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Service is the point: members as ministers to the world

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Service Is the Point: Members as Ministers to the World

Gustav Nelson

Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2000

159 pp. \$21.99 Softcover

Gustav Nelson's *Service is the Point* has been promoted as a book that will offer hope and guidance for pastors and other church leaders to deepen people's commitment to the call of Christ. His objective is to counter the maintenance mentality so predominate in the church's culture and for laity to take the call to discipleship seriously.

Each chapter touches on some aspect of how service can renew or transform congregational life: worship, new-members class, renewal of members, youth, children, church council, vision, and mission. It is a book of interest for pastors who are involved in leadership training and rejuvenate growth in the local congregation.

Nelson contends that the focus of *Service Is the Point* is service. I get a different reading: the hub of this book is the concept of covenant. That should not surprise us since Nelson's denomination is the Presbyterian Church (USA). But in so doing, he makes an assumption that all congregations think covenantally. Many do, but most Lutheran congregations do not. "Covenant" is not as popular a model among Lutherans as it is among Reformed congregations. That is not to say there is nothing to learn here. Nelson offers a great deal of wisdom that can be gleaned and applied to congregational life. Then again, I do not think Nelson has anything new to say that has not been said elsewhere. What he does is apply it to the covenant model.

Still, throughout the book I read another assumption: just do it and it will work. Any of us who have been in the parish know it is not that simple. Maybe Reformed congregations are different, but I suspect not. David Buttrick, Buffington Professor of Homiletics and Liturgics at Vanderbilt University Divinity School, comments on the back cover, "Gus proposes a 'covenant model' for churches, and then, in a series of useful chapters, tells you how a covenant church can come alive." More beneficial would have been situations where his approach met

with some challenge to change and how his model overcame that challenge. Seldom does he give us that privilege.

Interestingly, he draws from his childhood of growing up Lutheran (!) to illustrate his own spiritual journey which led him into the Presbyterian church. In his adult life he was the executive presbyter of the Des Moines, Iowa Presbytery (PUSA), and is presently director of Project 21, a program which strives to develop and promote new paradigms of church life. No doubt, he comes to this task with a great deal of experience and wisdom. Yet, with so many other books on the market about paradigm shift in the church, one might want to look carefully before investing in *Service is the Point*. In this reviewer opinion, it could have been more pointed.

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Let Justice Sing: Hymnody and Justice

Paul Westermeyer
Collegetown, MN: The Liturgical Press, 1998
118 pages, \$15.95 Softcover

Hymnody and justice? A strange combination of themes for a book!...yet one which will attract the attention of many who see the lack of justice themes in our hymns! This monograph in the Liturgical Press' "American Essays in Liturgy" series, began as a lecture series at Montreal in 1995. Paul Westermeyer, teacher of liturgy and church music at Luther-Northwestern Seminary in Minneapolis, gives his purpose in writing the book as to draw in "...the church and others who wish to join the moral deliberation it presumes in the form of an open-ended and ongoing discussion, with the hope that it helps us know something more about our past that can be applied with wisdom to our present" (9).

Westermeyer asks the question, "Can justice sing?" and answers yes. Our hymnody, he observes, often avoids justice issues—most often by domesticating the church's song. This is more evident at Christmas! While acknowledging the difficulty of challenging injustice through poetry and song, he recognizes that the issues invoking the