Self-supporting ministry from a Lutheran historical perspective: looking back to the time of Luther and looking ahead with Luther’s example in mind

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Abstract

Self-supporting ministry has been accepted by ELCSA (the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Southern Africa) and should, therefore, be seen as a ministry that, together with full-time ministry, can contribute to the welfare of the flock entrusted to ministers. In fact, it should not be distinguished from full-time ministry, since both are indispensable to the ministry. The distinction that makes one ministry inferior or superior to the other is foreign to Luther’s theology of vocation and the Lutheran confessions and traditions. It is also foreign to the New Testament, which accommodates diversity in ministry. The article looks back at the history of Luther and examines his career as a priest, a professor, an administrator (district vicar) and a parish pastor. His primary career, from which he earned a living, was as a professor. However, this did not preclude him from involvement in the parish ministry and in the administration of monasteries. Thus he was a self-supporting minister in more or less the same way that St Paul was a tentmaker.

Introduction

The article looks at self-supporting ministry in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Southern Africa (ELCSA), how it was initially accepted, how it was finally implemented and the debates that followed. Without downplaying the significance of full-time ministry, the article argues that self-supporting ministry is as indispensable to the church as full-time ministry. Furthermore, it argues that there is no need for divisions and hierarchies in ministry. Such distinctions are foreign, not only to the New Testament, but also to the Lutheran confessions and traditions. Self-supporting ministry can be traced back to the time of Luther, who was involved in a ministry similar to the self-supporting ministry of St Paul, who was a tent-maker (σκηνοποιός). The term “self-supporting ministry” was not used in Luther’s day; a minister was a minister, regardless of his/her source of income or salary. The article traces Luther’s career through three of the many occupations that he pursued: as pastor (priest), administrator and professor. He also assumed other roles, such as a church reformer/reorganiser and teacher, prolific author, translator and farmer. Theological arguments have been advanced to help ELCSA appreciate the value of self-supporting ministry by theologians such as Professor Simon Maimela (1982), W.L. Willemse (2012) and Tsele (2012). Very recently Dr Molefe Tsele (2012) wrote a thought-provoking paper in which he also provided some convincing theological arguments against the distinction that is made between the two forms of ministry. Those who opt for self-supporting ministry are often erroneously seen to have left their calling to minister. The fact remains that some parishes have been sustained as a result of the contribution of self-supporting ministry. Over the years, some sections of ELCSA have resisted the theological arguments that self-supporting ministry is a viable alternative to full-time ministry – and one that can complement full-time ministry. Therefore, the author hopes that an awareness that Luther himself was a self-supporting minister par excellence might produce a paradigm shift in these opposers and, hopefully, lead to greater appreciation and utilisation of self-supporting ministers to complement full-time ministry, rather than replace it. This article therefore looks back to the time of Luther and then looks ahead with Luther’s example in mind.

Acceptance of self-supporting ministry in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Southern Africa (ELCSA)

Although the Lutheran Church has officially adopted a policy of diverse forms of ministry, including self-supporting ministry, there seem to be divisions and hierarchies with regard to these two “categories” of ministry, namely full-time ministry and self-supporting ministry – otherwise known as tent-making ministry. Other traditions use the terms “part-time ministry” and “bi-vocational ministry”. This division of the ministry into categories is foreign to the New Testament and to the Lutheran confessions. In the Lutheran confessions there is only one form of ordained ministry, which is complemented by lay ministry.

Self-supporting ministry was accepted in principle by the Seventh General Assembly in 1990, following a demonstration by a group of pastors. In response, the following resolution was adopted by the General Assembly: “This ministry was accepted in principle by the G.A. (and that) appropriate committee to work out the details.” What followed was what Maimela referred to as “a miscarriage of the Lord’s injunction that his flock should not be without the word”. Following that General Assembly, dioceses were assigned to come up with proposals. A dominant voice came from the leadership of the Cape Orange Diocese, which influenced a particular model and policy on self-supporting ministry, following a presentation of a dossier by Bishop A.J. Fortuin of the Cape Orange Diocese in 1998. Thereafter, a particular model of self-supporting ministry was adopted by the Church Council of 1998. The model that developed from that process included the following characteristics:

1. It introduced categories, hierarchy and divisions in ministry, which were foreign to Luther’s theology of vocation, to the Lutheran confessions and even to the New Testament.
2. It introduced discriminatory practices and regulations aimed at excluding those in self-supporting ministry from the opportunity to serve the church as best they can. For instance, self-supporting pastors are constitutionally excluded from serving on executive councils and in executive positions of the church at all levels. They are also constitutionally prevented from serving as parish pastors. In cases where they serve parishes by default, that is, where there is no full-time pastor, such parishes are still regarded as vacant. There is one circuit (Pretoria) in the Central Diocese that has only four full-time pastors out of a total of 14 pastors. Very important lessons can be drawn from the Central Diocese and others that have allowed this form of ministry to be implemented.
3. Self-supporting pastors are constitutionally excluded from the common roster of pastors and are therefore ineligible to be elected to offices of the church such as dean or bishop. Recently (2011) the Central Diocese removed Dean Desmond Lesejane, despite the fact that his circuit had become the most stable and best-performing circuit owing to his visionary and capable leadership. Since the formation of ELCSA, following a merger of regional churches in 1975, there had never been a circuit that performed so well in the Central Diocese. Yet, when he was found to be working elsewhere, he was unceremoniously removed from the office as dean.

Self-supporting ministry has not been accepted willingly and wholeheartedly by the church, probably because of the fear of potential challenges. The response since that Seventh General Assembly in 1990 has been characterised by

- half-heartedness
- scepticism as to the usefulness of this ministry
- indifference
- fear
- hostility
- marginalisation and exclusion

Nevertheless, the ELCSA Central Diocese has improved vastly, despite the fact that some of the above-mentioned characteristics are still evident. This diocese has the highest number of self-supporting ministers of all the other six dioceses. Although there is still room for improvement in this diocese, the other dioceses can learn a lot from the relative openness regarding the matter in the Central Diocese. During its Synod of August 2012...

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5. The General Assembly is the highest decision-making body of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Southern Africa and it meets every second year.
7. Maimela, 130.
2012, the Central Diocese made some far-reaching proposals to amend the constitution to remove all discriminatory clauses.

Tsele and Buffel stated the following: “In short the response to self-supporting ministry was characterised by an erroneous belief that self-supporting ministry is an aberration to a true form of ministry and thus a departure from the real ministry which is full-time ministry.”

An erroneous understanding has developed over a long period that this call can only be received by those who are available to be employed full-time by the church; hence full-time ministers are the only ones who can be entrusted with certain offices and responsibilities. This understanding ignores the truth that the church at the time of the New Testament also consisted of diverse forms of ministry, each of which was necessitated by specific material conditions and circumstances. Furthermore, this erroneous understanding negates the Lutheran confession and, in particular, Luther’s theology of vocation, as well as ignoring the fact that he served as an administrator (district vicar), a professor and as a pastor (priest) of the monasteries, the university community and the city church.

Biblical basis of self-supporting ministry

In the spirit of the principle of Sola Scriptura, if people are looking for a scriptural basis of tent-making ministry (self-supporting ministry), they need look no further than St Paul. Tent-making ministry, based on the model of St Paul, has a very honourable pedigree within the Christian tradition, and it was followed by Luther and other reformers. Even before the Lutheran Church was established, Luther’s mentor, Johann von Staupitz, was engaged in multi-vocational ministry: as a university professor, a provincial vicar-general and a priest (preacher).

Although Paul was a tent-maker by trade, he also served as an apostle. In that capacity, he achieved the following:

- He established congregations.
- He travelled extensively to visit congregations located over a wide area.
- He wrote letters to a variety of congregations.

Luke identifies Paul as a tent-maker (σκηνοποιός), together with his colleagues and one-time hosts Aquilla and Priscilla, who were also tent-makers by trade. When Paul lodged for some time with Aquilla and Priscilla, he regularly went to the synagogue of Corinth to preach to the Jews and the Greeks, while also working in Aquilla and Priscilla’s workshop as a fellow tent-maker. Paul most probably learned his trade from his father. It was not uncommon for fathers to teach their sons the family trade, both in the Jewish-Rabbinic traditions and in the Greco-Roman society of the time. As a result of this trade, Paul did not depend on his ministry for his livelihood; rather, his primary means of subsistence was tent-making. Moreover, he was happy not to be a burden to anyone while he preached: “Surely you remember, brothers, our toil and hardship; we worked night and day in order not to be a burden to anyone while we preached the gospel of God to you” (I Thessalonians 2:9).

Paul went to the extent of boasting to the Corinthians that he served without being a burden to anyone. He did not make use of his right of support from them. He said: “I would rather die than have anyone deprive me of this boast.” It was Paul’s policy to support his missionary career by the labour of his own hands.

From the time of the early church, tent-making ministry formed part of the rich diversity of ministry, and it is still a very viable alternative to complement full-time ministry, as Maimela correctly states:

I believe that part-time ministry is a very viable option for us, for it can go a long way toward tapping the richness of the resources the church has in order to meet its obligation to be the

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12 ELCSA. Central Diocesan Synod Resolutions, August 2012. Soweto.
13 Tsele and Buffel, 3.
15 Acts 18:3.
17 Hock, 23.
18 Cf. 1 Corinthians 4:12: “We work hard with our own hands …”
19 Read 1 Corinthians 9: 1-18 regarding the rights of an apostle.
messenger of the saving gospel.\textsuperscript{20} It is a form of ministry that must be embraced fully, without the usual suspicion, marginalisation and exclusion from certain processes. It must not be accepted reluctantly and begrudgingly as if it is an inconvenience to the church or as if it is an unwanted, illegitimate, step-cousin of full-time ministry. This allergic response to self-supporting ministry as already indicated is foreign to both the scriptures and the Lutheran confessions. It was foreign to Luther himself, whose theology of vocation destroyed the distinctions, hierarchies and exclusions that were prevalent in the medieval church. Luther himself was a self-supporting minister, and no question was ever raised about his availability or suitability for ministry. It is therefore worth looking back at Luther and his ministry, in view of also looking forward with Luther as we look for diverse ways of feeding and tending the flock of our Lord and saviour in ways that are sustainable and meaningful.

**Luther, the self-supporting minister par excellence**

From the time of Luther’s entry into the monastery in 1504 and his ordination to the priesthood in 1507,\textsuperscript{21} he served the church – that is, the Roman Catholic Church and, later, the Evangelical Lutheran Church – in a variety of capacities simultaneously. He served the church as a priest, an academic, an administrator and in many other roles. Yet it was never the intention of Luther to establish a church or to have a church named after him. In 1522 he said the following words:

\begin{quote}
Make no reference to my name; let them (followers) call themselves Christians, not Lutherans. What is Luther? After all, the teaching is not mine. Neither was I crucified for anyone … Let us abolish all party names and call ourselves Christians, after him whose teaching we hold.\textsuperscript{22}
\end{quote}

In the same year he is also reported to have said:

\begin{quote}
What is Luther? I ask that no men (sic) make any reference to my name … I neither am nor want to be anyone’s master. I hold, together with the universal church, the universal teaching of Christ, who is our only master.\textsuperscript{23}
\end{quote}

These words were written shortly after his condemnation by the church and the state and at a time when Luther was still very “Catholic”. At one stage, Luther’s Catholicity was unquestioned.\textsuperscript{24} Whereas Luther was critical of some aspects of the tradition and how tradition was abused, he displayed knowledge of the rich tradition of the church of his time. In the words of Booth,\textsuperscript{25} he tried to distil from the tradition what he thought might renew the Western medieval church led by the bishop of Rome (pope). Luther was a faithful son of the church, a doctor of the church. He was many things to the church and to the community of his time. This is reflected in the words of Montgomery:

\begin{quote}
He was a reformer who brought such renewal of the church as many of his contemporaries and predecessors had dreamed of; the reorganiser who changed the ecclesiastical map of Europe; a pastoral administrator, a spiritual director; and a writer of great versatility whose published works run to more than 50 000 pages in the Etlangen edition.\textsuperscript{26}
\end{quote}

Luther himself described the many things that he did in a letter to a friend:

\begin{quote}
I am terribly busy and really could do with two secretaries. I seem to do almost nothing all day but write letters. I also preach in the friary, preside at mealtimes and take services in the parish church. I am keeping an eye on other friaries, including lecturing on St. Paul’s letters and collecting material for my book on Psalms.\textsuperscript{27}
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{20} Maimela, 132.
\textsuperscript{22} Luther Works 45, 70-71; cf. Gritsch, 9.
\textsuperscript{24} Edwin Booth. *Martin Luther: The Great Reformer* (Barbour, Ohio, 1979), 25.
\textsuperscript{25} Booth, 9.
\textsuperscript{26} John Montgomery. *Crisis in Lutheran Theology* (Minneapolis: Bethany Fellowship, 1967), 130.
\textsuperscript{27} Heather Cubitt. *Then and There: Luther and the Reformation* (London: Longman, 1973), 33-34.
Of the many roles that Luther played, the following are relevant to this article: priest (preacher), academic (professor) and administrator of monasteries.28

**Luther as priest**

Although Luther’s father, Hans Luder, wanted him to become a lawyer, he became a monk and a priest instead. Being a lawyer was a respected and prosperous profession, a popular way to acquire part of the fortune of the rich and the noble29 and to climb the social ladder.30

In an effort to please his father, Luther obtained a bachelor’s degree (1502) and a master’s degree (1505). However, his life course changed suddenly following the threat of death during a violent thunderstorm on his way from Mansfeld to Erfurt. This terrifying experience made him cry out for help to St Anna patroness of the miners and smelters: “Help Saint Anna, I will become a monk.”31 He later abandoned his legal studies and joined the Augustinian Hermits in Erfurt, in keeping with his vow. Luther had chosen the monastery of the observant wing of the Augustinian order, though he never mentioned his reasons for choosing this particular order, which had a reputation of being very strict.32 He was subsequently ordained to the priesthood on 3 April 150733 and became a dedicated monk and priest, while continuing to excel in his academic work. On the occasion of his ordination, Luther said his first Mass in the presence of his father and a number of guests from his hometown. His father had eventually overcome his opposition to his son’s decision to enter the monastery,34 accepting that it was possibly a divine sacrifice.35 Luther made his final vows in September 1506.36

At the Augustinian monastery, Luther was under the Vicar-General (Saxon Province) Johann von Staupitz,37 who was also the prior (superior) of the district. Staupitz was not only in charge of monasteries in the Saxon Province, but was also a professor of theology and a dean of the faculty of theology.38 This is another important personality in the church at the time of Luther who fulfilled multiple responsibilities (he was multi-vocational). This is also an indication of the origin of what we now refer to as self-supporting ministry. Staupitz liked Luther from the start and recognised the great potential in him.39 He later made Luther a sub-prior of the Wittenberg monastery, with the primary responsibility of supervising academic studies.40 Staupitz had a great influence on Luther. A great pastor and preacher, Staupitz was one of the few people who understood Luther and his misery. Martin Luther wrote the following about his mentor: “If it had not been for him I should have sunk in hell.”41

**Luther as an unwilling academic (professor of biblical theology)**

By the time Luther entered the monastery, he already had an excellent academic background. In fact, he excelled in his studies so much that he was given the nickname “philosopher” by his peers.42 He had a very special relationship with the Bible, which inspired him to complete a biblical baccalaureate in 1509 at Wittenberg University. He also earned a master of sentences,43 which gave him the title sententiarius, thus authorising him to teach at university.44 Luther’s superiors at the monastery had confidence in him, and even loaned him temporarily to Wittenberg University in the year 1508 to lecture on moral philosophy and Aristotelian ethics.45 Whiteford writes: “In 1508 Fr. Martinus Luder der Mansfeld was transferred from the Augustinian monastery in Erfurt to the monastery in Wittenberg.”46 This was to bring him closer to Wittenberg University for the purpose of teaching and continuing his studies. He became a “faculty star”47 at the university

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28 See Gritsch, 13. He refers to Luther as a monk, priest and teacher.
29 Gritsch, 12; Dillenberger, xiv.
31 Kolb, 12; cf. Dillenberger, xiv. According to Dillenberger, a bolt of lightning knocked him down to the ground and nearly took his life; Booth, 27.
32 Cf. Kolb, 15.
34 Dillenberger, xiv.
36 Booth, 31. In accordance with the ritual of the order, he vowed his life to the service of God in the monastic calling.
37 He was known for gentle piety and ordered life according to Booth, 28.
38 Kolb, 16.
39 Kolb, 15.
43 He had mastered the Sentences of Peter Lombard, which were the topical collections of passages from Scripture, the church fathers, and occasional scholasticism, which formed the basis of lectures in theology in the Middle Ages; see Dillenberger, xvi.
44 Gritsch 2002, 12.
47 Whiteford, 9.
during that brief initial spell at Wittenberg. He was later to return in 1512 for a permanent position at Wittenberg.

Later, at the insistence of Staupitz, he earned a doctorate in biblical studies, the highest academic degree at a university in 1512. It was as a result of an order from Staupitz, his superior at the Augustinian Order, that Luther studied for a doctorate so that he could assume Staupitz’s position, lecturing in biblical theology at the University of Wittenberg. Luther was ordered by Staupitz: “You must become a doctor and a preacher. This way you will be kept busy.” Luther had protested and pleaded that this new and unwanted responsibility would surely be his death: “You will bring me to my death. I will never endure it for three months.” Staupitz responded:

For heaven’s sake, our Lord has great work to be done. He needs smart people in heaven too. Don’t you know that our Lord has many great matters to attend to? For these he needs wise and clever people to advise him. If you should die, you will be received into his council in heaven because he too has the need of some doctors.

It was this insistence by Staupitz rather than Luther’s own ambition that forced him to become a doctor, a professor and a preacher. Atkinson says that it was while under the famous pear tree in the garden that Staupitz persuaded the reluctant Luther to assume the office of a preacher and to acquire the doctor of theology degree, remarking that this would provide him with the “opportunity of saying what he wanted to say”.

In 1513 he was appointed to the Augustinian chair of biblical theology, a position that had previously been occupied by Staupitz, who had since retired to Salzburg, Austria. Thus it appears that Staupitz was an astute talent scout who was very strategic in his mentoring and succession planning. Luther’s academic career started with the teaching of the following: lectures on Psalms (1513-1515), Romans (1515-1516) and Galatians (1515-1517). It was mainly – but not exclusively – while searching the Scriptures as an academic that he came to a fresh understanding of the gospel, sometime between 1513 and 1519. During that time he had what is generally known as the “tower experience” (turnerlebnis), since when this new insight came to him, he was in the tower of the Augustinian monastery in Wittenberg. The precise date of this “tower experience” is often the subject of debate by researchers (scholars). Nevertheless, that experience was a moment of religious breakthrough in which Luther resolved his feelings of unbearable tension between the justice of God and his awareness of utter sinfulness. As a result, he came to fully grasp the gospel truth that “man (sic) is justified by faith (alone)”.

As an academic, Luther also engaged in academic debates, the most famous and dramatic of which was the Ninety-Five Theses, which he nailed on the door of the church at Wittenberg on 31 October 1517.

Luther as parish preacher/pastor

Luther also preached regularly, both at the university and at the monastery, and he also presented sermons to parishioners outside the university. Luther also “shared in the preaching duties at the town church”, where there was a sermon each weekday and three times on Sunday. Thus Luther was a preacher “in several pulpits”, according to Paulson. According to Montgomery, the interpretation of Scripture was his constant occupation. His academic career did not prevent him from performing other responsibilities at the university, the monastery, the university church – as the equivalent of a chaplain – and the city church. He preached at the Augustinian church and performed the duties of a priest at the parochial church in town. In the same way that Luther was not prevented from working as a pastor at the city parish, his parish pastor and confessor, Rev Dr Johannes Bugenhagen, later also took a position at the university as a professor, after completing his doctoral studies under Luther and Philipp Melanchton.

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49 Gritsch 2002, 12.
50 Gritsch 2002, 12.
51 Atkinson, 67.
52 Gritsch 2002, 14; cf. Dillenberger, xvii.
53 Dillenberger, xvii. The most likely occasion was when he was engaged with the second series of lectures on Psalms in 1518. Others date this to the years 1513-1515. Cf. Koenigsberger, xx.
54 Koenigsberger, xx.
55 Koenigsberger, 15; cf. Luther Works Vol. 31:25-33 and Dillenberger, xix.
57 Montgomery, 130.
58 Paulson, 6.
59 Pauson, 130; cf. Whiteford, 26.
60 Cf. Koenigsberger, 8.
His exile at the castle of Wartberg (1521) temporarily disrupted his stay at Wittenberg University, without necessarily stopping his academic work. It was like a welcome sabbatical, which gave Luther more time for further academic reflection, writing and translation of the Bible into German. He only returned to the city of Wittenberg after receiving a written plea from the city council, who, according to Whiteford, “begged him to return”. There were challenges both at the university and in the city of Wittenberg. The plea of the city council was precipitated by some disturbing religious changes that were taking place at Wittenberg under the leadership of a colleague of Luther, Dr Andreas Carlstadt. Among other things, Carlstadt had led the services in the crowded church wearing a simple black robe, and not the usual colourful, dignified vestments. Large sections of the Mass were said in German and not Latin, and others were completely omitted. The congregations were allowed to serve themselves with wine and bread. Altars, crosses and other religious objects and symbols were smashed, and priests were dismissed. Mobs were rioting in the streets. The city council hoped that Luther would help to restore order within Wittenberg. So he returned on 6 March 1522 and remained there until his death in 1546. One theologian of Luther’s time wrote: “It took tremendous courage to return, and all his tact, patience and organising ability to deal with the dangerous situation.”

In a number of powerful sermons, Luther sternly rebuked the Wittenberg citizens, but he was also gentle, patient and understanding. He said:

> Give people time. It took over three years of constant study, reflection and discussion to arrive where I am now. Many folks could not accept too much change. There are those who run, others walk and some who can hardly creep.

Luther commanded great respect among the people of Wittenberg and, as a result, they listened to him and the confusion and disorder that was reigning in both the church and the community subsided. This was mainly thanks to his role as a preacher and a pastor. As Atkinson correctly pointed out, “Luther handled the matter like a true pastor.”

In his preface to the Latin Writings, Luther referred to himself as “a preacher and a young doctor of theology, so to speak”. In addition to being an academic, Luther was an administrator, an author and “a pastor of God’s people”, as he ministered to ordinary people, parishioners, students and even the emperor himself (Charles).

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61 Whiteford, 46.
62 Whiteford, 47.
63 Cubitt, 71.
64 Cubitt, 71.
65 Atkinson, 223.
67 Kolb, 199.
Luther as an administrator (district vicar)

In addition to his many other responsibilities, Luther was assigned administrative responsibilities in the university, as well as being required to supervise monasteries in the area.\(^{68}\) He initially served as a sub-prior at Wittenberg (1512) and then as a district vicar (1515) in the district of the Meisser and Thuringian, a position he held until April-May 1518, when he resigned because the general chapter of Saxon Province demanded that he recant the 95 theses. Instead of recanting, he opted to resign as district vicar.\(^{69}\) As a district vicar, Luther had been in charge of ten monasteries, which made him an administrator.\(^{70}\) As district vicar, he also had to pay administrative and pastoral visits to all the monasteries in the province, often appointing or displacing priors and receiving or removing monks.\(^{71}\) He had to keep an eye on all friars in his province, regularly visiting them, advising their heads and ensuring that discipline was firmly observed.\(^{72}\) This was an enormous task that occupied a great deal of his time and which, according to his contemporaries, he approached with a view to caring for the souls of the brothers entrusted to his care.\(^{73}\) In addition to being an administrator, he was also a pastor and preacher “for his Wittenberg brothers”.\(^{74}\) According to Kolb, “he exercised his duty as regional vicar with sensitivity to the pastoral care of his brothers, winning their respect and support, while also gaining the admiration and appreciation of students to whom he was lecturing”.\(^{75}\)

It was this involvement in pastoral care that sensitised him and developed his understanding of pastoral care (seelsorge). According to Whiteford, it was also this understanding that guided his response to indulgences and, ultimately, the writing of the 95 Theses and the posting thereof on the door of the church at Wittenberg.\(^{76}\) While that was an invitation to an academic debate, it was motivated by the practical realities experienced by ordinary men and women, as Luther responded to a pastoral problem.

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\(^{68}\) Cf. Dillenberger, xvii.
\(^{70}\) Whiteford, 26.
\(^{71}\) Koenigsberger, 8.
\(^{72}\) Cubitt, 33.
\(^{73}\) Cubitt, 26.
\(^{74}\) Kolb, 17.
\(^{75}\) Kolb, 17.
\(^{76}\) Kolb, 26-27.
Luther’s source of income to support his ministry

Since Luther had so many occupations, including as a professor, a pastor in the city church and, for some time, as a district vicar (administrator), you might expect him to have been a wealthy man. But this was certainly not the case. Luther’s main source of income was from his teaching position at Wittenberg University. Aland says that the centre of Luther’s life was his professorship, from which he received his salary, refusing honoraria for his writings and his preaching activity. In addition, Luther earned an income from the following sources:

1. He did part-time work as a carpenter. He had taught himself carpentry in case he needed to do part-time work. Manual work and the learning of a trade were very important activities at monasteries.
2. The kindly Duke of Saxony donated to Luther and his family a disused monastery as a home, and he was also generous in sending hampers of food and presents of wine and meat.
3. Luther and Katharina worked very hard in the garden growing all their own vegetables.
4. They also had an orchard, which included pear, peach and apple trees.
5. They owned some livestock, such as pigs, hens and cows; the Luther family slaughtered their own pigs to make sausages.
6. They brewed their own beer. Some critics have alleged that the family made extra income from selling their homemade beer, but there is no substance to such allegations.
7. Students lodged with the family as paying guests at the insistence of Luther’s wife. (If Luther had had his way, guests would have lodged with them free of charge.)
8. Katharina became proficient in running a little farm and selling the produce at the local market. She also became very efficient at managing the affairs of the Luther family, including their finances.

Luther’s occupation as an academic, initially at the University of Erfurt and, later, at Wittenberg University, as well as his involvement in the administration of eleven monasteries in his district never detracted from his role as a minister in the city church and the university community.

Conclusion

Given the sound biblical-theological and historical bases, as well as support from the Lutheran confessions, it is essential to appreciate and fully embrace self-supporting ministry as a complement of full-time ministry. Moreover, there is no basis for the discrimination, marginalisation and exclusion of self-supporting ministers from certain democratic processes and offices, purely because they function as self-supporting ministers. There are practical problems that could affect this ministry, just as there are practical problems that complicate full-time ministry. Such problems should be dealt with in ways that seek to ensure that the flock is well cared for. Full-time ministry remains indispensable to the life of a congregation and a church, but self-supporting ministry is just as important. Self-supporting ministry was embraced fully, without distinction, by the apostles in the early church (e.g. Paul), by the Roman Catholic Church (Staupitz, Luther, etc) and, later, by Luther and Johannes Bugenhagen when the Lutheran Church was being formed and reformed after Luther was excommunicated. Therefore there is no reason why it should not be embraced fully by ELCSA and its different dioceses. It remains a viable alternative that can complement full-time ministry, without the usual hierarchical order, exclusion and marginalisation that is part of the constitution of ELCSA and that has become common practice. What is important is that all the diverse forms of ministry that can be adopted – as dictated by needs and circumstances – must lead to the “mission of feeding and tending the flock of our Lord and Saviour”. The notion must be dispelled that the only “real pastor” is one who is in full-time ministry. This erroneous notion was recently (2012) endorsed publicly by a retired bishop of ELCSA and a theologian of note, Dr Manas Buthelezi, at a funeral of another retired bishop, Rev D.P. Rapoo, who had served the church with distinction. In his homily, former Bishop Buthelezi lamented that, unlike Bishop Rapoo, there are some pastors who fail to finish what they start, implying that they “failed” because they “left the church”. This remark was directed at ministers who left the full-time service (employment) of the church, but continued their ministry as self-
supporting ministers. The author believes that the many men and women who are in self-supporting ministry should in no way feel inferior to those who are in full-time ministry; both groups are fulfilling the important task of ensuring that the parishioners are well cared for. They can and should cooperate in the way that St Paul, Rev Dr Johann von Staupitz, Rev Dr Martin Luther and many others have done in the past. Thus it is very helpful and enriching to look back at the example of Luther and also to look ahead with Luther’s example in mind as we make it possible for the flock to benefit fully from the ministry of men and women who are God-given gifts to the church, in the same way that full-time ministers are.

Works consulted

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