a stir and some uneasiness both inside the LC-MS (e.g. the faculties at St. Louis and Ft. Wayne) and outside. During 1991 two pastoral conferences within the SELK, concerned about the continued validity Article 14 of the Augsburg Confession, asked the Presidium of the SELK for information and reaction. Thereupon the Presidium instructed the Theological Commission of the church to formulate a response to “Lay Ministry”.

The decisions concerned may be found in the “Convention Proceedings” of the 57<sup>th</sup> Regular Convention, The Lutheran Church–Missouri Synod, Wichita, Kansas, July 7-14, 1989, pp.111-114. There the following stipulations are made:

1. According to the Scriptures and the Lutheran Confessions there is only *one* divinely instituted office in the Church, the Office of the Public Ministry, usually referred to as “Pastor” (reference is made to CA V and XIV).
2. Apart from “exceptional circumstances or emergencies” the functions of the ministerial office should be carried out only by ordained ministers (referring to CA XIV). For “exceptional circumstances and emergencies” the 1981 report of the CTCR, “The Ministry”, was pointed to.
3. If no ordained pastor is available, provision must be made that the congregation (“people”) should not have to do without the Word and the sacraments.

4. The Bylaws of the LC-MS govern the licensing of those persons (“certain men”) which are called to perform a “special Word and Sacrament ministry under the supervision of an ordained pastor”.
5. Some of the partner churches (e.g. in Nigeria and in Ghana) have related their experiences in using specially selected, trained and supervised laymen “assisting” in Word and Sacrament ministries.
6. In the LC-MS there are at the moment 135 “lay ministers” serving in an “ongoing Word and Sacrament ministry” without synodical guidelines regulating their service.
7. The Lay Worker Study Committee has looked at the matter of recognized lay ministry with reference to
  - a. Pastoral services, functions and responsibilities by men without seminary training or ordination;
  - b. Nomenclature, preparation, deployment and supervision;
  - c. New ways of involving lay people.

The Synodical Convention adopted the following recommendations of the Lay Worker Study Committee:

#### 1. Regarding Forms of Lay Ministry

All Christians are called to carry out ministry in the broad sense, which has its focus in the world (John 3:16; 2 Cor. 5:19,20); the individual is called to serve as part of the universal priesthood of all believers. The clergy assist lay persons in helping them to fulfill their Christian vocation. Laymen serve on many levels of congregational life on boards, committees, as elders, etc.

#### 2. Regarding Nomenclature:

The title “deacon” shall be introduced to denote a laymen temporarily serving in the Word and Sacrament ministry “in exceptional circumstances or in emergencies”; this title shall distinguish him from an ordained pastor.

#### 3. Guidelines for Congregations regarding the Performance of Pastoral Functions When No Ordained Pastor is Available:

With reference to CA V and XIV (quoted here!) the point is made, that “only those who hold the office of the public ministry should exercise distinctive functions of this office. However, when no pastor is available, congregations may arrange for the performance of these distinctive functions by qualified individuals, lest God’s people be deprived of the opportunity for corporate worship and the celebration of the sacraments, in the absence of any specific Scriptural directives to the contrary.”

The guidelines deal with the following four functions of the office of the public ministry:

- a. Preaching in the services of the congregation;
- b. Leading the formal public services of worship;
- c. The public administration of the sacraments;

d. And the administration of the Office of the Keys as it pertains to the public pronouncement of absolution and church discipline.

To Point a:

A distinction must be made between one's own, self-composed sermon and reading a sermon prepared by an ordained public minister. A layperson can preach his own sermon provided he is licensed to do so, there is supervision by an ordained pastor and he has had the appropriate training. The license is granted initially for one year, then to be renewed every two years.

To Point b:

The leading of public worship services shall be according to approved liturgical forms only.

To Point c:

Holy Baptism shall be administered by the supervising pastor or another rostered pastor. Should this not be possible, the licensed layman will administer this sacrament.

The supervising pastor will normally administer the Lord's Supper. "However, in exceptional circumstances, when no ordained clergy is available and the congregation would otherwise be deprived of the Sacrament for a prolonged period of time, the licensed layman will preside, when specifically authorized to do so by the congregation and with the approval of a supervising pastor and the District President."

To Point d:

However, the administration of the Office of the Keys by means of the personal pronouncement of absolution, as it pertains to church discipline and possible excommunication, ought not be carried out by those who do not hold the office of the public ministry. This can always be provided for on behalf of the congregation by those who hold the office of public ministry.

## **B. Response and Position Statement**

The Theological Commission of the SELK takes the following position in regard to "Lay Ministry" (without here intending a complete description of and response to all related problems):

1. The Decision of the Wichita Convention arrives at conclusions based upon a particular understanding of the ministry and ordination as it is common in the LC-MS (and elsewhere in North America) and which has found acceptance in other places. But this cannot lay claim to be the only view consistently scriptural and confessional, because in some aspects it goes beyond the Scriptures and the Confessions (e.g. the view of *vocatio* according to CA XIV as simply the calling/commissioning by the congregation).

2. Thankfully the convention decision reiterates the Lutheran doctrine that there is only *one* office of the ministry. In our history this *one* office has taken concrete form by appearing in different offices and services. Thus it is incontrovertible that the distinctive functions of this office may, to a certain extent and to a certain degree, be transferred, and such functions may then, for their partial

fulfillment, be carried out by others.

3. But it is doubtful in any case whether exceptional situations and emergencies justify the proposed regulations (the resolution itself indicates them to be a deviation from the confessional norm). Can permanent regulations be based upon emergencies and exceptional circumstances? Which are such emergencies and exceptional circumstances? What care is taken to clearly limit them? Which developments can follow out of them? In any case, there is evident danger that the statements of our Confessions will be undermined and circumvented when emergencies and exceptional circumstances decided what regular church practice will be.

4. We have to ask whether the experiences related from Africa or the practice already followed in the LC-MS should be continued. If necessary, such practices should be corrected, and confessional principles (CA XIV) ought not be suspended. Beyond that, other experiences should also be taken note of (e.g. in the last century the Old Lutheran Church very quickly dropped the suggestion — practiced in a few cases — to have laymen administer the Sacrament of the Altar; rather the regular ordination of elders was considered. The rules governing the commissioning in German territorial churches today have completely denuded any meaningful understanding of what ordination is. The proximity to denominations that have cast overboard the Lutheran doctrine of the ministry is of real concern to us.)

5. A full course of seminary training is a matter of great significance and some weight for service in the church. But that does not replace the authorization of the office holder by Christ Himself. With the proposed commissioning of lay ministers the danger arises that the (necessary) training is dispensed with. We express our urgent warning.

6. The decision of the Wichita Convention clearly defines the Ministry merely from its function. That is one-sided, only partially correct; it is a distorted view of the understanding of the ministry. The Holy Scriptures seldom speak of functions in the abstract sense (viz. The rare use of the word *apostolee* – I Cor. 9:2; Gal. 2:8; Rom. 1:5; and the frequent use of the word *apostolos*). The Scriptures usually refer to the bearer of the office, his call to duty and his responsibility. Thus the *administratio* of the sacraments is not merely a “technical function” of consecrating and distributing. Rather it includes the responsibility of admitting to or refusing the sacrament, a matter of great personal responsibility.

7. If laymen are commissioned to administer the sacraments (“licensing”), perhaps only for a limited period of time, the question of certainty arises: Is what they do valid, proper, according to Christ’s will and effective? It would be quite irresponsible to allow for any uncertainty in this matter. Because Christ Himself — as is incontrovertible — has instituted the Ministry, it cannot be broken up, not even partially.

8. The proposed separation of the administration of the Lord’s Supper and the Office of the Keys makes little sense. Admission to the Sacrament of the Altar (a part of the responsible *administratio*) is admission to forgiveness (“given for you/shed for you for the remission of sins”) and this cannot take place conditionally or in a limited way. It generally implies the removal of church discipline

measures.

9. For which laypersons are these measures intended? At the moment the LC-MS listing “Ministers of Religion – Commissioned” (teachers, directors of Christian education) and the list “Certified Professional Church Workers – Lay” (e.g. deaconesses, parish assistants, parish workers) include women, according to the *Lutheran Annual 1991*. With the proposed regulations how can you ensure that the Office of the Ministry is entrusted only to men? (viz. Constitution of the SELK, Article 7,2: “This Office can be entrusted to men only.”) How can the ordination of women be considered unscriptural or contrary to the Confessions, if the functions of the office can be entrusted to women by way of commission?

10. Luther’s strict rejection of sacramental administration by laypersons is disregarded. This poses a real danger of sectarianism! The precise limits of rules governing emergencies (emergency proclamation, emergency baptism, possibly emergency absolution) would have to be clearly defined, and according to theological standards! Rules governing emergency situations should, according to Luther, not be applied to the administration of Communion.

11. With the proposed regulations, the LC-MS parts with the tradition of the Church and with large segments of present day Christendom as well as with the practice of some of the sister churches. Certainly the SELK could not give recognition to such lay ministers.

12. It is possible for the church to transfer some of the functions of the ministry (such as public preaching, administration of baptism, certain official acts, instruction, pastoral care) in a limited way from the one Office and commission specific persons (viz. The diaconate in the ancient church and in some present day traditions, or the institution of the “pastoral deacon” in the SELK), this we agree — or the applying of church discipline or the exercise of certain leadership functions and their transfer to specifically appointed officeholders. But the Office of the Ministry itself with its divinely given authority must be fully maintained. “Deacons” are accordingly ministers “in part”, are associated with the ministerial office, participate in it and are subject to the same conditions for their qualifications as ministers “in the full sense” (no women, able in body and mind, of proven attitude and character). Therefore, instead of considering the temporarily limited “commissioning” of laymen, proper ordination ought to be considered, if the regulations of the LC-MS concerning the use of laymen in pastoral functions are to be legitimate and responsible. Amongst others the Old Lutheran Church in East Germany did just that when there was a lack of fully trained pastors: certain men without the full regular seminary education were ordained.

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