Sunday, February 11, 1973
YOU, TOO, ARE MINISTERS
Acts 1:6-8; I Peter 2:1-3,9-10

Imagine for a moment that you come from a different planet, or that you come from somewhere in this creation where you have never heard of the Christian Church. You are walking down “D” Street in Lincoln and you see a church building for the first time in your life. It is quiet and dignified. You notice the sign board on the corner. It gives the name of the church, but that means little to you since you have never heard of any kind of church. The sign indicates some kind of activity on Sunday morning, and you wonder what it’s all about.

Then suppose you stop someone on the street and ask some questions. “Do you go to a church?” “Yes.” “Where is your church?” “On the corner of 20th and D Streets. What does your church do?” “Well, there are worship ser-vices at 9:30 and 11:00 a.m. on Sunday mornings, and we have a church school and some other activities as well. There are women’s circles, a youth program, choirs, a nursery school, and various groups of people use the building for meetings — it’s a busy place!” “But why do you have churches?” “Why do you belong and attend?”

What would you answer? These are seemingly simple questions but more difficult to answer that we at first realize.

How do we think of the church and its ministry? One man reports this conversation. “Recently, I bumped into a friend at the golf club and mentioned to him that I hadn’t seen him around for some time. ‘Well,’ he explained, ‘I haven’t been playing much golf; just occasionally when I’m in the mood. But it’s nice to belong to the club. I can come here and eat and drink and meet my friends and generally take advantage of the place when I want to.'”

They said goodbye to each other, but afterward it occurred to the person reporting the conversation that his friend had voiced an attitude which some persons have toward the church. They look upon it as a kind of religious club in which they hold membership and of which they may or may not avail themselves as the whim takes them. The minister is a combination “pro” and club manager. He is paid to keep things going, especially during the offseason whey they have more important things to do. And like a golf club, a church exists for the enjoyment of the members, a kind of retreat from the burdens and responsibilities of the world. Just as “they can get away from it all” on the fairways, so “they can get away from it all” in church.

I remember one person making the remark after reading the sermon of a famous preacher, “Things have come to a pretty pass when religion is allowed to invade the sphere of private life.”

How do we think of the church and its ministry? What do those who are not in the church and know only a little about it think of it?

Harry Golden that whimsical Jewish writer in North Carolina, had this to say about the church.

If I were faced today with the decision my ancestors faced — become a Christian or die — I would pick a church fast. There is nothing to offend me in the modern church. The minister gives a sermon on juvenile delinquency one week, then reviews a movie next week, and then

everyone goes downstairs and plays bingo. The first part of the church they build is the kitchen. Five-hundred years from now people will dig up these churches, find the steam tables and wonder what kind of sacrifices we performed.

There is some confusion about the church, its purpose and its ministry and mission. This confusion exists among those outside the church, but it also exists among us who are in the church and call ourselves Christians and count ourselves as members of the church.

This morning then, let's let the Bible remind us of who we are and what our mission is in the world.

1. To begin with, whenever we talk about the church, we need to begin with the Old Testament and the Hebrew people. Our history begins with Abraham. It was he who received a promise from God — "In you all the families of the earth will be blessed." What God began with Abraham is continued with Isaac, Jacob, Jacob's 12 sons. Next, we find the Hebrew nation in Egypt as slaves. God called Moses and through Moses led our fathers and mothers out of Egypt and made of them a nation — a people of God.

The Hebrews were a chosen people — chosen not to any special privileges, but to responsibility — chosen for the purpose of God revealing himself through them to the world. To put it another way, by working through the Jews, God was not expressing an interest only in them. On the contrary! He was working through them for the unity of the human race. Their blessing was to be spread out until it became a blessing for all the families of the earth.

In the course of their history, the Hebrews endured a great deal of suffering and persecution. And the more they suffered, the more they realized that God was using them for a worldwide, rather than a national purpose. Isaiah said, "I will give you as a light to the nations, that my salvation may reach to the end of the earth." Time and time again, however, Israel forgot the wider purpose it was to serve.

As Christians, we belong to that community which had its beginning in the Old Testament. This is our background, and it gives us part of the answer about the church of today and its purpose. The church is not a building, not merely a congregation of people; nor is it a club or group of persons who just happen to like to be together. It may be all of these things as by-products, but it is primarily a community of persons called into existence by God himself, beginning with Abraham and tracing its ancestor through the Hebrew people on up to Jesus Christ, and through him up to the present day.

Thus, while we Christians see the Hebrew people as our beginning in the Old Testament, we know that the story did not end there. The story of our faith continues with Jesus — a man born within the Hebrew community and educated in the Hebrew faith. With Jesus comes the beginning of the New Covenant. As the writer of the book of Hebrews in the New Testament puts it: "In many and various ways God spoke of old to our fathers by the prophets, but in these last days he has spoken to us by a son!"

With Jesus and his followers is the beginning of what the New Testament calls the "New Israel." We know the story of Jesus, how he was born, grew up and when about 30 years of age began his public ministry and he began it not all by himself, but by calling men and women to work with him. Jesus was put to death, but that was not the end as the gospels testify. He overcame death and lives in a new way in the world. This is the story of the church in very brief

form. Not only does Jesus live, but he still calls persons to be a community, to carry on God's work in his power and his name.

Jesus gave a command and a promise to his followers-- "You shall receive power when the Holy Spirit comes upon you, and you shall be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria and to the ends of the earth."

So, we today in churches around the world are bearers of that message and ministry. This is quite different from the idea of the church as some kind of religious club.

What then are some of the implications of this for all of us who call ourselves Christians today?

1. Note first, that when Jesus said, "You shall be my witnesses, he was not speaking to professional ministers like myself. Look at the persons to whom the Risen Lord entrusted this assignment for the telling of his story. There was Peter, a fish merchant from Galilee, and James and John engaged with their father in the same business. There was Matthew, a civil servant. All the disciples had one thing in common; they earned their living in what we call secular vocations; not one was a priest or a bishop or a rabbi or in any sense a religious professional-- all were what we call today — lay persons.

Christianity began that way — as a lay moment — all the way back to Abraham in the Old Testament. Jesus was a carpenter by trade and Paul the great missionary was a tentmaker. Not to a group of clergymen, but to a loosely organized group of lay persons, Christ gave his command and promise.

However, over the years a slow change occurred. As the church grew larger and more unwieldy, it required leadership by persons who no longer earned their living in secular vocations and who need special training so they could give their full time to the work of oversight and supervision. Within Christianity, as within all religions, there emerged the professional leader, the pastor, and the bishop, at first distinct from other church members only by virtue of the functions performed. Gradually, however, the pastor evolved into a priest, and during the Middle Ages was believed to possess a kind of mysterious power; and was in some places elevated to the status of being a kind of mediator between God and man. The priest even came to be thought of as a higher species of Christian. Some believed that one needed a priest in order to be saved. He alone knew the formula of salvation.

The very word "church" became different in meaning. It no longer denoted the whole people of God. For though the laity were within the church they no more constituted the church, than a theatre audience constitutes a theatre. The church, as such, had become identified with its ecclesiastical hierarchy. People came to believe the clergy were the church; and the church's witness and work came to be the exclusive role of a cast of religious professionals.

The Protestant Reformation, in the persons of Martin Luther and others re-discovered the idea which for many centuries had been buried beneath the rock of ecclesiasticism — the truth that every Christian is a priest, a minister, not only in his right to approach God without a human mediator, but also in his responsibility to be a minister of the Gospel and a witness to other human beings. The very word, "layman" in its original meaning comes from the Greek word "laos" which means people of God.

However, since the Protestant Reformation there is still the tendency for some persons to think of the clergy as the church. Some may think of the clergy as being paid to minister for them.

Rather as I said in one of my first sermons in this congregation about a year ago, we have a mutual ministry together, one to the other and together to those outside the church. In this mutual ministry, we each have our own important functions to perform, there is a division of labor which is necessary in any organization if it is to function effectively. Our installation and recognition of the newly elected leaders in our congregation today points this up. All of us together are the church.

But there's even more than that to your ministry. I am in one sense what we might call an "ordained layman," and by the word "ordained" we mean designated to carry out a particular function within the church. You have called me to be your leader, to preach from this pulpit, to interpret the word of God as written in the Bible, to teach, to minister to those in need especially in those areas in which I am trained.

All of this I do in your name. You have assigned me certain responsibilities. The minister is nothing apart from the congregation. In the final analysis, it is not my ministry that is of first importance, but the congregation's ministry in which I lead and have a role.

This then means that you too are ministers in every sense. You were ordained when you were baptized, when you became a part of the people of God. This ordination was confirmed in your confirmation or whenever you joined the church on your own.

So, you, too, are ministers; but what is your ministry? It is more than serving on Boards or committees in the congregation's organization. As important as these are for the visible gathered congregation and organization, your ministry is also carried on in the world where you work and play, in addition to the way you care for and minister to members of this congregation.

Many of the most important issues which face all of us are found in offices, factories, shops, farms, political, parties, government agencies, public education, in the press, radio and television, in the relationship of nations and in countless other ways. The church is already represented in these spheres of activity through persons like you here. You are ministers of the gospel in these places.

You carry on your ministry in your job, in your home, your recreation or wherever you are.

Your Christian ministry in the world begins often quite modestly with listening to the questions of people, talking them over and being one who cares. Your ministry is evi-dent in the decisions you have to make day after day which affect the lives of other persons. It is evident in the way in which you treat people and in the way you carry out your assigned work. During the week, as you go about your work, the church is quite literally wherever you are.

The question you face each day is — How can I serve God and my brothers and sisters in the human family in my work — as farmer, producer, banker, lawyer, manufacturer, teacher, homemaker, nurse, technician, administrator or whatever my daily work is?

In your work is where you most often carry out your ministry.

We ministers in the church, on the other hand, have to be very careful, lest in our preaching we over-simplify the difficulty of your carrying out y6ur ministry. I think it must be maddening to responsible laymen, when preachers tell them that the complex problems of our society can be

solved by narrowly religious methods; by a little more prayer, a little more Bible reading, a little more of the ten commandments, a little more application of the teachings of Christ. Do not misunderstand me, I am in favor of all of these activities. But the Bible and the teachings of Christ have very little to tell us specifically about how to improve agricultural productivity in a technically retarded area, or how to attack endemic disease in a nation without a public health program.

But now back to our question with which we began. Where is the church? Wherever you are. Where are the ministers? Again, wherever you are. The church is spread out all over this town, involved in all sorts of work. You, too, are ministers!