The Vocation of the Laity within a Swedish-Lutheran Context

by Lisa Buratti

For this symposium, I reflect on the vocation and role of the laity from a Swedish-Lutheran perspective. For the last two years, I have been teaching at the only confessional theological seminary with an ordination track for clergy within the Church of Sweden. (The other option for students is to study theology at a state university for four years with one final year at the pastoral institute of the Church of Sweden). The Johannelund seminary was founded (and is still governed) by the Swedish Evangelical Mission (EFS), a church-affiliated lay movement. In the first part of this paper, I will describe two important movements within the Church of Sweden: the Swedish Evangelical Mission (EFS) founded in 1856; and the Church of Sweden’s association for lay ministry founded in 1918. In the second part, I will discuss some of the challenges we face on the vocation of the laity. I will then make some concluding remarks.

From a general Lutheran perspective, there has always been a strong emphasis on the personal vocation of every Christian. This vocation is given in baptism and grounded in biblical references like 1 Peter 2:4-5 (“and like living stones be yourselves built in a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood”), as well as 1 Peter 2:9 (“but you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God’s own people.”) The common priesthood is an important aspect of how Lutherans view the people of God. Nevertheless, since the Lutheran Church of Sweden holds a threefold ordained office—bishops, ministers, and (permanent) deacons—the distinction between the ordained and the laity exists. There is also a vivid discussion of how the laity contribute to the Church not only through their everyday life as Christians and churchgoers but also in more specific ways as living stones and bearers of the faith.

In the mid-nineteenth century, there was a “low-church” revival movement led by a man named Rosenius and an ordained minister named Lundeborg. To support their efforts to evangelize both nationally and internationally, they started printing and distributing evangelical tracts and books. Soon after, lay missionaries were trained and sent to Africa, and since then, the movement has maintained a strong commitment to support missionary activities. EFS congregations were formed all over the country, and the laity preached, prayed, sang, and read the Bible together. For the eucharist, however, they would attend the Sunday service at the local parish of the state Church of Sweden. At times, there were conflicts between the EFS congregations and the local parishes of the state Church, but EFS have remained a low-church movement within the Church of Sweden, affirming the confessional documents as well as the structure and offices of the Church.
The other main lay association in Sweden was formed in 1918 and was a result of the transformation of several local associations for lay ministry into one national association. The association came into being when there was a severe lack of clergy in the Stockholm area and an acute need for lay assistance in order to maintain weekly worship services, albeit without the eucharist. Laymen took the initiative of forming a movement, although the archbishop at that time, Natan Söderblom, was very much involved in the formal establishment of the association. It was an organization for both laymen and ordained men that was also known as "Church brothers." It was only opened to women in 1978, i.e. twenty years after the decision to ordain women clergy. The association was founded in an era of renewal in the Church of Sweden, which is known in German as Volkeskirsche, the nation or people's Church. It was founded on the principle that the Swedish nation should be a Christian nation and, in that respect, also God's people. God's unconditional grace should reach out to every citizen, whether he or she embraced it or not. Thus there was a Church of Sweden youth association (1943) and a women's association (1947) from early on. This was a period when associations were also being formed in the secular realm. These developments meant that from the turn of the nineteenth century onwards, the laity had an increasingly important role in the Church of Sweden not only for practical matters but also with respect to Sunday worship services. This is very much consistent with the Lutheran heritage of the vocation of every Christian. In the Church of Sweden, there is a longstanding tradition of giving venia—license to preach—to churchwardens, Bible study teachers, missionary boards, etc., as well as a strong desire among the laity to educate themselves in matters of faith. Both on a parish and a national level, the laity, with the support of the clergy, organized lectures and courses where theologians were invited to teach. Lay people also organized and led Bible study groups and missionary associations.

Today, the Church of Sweden is facing some challenges that must be taken into consideration when assessing the importance of the vocation of the laity. The most critical challenges are lack of money, lack of commitment, and lack of Christian heritage (secularism). Although it is not easy to determine the root causes of these challenges, not to mention classifying them in neat categories, the very concept of “laity” is a good starting point.

The words “laity” and “lay” have their origin in the Greek word for people, λαός as well as from the word λαίκος (Latin “laicus”), i.e., from the people. In Medieval Latin, the word could indicate either someone who is not ordained or someone who is not educated or learned. The Swedish word lekman stems directly from the low Saxon (Plattdeutsch) lekman The first part of the word lek is spelled exactly like the Swedish word for “play,” as in the phrase “the child plays with its toy,” even though the latter stems from the Latin word “ludus,” meaning game. In a Roman Catholic or an Anglican context, the word “laity” or “lay” indicates someone who is not ordained. This is certainly the case from a Swedish-Lutheran perspective, although some other connotations are perhaps equally strong and need to be considered. The word “lay” denotes not only a person who is not ordained but also a person who is not employed by the Church, i.e., a volunteer. It may also denote a person who is not a theologian. It is common for a volunteer to identify him or herself as a layperson because he or she is not a theologian. From the common perspective of the Church of Sweden, a layperson is someone who doesn't hold an office and is a volunteer in the parish or national church context. That said, the main difference in our context is not so much between the ordained/non-ordained but between those who are Church-employed and those who are not. Thus, when assessing the vocation and commitment of the laity, it is also necessary to assess the vocation and commitment of the volunteers. This is good to keep in mind as we proceed to discuss the different challenges posed by today's society.

Lack of money. Funding is the first challenge that comes to mind. For centuries, the Church of Sweden was a fairly wealthy state church; all citizens were members, and all paid church taxes. The whole nation was divided into parishes, which ensured that everyone had a seat at the Sunday service. However, with secularism on the rise, and with separation of church and state promulgated in the year 2000, membership had dropped and, along with it, funding. Moreover, the average age of the church membership is increasing, and parishes are no longer operated by a large
staff of employees such as pastors, musicians, catechists, and social workers. (In the face of such challenges, the Church of Sweden may learn from its sister Anglican church, which has been dealing with a similar financial situation for a longer period of time.) Due to such heritage, laypersons—in this sense, volunteers—have unfortunately been seen as a last resort when there wasn’t enough funding, not as living stones to build on. To have a large staff of employed personnel has been recognized as a means of guaranteeing professionalism; it has also been understood as a way of maintaining the openness of the Volkeskirsche. This calls for a radical change in attitude so that parishes not only encourage volunteers but trust and depend on them. Regarding this change in attitude, EFS, which has a strong membership commitment, might be of influence for the whole Church of Sweden. We also need to re-think the different connotations of “parish.” From a Swedish perspective the word “parish” can indicate somewhat different things: the geographical parish, the church-goers, or even the staff. If the parish is understood as the staff, then of course the volunteers are easily viewed as mere helpers rather than actual parishioners. At the same time, there is a fear within the Church of Sweden that volunteer engagement might contradict the openness and generosity of the concept of Volkeskirsche, creating an exclusive club where engagement makes one more or less valuable. This tendency may also be observed in some of the other denominations in Sweden.

**Lack of commitment.** In our busy world, the era of associations has declined. It is not popular anymore to invest time and effort outside one’s own family and interests. Constancy is neither desirable nor virtuous in an era and in a society where the focus is one's own self and where self-fulfilment and variability are praised. Thus, if a parish doesn't suit me I can easily change to another; the Church is viewed from a somewhat consumerist point of view. In addition, since we live in a professional’s world, the Church is easily understood as an institution operated by professionals, not by the laity who have little theological training or none at all. Perhaps the very concept of “Church” needs to be contemplated. At a time when the Church of Sweden indeed needs volunteers, there is an unfortunate lack of commitment. However, what seems to have taken the place of associations is “networking,” which, in a sense, is a less fixed construction. Nevertheless, it is a challenge for us to engage with this new phenomenon of networking for the benefit of the Church in a manner similar to our engagement with associations in the past.

**Lack of Christian heritage.** Historically, the Church of Sweden was an important part of society; most people knew about the Gospel and Christian values and were more or less active in the life of the Church. For many, it was considered an honor to partake in some aspect of parish life, such as by being a Churchwarden or Sunday school teacher. Today, Church activity is just one activity among many, and general knowledge of Christianity is declining. There is also a risk that people who accept the faith and become active Christians immediately understand this as a vocation that leads to ordination. This is quite often the case with students, who have almost no experience being part of a parish yet are convinced that they are called to be pastors. Likewise, middle-aged persons with a first career but quite often no Christian background (or, perhaps, some background in another denomination, such as Pentecostal, Baptist, Methodist, or even Catholic) become convinced that they have a vocation to ordination in the Church of Sweden. There is indeed a lack of clergy in the Church of Sweden, but there is also an equally alarming lack of committed laypersons. Apparently, there is a need to contemplate on the vocation of the laity so that it fosters an understanding that laypersons and parishioners are fully Christian without being ordained; parish work should originate from their commitment to live their lives as laity in imitation of Christ. It seems that presently, not much emphasis is given to the theological training of laypersons. At times, it is difficult to find volunteers because they do not feel secure enough in theological matters when, in fact, volunteering to help in a parish may be a way for them to investigate their own personal faith and to grow as Christians.

To sum up, although lay ministry has a long tradition within the Lutheran Church of Sweden, we have perhaps not reflected enough on the particular theology of lay ministry. We also need to more realistically face the challenges presented by today’s society. There is a need to reconsider the vocation of laity, particularly in a church.
context where the Lutheran common priesthood and the vocation of every baptized is emphasized. The view that laypersons or volunteers are a last resort when the financial situation is difficult needs to be addressed and altered. Instead, the importance and value of the laity must be recognized as a basic feature of the parish and the Church. Time must be invested in finding each individual’s gifts and how they can best be put to service for the kingdom of God. In a society where many individuals avoid longstanding commitments, it is important to realize that Christian commitment is not so much a burdensome obligation as a blessing and a gift, something that gives strength and joy to a Christian’s everyday life. Finally, at a time where individualism is strong, it is necessary to affirm that we are Christians together; we are people of God, and we cannot be separated from each other without risking separation from Christ himself. In the words of St. Paul in Romans 12:5, as adapted in the liturgical part fractio in the Church of Sweden’s liturgy of the Eucharist: “Though we are many, we are one body, because we all share in one bread.”