

“Laity in Ministry to the World: God’s Secret Weapon for Reforming the Church and the World”

Edward H. Schroeder

[Presentation to Salt Lake Ministerial Association, Salt Lake City, Utah,
March 4, 1991. Printed in Crossings Newsletter, A Tribute Edition, 2001.]

1. A new offertory collect in the Lutheran Book of Worship has the praying people saying this: "We dedicate our lives to the **care** and **redemption** of all that you [God] have made." Those two words, care and redemption, designate the twin tasks on which God sends the laity in the Christian tradition. The two terms might appear to be synonyms, two words for the same thing, but they are not. To care for God's creation and to redeem it are distinct tasks, as I shall seek to show below. But for now I wish to designate these two tasks as the substance of the word ministry in this evening's lecture title: "Laity in Ministry to the World: God's Secret Weapon for Reforming the Church and the World." So the ministry as I shall use the term this evening is not a synonym for the clergy or what the clergy do. Ministry is a task, an assignment: care and redemption of God's world.

2. I am using the term laity here in the standard way: **believers** who are not ordained to the public task of proclamation, pastoring and administering the sacraments--a public assignment that is considered to be a full-time job in many, if not most, religious communities in our country today. The "full-time jobs" of people called "laity" are out in the world, doing all those things that keep our society running, the thousands of tasks you people did when you "went to work" this Monday morning.

If clergy can be said to be ordained to do **church work**, then the laity are commissioned to do **world work**, whatever it takes to keep the world running. So it really comes as no surprise that the laity are God's ministers for the "care and redemption" of God's world, because out in the world is where they are most all the time--except for those couple of hours each week when they're "at church."

3. "Ministry of the Laity," or expressions like that, are commonplace in Christian churches today. Their popularity represents a rediscovery that the 99% of believers who are not ordained **are** the church, and that world-work (not church-work) is their calling from God. And if they already are doing world-work, and doing it well, then they already are in ministry, already busy at the first of the two tasks, "caring" for all that God has made.

4. Why does God's creation need to be cared for? If it's God's creation, why doesn't **God** care for it? The answer, of course, is that God does care for it, and we humans are the designated care-givers to make it happen. People are God's "field reps" for this task.

In the first chapter of the book of Genesis, God appoints human beings as the care-givers for all that God has made. Even the unfractured creation of Genesis chapter one needs

tender loving care. Whatever all that might have entailed, we don't really know, since that first creation story in Genesis 1 never got beyond the first seven days. We never see our primal parents doing their assigned "world-work," in paradise Monday through Friday, 9- But even so, without any words about day #8, there are some solid hints about human care-takers in the still unfallen world. For one, they were to **interact** with all that God had made, in some sense to **humanize** the non-human world by engaging it for its own welfare--and not as we now do, to "conquer" it for our own welfare, whatever we may claim that to be.

Another signal of such **care-giving world work** is in that mysterious phrase used by God when creating the humans, "the image of God." Bible-scholars have wrestled with that expression for centuries, even for millennia--and there's no consensus yet on what it must surely mean. But here's one option that's tantalizing. If God is Creation's Care-Giver *par excellence*, caring enough to call it into existence and then not deserting it to run on its own, then people, we humans, are the ones designated to "image" that divine care to the world, to "mirror" God's own self when we interact with "all that you, God, have made." And, of course, that goes double for humans interacting with other humans, with other God-imagers.

My Crossings colleague, Bob Bertram, once made this quip when talking about **image of God**, as **mirroring God**. Said Bob: When Adam awoke and first saw Eve, his first words were most likely not something sexy, but rather something like this: "You remind me of Somebody I know." And Eve's response: "I was just going to say the same thing myself." But with that I have already jumped into the second creation account in Genesis chapters 2 & 3 where our primal parents have names and where the story ends with tragedy. The business of mirroring God gets all mucked up. Adam and Eve get expelled from the created perfection of Eden. It seems that mirroring and care-giving go down the tubes.

5. That tragedy in the second creation account (Genesis 2 & 3) puts a second element into **caring** for God's creation. When care-giving is not automatic, then emergency measures are needed to make it happen at all. For the creation you and I know is itself now an endangered species. As Pogo said: "We have met (creation's) enemy and he is us." God's creation is fractured and in danger of even greater fracture. We are the culprits. In the world after Genesis 3, caring for creation is not just **interacting** with it to humanize it, but **intervening** for it to restrain the forces that **demonize** it, **destroy** it.

Preserve it, protect it, defend it, go to bat for it, speak up for it, be God's advocate for all that God has made--this is the rhetoric for caretakers "after the fall." And especially for our fellow human co-creatures is this true. "See to it that they get cared for, get justice, have their lives and welfare preserved,"--that's the divine care-giving imperative in a fallen world. It puts care-givers in a conflictive situation, not unlike warfare. Hence the word "weapon" in the title for this address. And it pits creation's care-givers against their fellow human beings. For the major threats to **all that God has made**, especially God's own created images, comes from other such images, people.

In our fallen world **we** do not automatically mirror God's TLC to fellow mirrors, but we mirror our own egos, our own predatory designs. Instead of "God loves you, and I'm on assignment to implement that," the almost automatic message is: "I love me, and I want you to implement that."

6. The standard Biblical word for all this is **sin**, as you know. Because sinners populate the planet, caring for all that God has made is even more necessary, but also a seemingly lost cause. The care-takers are also the creation's predators. "We have met the enemy, and he is us." So how can it work? How to rehabilitate tender loving care for the creation when what's needed is cure of the care-givers? Of course, to cure creation, you have to undo Genesis 3.

Martin Luther had a folksy way of portraying God's dilemma about creation after the fall. He pictures God deliberating: how to get creation cared for now that the God-mirrors were cracked? How to get sinners to care for creation even before the sinners themselves got cured?

Said Luther: God takes it as a given that humans are now ego-centric. So God devises a "plan B" after the fall to capitalize on that fact of sinner's self-centeredness and still keep creation from total collapse. He inserts into all the structures of the fallen world the principle of reciprocity: "If you do good, you get rewarded. Do evil, and evil eventually gets done back to you." The common shorthand for this is the "golden rule." It makes a sinners' self-interest the motive for their doing good to others.

So it's in a sinner's self-interest to be a care-taker, for that will bring positive feedback to one's own self. Thus even in a fallen world care-giving still gets done, seldom perfectly but nevertheless enough, via these structures of reciprocity. More often than not care-giving happens, justice gets done, the "law of preservation" works to keep creation going.

7. That brings us to the second task after "care," viz., redemption. Creation longs for redemption, St. Paul says. Christians claim that in Jesus, a Jewish human being whom they call the Messiah, the Christ, God the Creator has done just that.

Care-giving under the rubrics of reciprocity doesn't cure ego-centrism, doesn't **redeem** God's creation. It is still victim to innumerable alien owners who usurp it as their own. There is at least one such alien owner per person in the billions of us that now inhabit the planet, to say nothing of the larger-than-life "principalities and powers" still running around loose. Redemption is the Biblical word for rectifying the ownership issue in creation. So "redeem" is not just another synonym for "saving." To redeem is to buy back, to regain ownership. In today's Wall Street rhetoric it's a "take-over," but in this case not a "hostile takeover." Instead, a merciful one.

The term "Kingdom of God" used so frequently in the first three Gospels is the "tag" Jesus and his disciples use for God's "merciful takeover" of the creation possessed by renegade and alien owners. The crucified and risen Jesus is the center of the operation. He's the Redeemer, the one who undoes the hostile takeover in Genesis 3.

Luther capitalizes on the ownership angle in the Small Catechism, as he explains the 2nd Article of the Apostles Creed. "What does this mean? he asks. And he answers: "I believe that Jesus Christ, true God, begotten of the Father from all eternity, and also true man, born of the Virgin Mary, is my **Lord** [remember "Lord" in the Bible designates **owner**, not boss]; that he has **redeemed** me a lost, and condemned creature; **purchased** and **won me** from all sin, from death and the power of the devil, not with gold or silver, but with his holy, precious blood, and by his innocent sufferings and death; so that I might be **his own**, and live **subject to him** in his kingdom and serve him in everlasting righteousness, innocence, and blessedness; even as he is risen from the dead, lives and reigns to all eternity. This is most certainly true." Note all the ownership-transfer rhetoric here as Luther portrays the work of Christ.

8. And when Jesus' task is completed and he is closing out his affairs, he sends his disciples out with the self-same assignment: "As the Father sent me, so send I you, now on a second assignment--go and dedicate your life not only to the **care**, but also to the **redemption** of all that God has made." Any and every disciple--ordained or not--merely by virtue of being baptized, is called into the unfinished job of getting all the rest of creation back in under God's mercy-management.

Is that not the fundamental task of the laity, really? Who else interacts with the creation, with all that God has made, on such a regular 24 hour a day basis? Who among Christians sees so much of what God has made that is still under alien ownerships, tyrannized and terrified by the competitors to God's proposed mercy-management model for running the world? The folks we call laity, of course. And the way to make such redemption happen is to insert mercy-management into the interactions we have with all that God has made--foremost in our interactions with the human creatures (for that is where it is the toughest to do) and then also in our interaction with the non-human creatures as well, the thousands of places each day where we encounter things besides people.

If such behavior on your part should make people ask what's wrong with you, then you tell them about the ownership transfer you yourself underwent. You might even tell them the name of the New Owner, the New Lord, should they ask, and find out whether they'd "rather not switch than fight." The witness of the laity for finishing Christ's project is the primary theater for redemption operations. If it doesn't happen there, it doesn't happen.

9. That may make it sound easy, and all of you know it is not. Yet that is the fundamental blueprint in the Christian tradition. **Redemption** is a second assignment that Jesus-followers take on in addition to the **care-taker** assignment that applies to all humans created in the image of God. Caring is needed to prevent the whole planet from turning into a landscape like the recent pictures we have seen of destroyed Iraq and Kuwait. Redeeming is still an unfinished task of both sides engaged in that war, and the multitude of little wars each of us still knows from our personal lives.

To **reform the world**--as the published title of this address says--is to form it over by such care-taking and such redeeming, into a world that operates at every juncture by mercy-management. If and when that is ever completed, says the seer in the Revelation of

St. John, "then will the Kingdoms of this world (=all the ownership structures on our planet) have become the Kingdom (=ownership, property) of our God and of God's Messiah; and he shall reign (=own them) forever."

10. That's a proposal of laity for reforming the world by such "ministry," such service-like-a-restaurant-waiter, bringing God's goodies from the divine kitchen and placing them before people so that they receive what God intends them to receive: the Two Main Dishes are 1) tender loving care of this fractured old creation we all live in, and 2) redeeming it into the new creation that runs on mercy.

When Christians pray: "Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven," they are asking for just this, asking that the "mercy" on which heaven runs (by definition) would also be the power that energizes everything on earth. Not only do we pray for it in this third petition of 'Our Owner's Prayer,' but merely by reciting the petition we pledge ourselves to make it concrete in and around our individual locations on this earth.

11. But now what about "Reforming the Church," that other element in our lecture title? Each of you could now, I imagine, answer that yourself. It's nothing else than this: wherever the form of church life steers the laity away from this ministry, it needs reforming.

Congregational life in America regularly acknowledges the high priority of care and redemption of the world, but then so often organizes itself for the care and redemption of the **congregation**. Even those who have caught the vision of "world-work" as the arena for the laity's ministry, especially clergy, are so often hamstrung by our seminary training, our habits and the denominational traditions of America--hamstrung and unable to get on with it. So clergy need laity to lead them cheerfully into this venture.

12. There's one word left in the title that I haven't mentioned yet, but I will now as I bring this to closure. "Secret." "Laity in Ministry to the World: God's **Secret** Weapon for Reforming the Church and the World."

What's so **secret** about the laity? I want to use the term in the sense of an "open secret" as I shall seek to show in a minute. But it is "secret" in some other senses as well. For example, I still encounter fellow clergy for whom it's still secret. They think and speak as though **they** are the ministers doing ministry and the laity are their clients, their consumers, but not really active participants, co-laborers with Christ in Christ's own project.

We find in our Crossings work that it's still a secret for many of the laity, who see their world-work as something else, something different from their Christian "churchly" experience, maybe even **alien** or **antagonistic** to it. So to exercise their Christian callings, they throw themselves into "church-work" almost as though it were their own redemption from the secularity of their "world-work."

Both of these types, the clergy and lay, for whom Ministry in Daily Life, Ministry in World-work is still a secret, need help. And the help they need is not first of all a lecture on the Ministry of the Laity, but a fresh look at the "secret," the "open secret" at the center of what Christians call the Gospel. "God was in Christ reconciling **the world** to God's own self." The world, not the church, is the object of all the trouble God went to in the crucified and risen Messiah.

But that Messiah is also a "**secret**" sort of Messiah, and I'm using the word secret as it's used in the Greek language of the Christian Scriptures. The original word is **cryptic**, which literally means **covered**. Not secret in the sense of "don't tell anybody," but secret in the sense of "you could look right at it and still not see it." You could look at Jesus and his common humanity, his motley crowd of disciples, and his obvious defeat on the cross--and not see at all that here "God was re-claiming the world for God's own possession," setting in place **a mercy-management model** for re-owning the fractured creation and nurturing it into being a new creation.

And what's true about this central figure, Jesus the Christ, himself "concealed by the Cross" (sub cruce tecta a la Luther) is also true about the company he keeps--then and now.

If the job is to get God's Christ back into ownership of God's world, then the laity do not look much like the super high-tech forces that just liberated Kuwait from its alien owners. They're not even organized in any kind of way that seems fit for the job. So, if they are the takeover squadrons, it sure doesn't look like it. It must be a real secret.

And yet, the High Command of this operation says that this is the takeover plan. It's not elite troops and heavy armor and blitzkrieg, but it's closer to guerrilla warfare with partisan subversives. For the object is not to destroy the "enemy," but to regain him--and her--and it, yes the whole creation, to bring them back alive to their real owner. Christ is the one and only general, the one Head, and all the body members (clergy included!) are infiltrators among their fellow world-citizens as Christ's subversives.

What was true in Corinth is still true today: "Consider your call, brothers and sisters; not many of you are wise, by any human standard; few are powerful or highly born. Yet, to shame the wise, God has chosen what the world counts folly, and to shame what is strong, God has chosen what the world counts weakness. He has chosen things low and contemptible, mere nothings, to overthrow the existing order. And so there is no place for human boasting in the presence of God. You are in Christ Jesus by God's act, for God has made him our wisdom, our righteousness, our holiness and our **redemption**. And so (in the words of Scripture), 'If anyone wants to boast, let them boast of the Lord.'(1:26-31)"

That's **the** secret. The first act of the drama ran from Bethlehem to the empty tomb. If you've been caught up in it, you are on stage right now. The drama still bears the same title: Ministry to the World. Everybody called, as St. Paul said, is now on stage as God's secret agent for keeping the action going. That action is to get God's cross-shaped wisdom, righteousness, holiness, and finally redemption, operational in all the places in

creation where is it not yet so. That's the ministry of the laity. That's the one and only ministry of the church. There really is no alternative.

Edward H. Schroeder