

Lay Ministry Leader Listening Session Learnings | October 2021

by Terri Martinson Elton
with Emily McQuillan, Tessa Pinkstaff, and Ashley Wheeler

Why We Are Doing this Work

Luther Seminary is responding to the challenges facing the church by accompanying, educating, and resourcing Christian communities and their leaders to embody biblical imagination, identity, and practices that address the longings and losses of today's world.

A significant part of this work is listening to the church. On October 25, 2021, six Luther Seminary staff and faculty facilitated a listening session with ten lay ministry leaders for the purpose of expanding our understanding of lay ministry leadership. These leaders were primarily from rural and small church congregations, and this work represents the first of many conversations to come with lay leaders in a variety of ministry contexts and roles.

The following is a summary of our findings from the conversation.

Understanding Lay Ministry (Discussion Round 1)

What Lay Leaders Need to BE, KNOW, and DO

The term "lay leader" can be challenging to interpret, especially when the church believes each person is a part of the priesthood of all believers. "We are all ministers," said one participant, and this assertion echoed throughout the conversation. The participants affirmed that it is **important for lay leaders to be seen as actual leaders**: people who are trusted within a community, who are willing to listen and learn, and who have wisdom to share.

BE: Lay leaders have gifts and callings that they are eager to discover and live out. Relationships with God and others, especially those in their community, are of particular importance. Lay leaders' cultivation of openness, curiosity, and collaboration enhances their ability to lead well in this season of the church's life.

KNOW: The foundation for lay leadership arises from lay leaders' understanding of the ways church works within their context and beyond. Their capacities for leading, both in general and within particular ministries, is also significant. Ongoing learning, risk-taking, listening, experimenting, and managing conflict are particular capacities named for lay leaders. Lay

leaders are also adept at integrating their leadership skills with their faith practices, and they see knowledge and rootedness in God's Word as essential for their ministry.

DO: Lay leaders do ministry out of their own unique skillset, using their diversity of gifts in many different ways. Empowering lay leaders in the basics of ministry (from leading worship or providing pastoral care to serving in the community) fosters both personal and communal leadership development. It is crucial for lay leaders to expand their understanding of their own role as well as discover how to share their leadership responsibilities with professional clergy. Lay leaders must also be able to set boundaries and have awareness of their own limitations to avoid burnout.

Central Themes from the Conversation

A central theme that emerged was the recognition that **all Christians have calls and therefore are leaders**. Nurturing and tending these calls, and empowering leaders to live into and out of their callings, is central for vibrant ministry. Participants highlighted that **the church is the people**, and **pastors and lay leaders partner together to lead ministry**. Forms of ministry and leadership roles change over time, but tending to the spiritual lives of people never changes. "There is no lay leader manual," one participant reminded the group, and the participants saw this truth as both a curse and a blessing. With this expansive freedom to serve, one participant saw her role as a lay leader this way: "[I'm] recirculating God's blessings. That's how I feel when I am in a leadership role. I'm happy sharing my gifts. Blessed to be a blessing."

The participants named a caution to **not assume that all lay leaders and/or congregants have a firm theological foundation**. As one person noted, not everyone has a "background or roots in the Bible, Lutheranism, or commitments to life in the church." This theme was expressed in different ways throughout the conversation. Part of empowering lay leaders is supporting and equipping their faith life and their personal growth as lifelong learners. The participants mentioned a working hypothesis—if the church did this, there would be more lay leaders leading both within church ministry and in the world.

There were also concerns. These included **concerns about generational differences, about the dwindling number of lay leaders, and about the future**. Many wondered about the impact of the pandemic on lay leadership in the church. While the needs of congregations continue to be great, lay leaders are tired and unsure of how to lead in this time. Many have not yet returned since the onset of COVID.

Understanding Areas of Growth (Discussion Round 2)

What Lay People Need to Grow as Disciples and Ministry Leaders

Lay leaders want to **grow both spiritually and in their leadership capacities**. This is good news. These leaders seek out various ways to obtain these goals. Several participants highlighted **mentoring or personal relationships** focused on growing as a disciple and leader. Formally and informally, mentoring provides learning that is timely and personalized around the leader's giftedness. Mentoring relationships support, encourage, and challenge leaders in

meaningful ways. The leaders also mentioned obtaining support through **one-on-one spiritual direction**. As one participant noted, “we can get so caught up in our doing; don’t forget we need a rich spiritual life.” More than anything else, relationships create safe spaces for lay leaders to wrestle with and ask hard questions.

There is also a longing among lay leaders for **accessible resources and tools, especially around the core aspects of ministry**. Reliable ready-to-go sermons, confirmation resources, guides for spiritual practices, and frameworks for having hard conversations were some of the most sought-after areas named by participants. Lay leaders often fill ministry gaps within their congregations, so having a trusted source they can turn to is important.

Lay leaders recognize that **more learning needs to happen** in order for them to nimbly lead ministry in today’s contexts. *Turning ideas into actionable, living, breathing ministry is ongoing work*. There is grief in letting go of old ways of being church, but there is also openness to new ways that God has in store for their faith communities. Participants wondered about the following **questions and areas for future exploration**:

- How do we embrace hybrid ministry?
- How can we reach out to the community in a way that makes a difference?
- How do we listen to people and shape ministry around their needs?
- What can we read?
- Who can we learn from?

Finally, there is a recognition **that nothing will happen overnight**. Participants affirmed that being patient and allowing time for leaders to tend to their own needs in the midst of ministry demands were important concepts worth remembering.

How Luther Seminary Can Support Lay Leaders

It was encouraging to hear that there are many ways Luther Seminary can support, nurture and equip lay leaders. Four different areas were identified:

1. There was gratitude for the **resources** Faith+Lead already offers. One participant said, “Faith+Lead courses are amazing. Congregations need to know the courses are available and put money behind them so leaders can grow.” Access to resources and ease of use were noted as important. Several participants highlighted how vital online options are for lay leaders in rural communities. There was agreement that providing online resources should continue and grow. For example, lay leaders wondered if Faith+Lead could develop a YouTube channel to expand its video resources. They proposed offering new types of resources as well. Of particular interest was developing resources for church councils.
2. There is some desire for **in-person learning** once those options are feasible again. In-person conferences—where lay leaders and clergy can learn together—was one area noted. Specific gatherings for council members was another, as were spiritual retreats uniquely designed for lay leaders.

3. There were a number of responses about **what Luther Seminary could focus on** in their offerings. Some of the areas lay leaders want to learn about are: *How can leaders and congregations assess their ministries and implement new ideas? What does church and outreach look like beyond the walls of the church building? What does delegation or shared ministry look like?* Lay leaders are also looking for help with topics such as trauma-informed ministry, creative finance models, and crisis management.
4. The final area focused not on the lay leaders themselves, but on pastors. Many of the lay leaders recognized how hard this time has been on pastoral leadership. Luther Seminary could support lay leadership—and their congregations—by directly **supporting and nurturing pastors and deacons**. By offering resources to professional clergy, the seminary is indirectly supporting the lay leaders in their communities.

Central Themes from the Conversation

The conversation in this area echoed the previous discussion in its exhortation to **increase the awareness of the priesthood of all believers**. One of the new themes that emerged here was naming how Luther Seminary can equip students in this area while they are still in degree programs. The emphasis is on setting the stage early by encouraging future pastors to consider how they will incorporate and partner with lay leaders in their ministries.

Another challenge that emerged was around **collaboration**, not only between the seminary and congregations, but between seminaries themselves. Lay leaders suggested that Luther Seminary could foster collaboration by convening lay leaders and having them share their stories. This relatively simple tactic significantly empowers lay leaders and encourages them to lead in new and different ways by **making their voices heard**. “Do more of this,” one participant said, referencing the listening session conversation itself.

Understanding Roles and Collaboration (Discussion Round 3)

How Lay Leaders See Their Roles

The majority of lay leaders in this conversation named that they see an overall **lack of lay leadership**. They also noted that the old models of leadership are not going to be fruitful in the future. This is due to many factors (from generational differences to population shifts to societal changes) and will require making a **shift toward risk-taking and imagination**. Helping congregations make this shift is central to lay leadership moving forward.

There is a strong desire to **engage new lay leaders** and **adapt their ministries** to match what is happening in the world. Many lay leaders are being entrepreneurial, leaning into discovering what the Spirit is up to and learning from other communities and congregations across the country. These leaders simply need encouragement along the way. Others need training and mentors to accompany them in attending to this shift.

How Lay Leaders and Clergy Can Work Together

In the future, **clergy and lay leaders must be able to work together**. There is a need to reframe the role of clergy and to lift up lay leaders. *Vibrant ministry requires finding ways to collaborate around the needs of the ministry and community*. Financial challenges have been a driving force behind this for some congregations as they are no longer able to afford a full-time pastor. Yet money should not be the only impetus for new ministry models. Faithful future models of ministry work around two truths:

- Lay leaders fully embracing and realizing their leadership role
- Congregations moving beyond relying on the pastor leading everything

To achieve these aims, there is a need for both collaboration and collaborative environments. This means ministries must not only embrace leadership training and a culture of experimentation, but they must also foster mutual respect and clarity on expectations between lay and professional leaders.

A key dimension to envisioning the future is to wonder **how God is calling us to connect with new people and the next generation**. One participant said it this way: “I’m convinced the church 10 to 15 years from now will look completely different—not bad or worse, just different. So the church has to figure out how to get there. As a lay leader, I need to figure out how to nudge us in that right direction.”

Central Themes from the Conversation

There is a great need to help lay **leaders transfer their wisdom and knowledge from one generation to the next**. This means not only transmitting leadership roles and power to younger Christians, but it also involves being open to new ways of leading that address the specific challenges in today’s ministry contexts.

The participants reiterated that **our churches are not dying; they are being reborn**. While that process can be painful at times, it also comes with a ray of hope. Moving into the future, collaboration will be necessary between lay leaders and clergy, across congregations, and in and among communities. In that sense, there is much to learn from congregations in rural contexts as many of them have long relied on lay leadership.

It is the love for people that unites pastors, lay leaders, congregations, and communities in a common goal. Through this shared mission, leaders of all kinds, whether lay or professional, can work together to bring the church into God’s desired future.