

“The Development of a Strong and Committed Laity” Lecture by Mark Gibbs

Gibbs delivered this inaugural Vesper-Audenshaw Laity Lecture (later called the Mark Gibbs Memorial Lecture) in San Francisco in November 1981 and at the Lutheran School of Theology in Chicago in December 1981.

I have been asked to start this series of annual lectures with a rather general topic, though we expect that future lecturers will often choose something a little more specialized. I suggest that we should look at the *development of a strong and committed laity*, and what has happened in this direction in the last thirty-five years. I need to define my terms. Let me first say a word about commitment; because this is a rather ambiguous term, and it's a word that many sincere Christians are uneasy with – partly because some of our fellow believers go on and on about conversion and commitment.

However, there clearly is in the Christian message, in the Gospel, a demand for something much more than religious amiability. You may remember a year or two ago we were inflicted with one of those pop posters, which said “This Lent, why not give up your neutrality?” and many church studies in recent years have reported that a good many American and British laypeople – and perhaps especially Anglicans and Episcopalians – are rather too easily half believers of casual creeds. We are called to know more definitely than that what we believe and what we hope.

Certainly, we must define very carefully what we are committed to. Christian history is rather full of examples of the quite demonic evil which is let loose when Christians believe firmly in the wrong things. Better have amiability than the Inquisition, or the Dutch Reformed justification of apartheid in South Africa or the sectarian intolerance in Northern Ireland. If we are to ask for commitment, we must do better than that. Let us say, then, that we are asking for laity who are committed to God's will as revealed in Jesus Christ, and to that will not only on Sunday and in our private religion, not only in Church affairs, but also in the whole spectrum of our lives' activities. In the famous phrase that our Lutheran friends have used in recent years, we have to be concerned with “Monday's ministries,” not only in our personal lives but also in politics and business and industry and commerce. And also in “Saturday's ministries,” our involvement in entertainment, in sports, in leisure, in television, in tourism and vacations. And this commitment is to inform all of our lives, regardless of our ability or our age, or our sex, or our education, or our race, or our class, or our income, *or our ordination*. Such is the commitment which I believe the New Testament calls us to. And it is for all of us.

No More Dumb Sheep

Now let us try to define *strong*, in our title, “the development of a strong and committed laity.” By strong laity I refer first of all to people who do understand that calling which I just have

spoken of. And secondly, I mean Christian people who are *adult* Christians. In the words of that famous chapter, Ephesians 4, people who are “no more children,” no more babies in the faith who have to be manipulated or instructed, or in some way or another kept from an independent adult life. We need laity who are able to handle questions of belief and of skepticism, and questions which criticize both society and church. And laity who are able to handle questions of ambiguity and compromise (by which the world is run).

After the Second World War

Such a vision, that we might have considerable numbers of Christian laity of that kind of strength and caliber, of that kind of commitment, came once more to very many churches in Britain, America and all over the world, after the great disaster of the 1939-45 war. If we study the founding of the World Council of Churches in 1948, and see the topics discussed then at Amsterdam, we shall discover a very strong emphasis on the recovery of a Christian vocation in the world. If we examine the history of the European churches in the late 1940s, we shall note that there were then founded a whole series of laity centers (which they have often called Academies), and also the great German laity congress – the Kirchentag. If we look into the churches of Asia and Africa after 1945, we shall find exactly the same kind of concern (indeed the missionary movements of the last hundred years have often startled [sic? *started?*] the “home” churches by the questions about lay witness which they put before them). If we reread the reports of the North American churches, it was after 1945 that Canada started a whole series of laity centers and all kinds of similar experiments and programs were initiated in the United States.

1945 is now thirty-six years ago. That is not so long in the great sweep of Christian history – and we need to remember that – but it does seem to us a very long time ago, almost a past era when we consider the rate of change in the world since then. In those thirty-six years, it seems to me that the churches have made some genuine progress in understanding the vocation of the whole People of God, and of the laity within that People, the *laos*.

In the first place, we should acknowledge that this basic theological understanding that *all Christian people* are called to a high quality of life in Christ Jesus – not just clergy, and not just church workers – has been very finely emphasized in many ecumenical and denominational statements since 1943. If I may give you one or two examples, the documents of the World Council of Churches Second Assembly in 1954, in Evanston, Illinois, give a much greater emphasis to the role of the laity in discerning and in ministering than you would ever find in church statements before 1939. If we examine recent documents of say, the Lutheran Church in America, or of the United Methodist Church at its General Conference in Indianapolis in 1980, or if we examine Roman Catholic statements about the laity during and after the Second Vatican Council, we can detect a real revolution in understanding the common calling of all Christian people. I refer you particularly to the *Constitution of the Church in the Modern World* and to the document from the American Roman Catholic bishops issued this year entitled *Called and*

Gifted, in which the bishops say openly and firmly that they wish not only to consult with laypeople but also to learn from them. Secondly, I think we should recognize that there has been a great deal of progress made in our understanding of Christian personal relationships in the last twenty years or so. Obviously the scene is complicated and patchy; but I think we should celebrate the fact that in many kinds of personal, sexual, family and friendly relationships, we have a deeper understanding of what sensitive Christian loving and living can mean, than very many people affirmed in church teaching before, shall we say, 1939. We are looking very much more openly than we used to at human relationships; and there has been very great progress made in discussing quite calmly all kinds of topics which were almost suppressed in the old days. And if we look at studies of how people learn, how Christians learn – both adults and children – I think we can also see very great progress.

Nevertheless, Some Failures

Nevertheless, as we look again at the last thirty-five years of church history, we do have to admit that there have also been a good many disappointments and a good many failures in Christian experiments with the laity. I use the word “failure” quite deliberately because I think we need to have a little more secular wisdom about this. When secular people fail in something, whether it be the design of a New York bus or of a new airport, they hurry around and learn from it. They do not always expect everything will go right the first time.

So let us look at some of the things which seem to me to have gone wrong in the last thirty-five years; so that we can learn from them, and not be ashamed to admit that we have to try again.

We Have Not Thought Hard Enough

First and foremost, I believe that we must admit some intellectual weaknesses in the lay movement as we have known it. I want to stress this point – it seems to me appropriate in such a lecture. There have been some theological and intellectual weaknesses in what we have tried to do; and we are paying the price for them now. John Wesley, in his old age, said “Blessed be God, I can still read, write and think. Oh that It may to his Glory.” And it does seem to me that this is a fine affirmation – dare I say perhaps especially for Methodists? – but also for us all. And I must admit that sometimes our recent stress on loving personal relationships, on human encounter and sensitivity, on individual and group growth, has fed a certain latent anti-intellectualism, both in Britain and perhaps particularly in North America. I don’t think this is necessarily what must happen. For instance if you look at young German Christians, who attend the Kirchentags in such large numbers, they seem able to join strong personal relationships with a high degree of intellectual sharpness.

Let me give you some examples of the way we get into trouble if we neglect our intellectual duties. For instance, consider our present concerns over economic affairs. I was recently in Cleveland, Ohio, at a National Council of Churches meeting, and a rather distinguished black church leader said very emphatically “For God’s sake make priority economics.” He was upset,

disturbed and bewildered by what is happening in your country to social programs and poverty programs and so on. (We have just the same kind bewilderment in many church people in Britain.) There used to be a very good tradition in your country, as in mine, that Christians must study the economic scene, and develop an informed critique of it. In the late fifties and early sixties the National Council of Churches in the USA produced nine volumes of studies on ethics and economic life. [1] We have little at the moment of anything like that quality: it was a serious matching of theological with economic understanding. So many Christians are now very confused about what is meant about “capitalism,” and “socialism.” They use these terms on the whole almost as swear words. They have rather little understanding of the inhuman implications of both some capitalist and some socialist societies; and they have not undertaken much careful study of what mix of the two may be appropriate. I think Christian scholars, who are called of course to be servant intellectuals, must be asked to help us about this kind of topic, and rather rapidly too. For we have some divisions between rich and poor, in your country and in mine, which are offensive to the Christian conscience. But they are also differences which are not easily overcome by simplistic solutions.

Let me give you another example. In many churches we still have no systematic development of the laity, no real educational process in the discipleship of people. It is different for the clergy. Our clergy quite rightly have a good basic training, and opportunities for continuing education throughout their careers. But laypeople are too often left in ignorance, to twitch or stagger, as it were, emotionally, when there comes a new crisis, a new problem, a new disaster. And yet we know that there can be careful processes by which Christian laypeople may grow in understanding.

Intellectual strength is not everything, but it is of great importance. I was very pleased to find recently in the biography of that old veteran of the lay movement in the United States, John R. Mott, that when he was a young student and started organizing conferences for students in Massachusetts and in New England, he said “We must do this with zeal and knowledge.” The knowledge is important.

Clergy-Laity Tensions

Secondly, I suggest that we have not been very successful yet in achieving a proper partnership between clergy and laity, between the ordained and the non-ordained ministers – for of course we are all called to be ministers together. In some cases and in some churches even the theology of our common vocation has not really been accepted by either side. I must say that some clergy (and it doesn’t seem to matter what denomination they are, whether Roman Catholic, Episcopal or Baptist), some clergy do seem to claim a special spiritual status. They make ordination more important than baptism, which it clearly is not. On the other hand we have many laity who certainly don’t want to face the implications of a common calling. As Jurgen Moltmann said rather ruefully, “The laity would rather not be called!” We laity often find it much more

comfortable to give the priest, the ordained minister, a special religious status, and then expect them to keep a standard of Christian living which we slide away from ourselves.

Even where the theology of a common calling is accepted, the *psychology* of a partnership between clergy and laity is still difficult, even in the most Protestant churches. I have had the privilege of visiting a considerable number of seminaries in the last few years; and I must report that even where the priesthood of all believers is central to their beliefs, I have found sometimes an assumption among young clergy and seminarians that the laity are still objects to be done good to, and that we are children that must be taught new tricks, that we are immature people not to be trusted with really controversial and difficult doctrines. I have detected also that some clergy are comfortable when they are dealing with weak and dependent and needy laity, but that they are not very happy with strong, mature and rather well-informed laity. Let me give you a quotation from one of our finest archbishops of Canterbury in this century, Michael Ramsey. He was talking and writing to priests, and he said this, “It may be often for you as priests to rouse the laity to think responsibly. But when they are aroused, you will find that they have knowledge that you do not have, and you will be learning from them in a partnership of Christian concern. That is how the mind of the Church is to be formed.” [2] That kind of partnership is something we have not always achieved.

The Parish Is Not the Whole of Life

Thirdly, and related to that second difficulty, I must suggest that we are still not very easy about the proper role of the parish, the local congregation, the local Christian community in our total Christian lives, and in the total development of the laity. Here again there is sometimes a tension between pastor and laity, because the pastor or the priest is naturally very parish-centered. This is central to his or her responsibilities, and this is central to the kind of training which is offered in most seminaries. Such ordained priests and pastors tend to like and to honor laypeople who are equally parish-centered – as some are, for example retired people, people working locally, and people who are keen on church organizations. But such clergy tend to suspect and even to be a little afraid of laity whose hearts and minds are not so parish-centered. They are sometimes very unhappy about Christians who join in other ways of learning, like occupational groups and ecumenical groups. This suspicion is very natural, but sometimes this may lead us into a very real evil of “churchiness,” where in a parish or in a denomination (and the denominations are always dominated by local clergy) you may get the kind of congregation which wants to save its own collective soul at all costs, which wants to run a kind of holy club, which wants to spend a great deal of money on its own maintenance. A congregation which affirms the kind of laity who are in the choir, but not those in politics, the kind of laity who are able to help in the church school, but not those who are worried about their work in union organizations. Senator Mark Hatfield, one of the most distinguished Christian politicians in this country, has talked and written of his loneliness and his desperate isolation sometimes from church life, because he has not been able to join very much in ordinary parish and denominational affairs.

I want to offer a testimony here from Professor Milton Crum, who is now a priest at Virginia Seminary and who was at one time a layman, working in the automobile industry. In an article we published in a recent *Laity Exchange* he wrote this: “No one in church ever suggested to me that what I did in the automobile business was a ministry or serving God. On the contrary, the message I got was that what I did in 54 hours a week on the job, and what I did in community service, and what I did with family and friends did not count as service to God. What counted as serving God were such churchly activities as serving in the vestry, as a junior warden, and as a lay reader.” Professor Crum has experimented in a parish with different ways to affirm in worship the ministry of those not prominent in church organizations, and I believe we need further work on this kind of liturgical innovation. I would like to report how much I have valued, on many visits to the Iona Community in Scotland, the opportunities which are given in worship there for an affirmation of the calling and life of the secular laity as well of that of the more churchly. As Professor Hans Kung wrote, long ago in 1958, “The laity generally feels itself spiritually powerless and illiterate as to its witness in that sector which is the very place where most of its life is likely spent.” Yes, laypeople often feel themselves illiterate and unsupported for their Monday and Saturday ministries. And I would agree with Professor Kung that on such points we do have to practice a certain holy impatience, and to maintain a certain critical loyalty to the institutional churches and the parishes.

Starved of Money

My fourth reason why the lay movement has not moved quite as fast as we hoped is a very simple one, a very obvious one, The clear reason why many of the best lay programs have not flourished is a simple lack of money. Dr. Hans-Ruedi Weber, the Swiss Biblical scholar who has written so much that is helpful about the laity, has published a famous article about this, in which he insists that you can always tell the true theology of a church, a denomination, a synod or a parish, by its *budget*. [3] The operational theology of a church is tested by its budget. And of course, as in the secular world, you not only have to undertake research and development and experimentation about the laity, but you do have to achieve a certain implementation of these new ideas, once they are tested. You have to *invest* in the laity, as in the clergy. I have nothing whatever to say against the very admirable developments in clergy education over the last thirty years. We’ve seen great changes and improvements, I believe, in seminary and in continuing education and in the granting of sabbaticals and the like. But we have not had anything like the same provision in church budgets for the laity. I would like once again to say how I honor Vesper Society for its laity programs. But I do wonder sometimes why the churches leave it to little organizations like the Society to do much of the educational and learning work which is so essential. I’ve seen so many good schemes for lay academies, lay experiments, laity centers, given a small three-year grant (which is absolutely fatal because in the middle of the second year, you have to run around trying to finance what you want to do next). I have seen so many people break their hearts and their careers because they have not been given reasonable financing over a reasonable length of time.

We must also insist that this is no excuse for the laity to stay immature and childish. Adult people do more for themselves; they don't blame everybody else. I think many laity ought to learn to put rather more political pressure on the churches, of which they are members, so that more opportunities are given for laity development. We ought to see a little of what George Steiner calls "Christian energy" here. And we laity should be prepared to pay more for our own Christian education, just as we have to pay nowadays for our secular education, our retooling and our re-training. We shouldn't expect always to learn Christian theology, and Christian discernment in the modern world, on the cheap. I have noticed with great pleasure the lead given here by some of our evangelical friends. I do not mean the ranting, roaring fundamentalists. I refer to the thoughtful evangelicals, who in Toronto, and Vancouver, and now in Berkeley have established respectable colleges, where laypeople may undertake respectable learning – and they are expected to pay something like respectable fees too.

The Costs of Commitment

However, we have to probe a little deeper in our examination of the weaknesses of the lay movement in recent years. We cannot only talk in terms of budgets and programs, we have to explore rather thoughtfully and carefully the *cost* today of Christian discipleship, the cost of "doing the truth." A cost which is measured not only in time and money, but also sometimes in pain and in uncomfortable living. The first General Secretary of the World Council of Churches, Dr. W.A. Visser't Hooft, has written of "the tragic quality of the spiritual life"; but this kind of language makes many laypeople distinctly uneasy.

This is not just moral cowardice. Many Christians today are bewildered by the information overload of our times. We hear bad news every evening on the television; and the informational explosion has made the world seem a more terrible place than ever before – in fact it was very terrible in past ages, but we didn't know so much about it. The total sum of human intolerance and brutality and torture seems more than we can bear; and we are reluctant to face more bad news every Sunday morning.

We are also uneasy because it seems that some of our most eloquent church teachers – those who try to teach us about social justice – are so perfectionist in their dreams and their demands. I received recently from Toronto an excellent article by Bonnie Green of the United Church of Canada, describing the ineffectiveness of some of that fine church's social programs, simply because laypeople feel they can't take any more exhortations. We cannot cope with the news of yet another atrocity, yet another famine. And so we have the now familiar problem among good liberal and radical activists, the phenomenon of a certain burn-out, a certain endless tiredness, a certain feeling that everything is getting worse all the time. Some of us have lost the enthusiasm we once had, and it is not easy to find it again.

I should like to suggest that we need a much more thorough theological and spiritual exploration of how laypeople may survive, and may grow a deeper quality of Christian compassion, not

withdrawn from but living in the midst of the pressures and ambiguities of our time. I'm quite certain one thing we must do is quite simple. We must take some regular time for reflection. We are a very busy lot of people – and we ought to be – but we must find some time for reflection on our busyness. It may be that the Catholic and Orthodox and Anglican traditions will be able to help us here. It seems to me that such times for reflection must center often for us in a rather careful understanding of how God's grace and God's strength comes to us. I am editing at the moment a rather fine article by Dr. Elliott Bradley, of the Vancouver School of Theology. He has been a strong social activist, and he still is. He believes that the church is in the business of telling the truth, even if it is unpleasant. But he admits that he faces in his own life, and in the lives of many laypeople he works with, a certain feeling of being overwhelmed by the terrible truth. Dr. Bradley writes – and I believe this is a point we need to explore very carefully in the days ahead – “God's grace comes to us, *as we dare to take on more than we can manage.*” We laity, like our clergy partners, can grow in strength only when we dare to take on a little bit more – not the whole world, but a little bit more than we are comfortable with. Spiritual growth comes with a certain style of Christian courage.

This is not at all a cozy, holy club, Christian ghetto style of spirituality; but it is central to the development of a strong, committed and adult laity. This must – as in past centuries – be a major item on our agenda, as we call the laity, together with the clergy, to tell the truth in hope in the days to come.

Notes:

[1] Published by Harper and Row for the National Council of Churches.

[2] Michael Ramsey. *The Christian Priest Today*. London: SPCK, 1972, p. 41.

[3] Hans-Ruedi Weber. “The Battle Is Not Yet Won.” *Laity Exchange*, No. 3 (March 1978), p. 1.

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