"Celebrating Our MINISTRY"

Romans 12
September 28, 2025
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Last Sunday in Adult Ed we asked the question, "What is the church *for*?" … in seven words or fewer. I want to share a few of the responses with you. Maybe they'll inspire you to try to come up with your own seven-word answer to that question.

"To show God's love in the world." That's a good one. It encompasses a sense of calling; it's outward facing – reflecting a sense of engagement with the world beyond our doors. At the same time it's grounded in our own experience of God's love. It's open-ended, and it's positive.

"A gathering of God's people in community." I like how this one emphasizes community and belonging. We aren't alone; we don't have to figure out faith and faithfulness by ourselves. It also subtly reminds us that it's God who calls and gathers us into church.

"To believe in something bigger than self." In an individualistic culture, that's a powerful statement. It invites humility and perspective; it suggests a concern for the common good. At the same time, it reminds us that our faith encompasses mystery... that the fullness of God is beyond our words and imaginings.

"Listening to God, loving the world" picks up on those two different aspects of faith: what we sometimes refer to as the "vertical" and the "horizontal." I like the word "listening" in there; it reminds us that sometimes we need to be still, and that there is always, always more to discern in our relationship with God.

Here's one that's a little bit different: "Coming to us from the future." This immediately made me think about the way Jesus talked about the reign of God coming near. The unsaid truth is that change will inevitably come. We can't know what the future holds, of course; but the church's purpose isn't to recapture some ideal period of the past. It's to welcome what God has for us in each new part of the journey.

And finally, here's my answer: "Finding ways to see, be, and bless." To see God's presence, our neighbors' needs, each other, the world's beauty and pain. To be, because claiming our own identity and deciding what kind of people we are going to be matters. To bless because we are here to do all the good we can. Finding ways… because there are so many ways to do all those things.

There are so many ways to conceive of ministry, to understand the nature and the purpose of the church.

That was clear as we went on to talk about ways each of us has experienced the ministry of the church, ways we have been ministered to.

One person mentioned a prayer shawl received – years ago – in a time of grief, and still treasured. Another said, "When my parents were both ill at the same time, I don't know how I would have gotten through that without support from the church." Someone else said, "When I came in here, I felt welcome and at home." Somebody mentioned gratitude for the love and example of older church members. We talked about opportunities to learn, like Adult Education. We talked about feeling cared for when another church member asks about our family or about how we're doing.

We went on to talk about being part of the ministry of the church, ministering to others. Some of the things mentioned included teaching kids, being with the dying and the grieving, feeding people, becoming more committed to justice in the world, singing with the choir, listening, and learning to receive as well as give.

It was clear – it *is* clear - that receiving and giving are interconnected, indispensable aspects of the ministry of the church. We learn about, we are nurtured and empowered for ministry as we *experience* the love of God in the community of faith. And as we *participate* in ministry, in enacting the love of God, we find that we receive and are blessed - maybe with new perspectives, compassion, humility, a sense of purpose, relationships that bring joy.

Sometimes it's hard to say when we're ministering and when we are being ministered to.

That's not the only place where the lines blur a bit. We used to sometimes make a distinction between "ministry" as things we do within the church, for ourselves, and "mission" as things we do outside the church, for others. The reason, I think, was to beware of becoming too inward-focused. But that line between "insiders" and "outsiders" is a little bit troubling, and doesn't reflect the reality of the church today. It doesn't reflect Jesus' openness to all or the kind of community we want to be. It doesn't take into account that we who are formed in and by the ministry of the church also go out and find ourselves in lots of non-church settings, and there, too, we have the opportunity to care and serve and bless, in ways that reflect the community and the faith that shapes and sustains us.

Similarly, people often want to draw a distinction between what is "sacred" and what is "secular." There are reasons for that, too. But our Presbyterian belief in the sovereignty of God tells us that all aspects of life belong to God. In the context of ministry, this means that, say, understanding the struggles of depression, encouraging artists, learning about the dynamics of systemic racism, and adopting earth-friendly habits are as much ministry as preaching, feeding people, hospitality, and celebrating the sacraments. Healthy ministry cares about the whole person… and holds a vision of wholeness for the world.

As we receive and participate in ministry, we see that it's not one thing, but many things. There's no checklist of tasks, no definitive definition, and no simple formula for doing it "right." A lot depends on context – what is needed, here and now? what are the gifts this (or any) particular community has in its hands?

The lists we read in Romans 12 are not exhaustive (and, as you may have noted, they are not as specific as prayer shawls, making coffee, prepping communion bread and juice, burying the dead, delivering meals to homebound folks, or learning how to study the Bible.) I'm quite sure this is

intentional. Paul's reflections on the church's ministry here give us a *starting place* for thinking about what it looks like and some activities it might include. They also offer a larger, more general vision as to the *character* of the church's ministry: humble, genuine, prayerful, committed, loving, respectful, generous, hopeful, transformative.

Paul's words in Romans 12 also remind us not to get complacent, and to be careful about idealizing the church. Paul knows that in any attempt at community involving flawed human beings there will be pitfalls, ways to go wrong. Although it's not our main concern today, I do want to acknowledge that many people have been harmed by and within by what the church has called "ministry." By unprincipled and abusive leaders, by legalism and unhealthy expectations, by anger and judgment, by prejudice and rigid gender roles and exclusion, by cliques and thoughtlessness, by silence in the face of wrongs – not to mention the many ways the church through the centuries has supported inequality, violence, and oppression. This is not what the church is for. This is not what ministry is about.

Paul urges the church community in Rome – and all Christian communities – to hate evil and hold fast to what is good. To love one another and their enemies. To reject vengefulness. To avoid pride and status-seeking. To recognize the limits of their own knowledge and wisdom. To cultivate respect for one another. To remember that they *belong* to one another. To be willing to be counter-cultural, to know that weeping is sometimes appropriate, to be prepared for the fact that Jesus' ways make people mad sometimes. To bless others rather than curse them. To persevere even when it's hard. To use all their different gifts for the good of the community.

Ultimately our example for ministry is found in the life of Jesus, who

fed people
prayed
told stories
knew the scriptures
ate with folks others dismissed as "sinners"
had no patience for hypocrisy
healed the sick
wept with the grieving
crossed social and cultural boundaries
urged people to love even enemies
welcomed children
respected women
provided wine for a wedding
challenged authority
loved his friends
showed empathy for those in distress
told us to notice the lilies and the birds…

And there was much, more that that made up Jesus' ministry, which is to say his *life* – more than could have been written in the few short books we call the gospels. Just as there is will always be more ways for the church to be the body of Christ, whatever the future may hold.