

Spring 2006

Reformed
Church in
America

Called to Serve:

Deacons and Elders Together

Equipped to Serve

Serving on consistory can be daunting. Deacons and elders are called to lead in forming and living out of the mission and vision of the church. They have responsibilities in financial matters, program oversight, building supervision, and pastoral support. If all those tasks seem overwhelming at times, allow this issue of *Called to Serve* to remind you of the core principles and practices of your calling. A deacon's commitment is to service; an elder's commitment is to caregiving; a consistory's commitment is to each other and to the means by which together they act as stewards of God's calling. Those are the themes of this issue. May they support you in your important work.

Visit the new
Consistory Center
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consistory.rca.org
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Called to Serve: This biannual newsletter, mailed free of charge to RCA deacons and elders, is designed to motivate and assist those involved in ministry.

Called to Serve
Reformed Church in America
4500 60th Street SE
Grand Rapids, MI 49512

Called to Be a Deacon

What's A Deacon to Do? Wait on Tables.

by Bruce A. Menning, director of RCA Global Mission

Can you hear a hint of disdain in the apostles' decision, recorded in Acts 6, to appoint people to wait on tables, thus freeing them for the more important work of spreading the word of God? One could read the text that way. Or it could be understood in another way: that already in the earliest days of the church, wisdom suggested a division of labor of ministry based on passions and gifts, with each function equal in importance to achieve the mission of the church.

What's a deacon to do? Scripture says, wait on tables. It sounds simple, but it has profound implications.

The office of deacon was not founded in order to take care of equal distribution of food. If that was the case, the apostles could simply have appointed engineers and accountants: X food divided by Y mouths = Z-sized proportions. Rather, a cross-cultural tension needed to be addressed. That's why spiritual qualities, spiritual sensitivities, were so important.

- Deacons have spiritual sensitivity and discernment.
- Deacons honor all cultures and perspectives.
- Deacons perceive racism and the insidious use of power.
- Deacons champion the inclusiveness of the gospel.
- Deacons overcome conflicts and tensions and bring unity to the body.
- Deacons understand the loneliness of the stranger within and the outsider beyond the doors of the church.
- Deacons greet all people with a generous smile and a fair welcome, regardless of their circumstances in life.

The text also causes us to wonder about the relationship between holistic

ministry and the growth of the church. After key sections of Acts, Luke uses formulaic statements like, "The word of God continued to spread; the number of disciples increased greatly."



The formula refers to all that happened around a set of particular events or occurrences. Because of what happened, the text says, the church grew. And so it seems valid to connect the dots between holistic diaconal ministry and the numerical growth of the church.

- Deacons lead the congregation in bringing good news to a lost and broken world.
- Deacons demonstrate the gospel's truth to those seeking a compassionate touch in their lives.
- Deacons open the doors of the church to those seeking a spiritual home.
- Deacons are sent to the highways and byways to invite people to the feast of God.
- Deacons provide a place of comfort and a touch of kindness which brings hungry people in and brings them back.

Not long after being appointed, Stephen becomes the church's first martyr. He took a stand for the truth, a stand of great risk. I'm wondering what diaconal risk looks like today. Not the annual budget. Not complaints about the condition of the kitchen. Not the

content of fiberglass or asphalt in roofing shingles.

I suspect that diaconal risk today involves moving beyond mercy and compassion to justice issues as a logical extension of holistic ministry and a source of growth for the church.

- Deacons march in CROP walks and march on Washington.
- Deacons confront racism and prejudice in their own lives and corporately in their churches, neighborhoods, and cities.
- Deacons wonder about wars as roads to peace.
- Deacons question political values that widen the gap between the rich and the poor.
- Deacons advocate for a living wage.
- Deacons are like Bono before the Senate Prayer Breakfast reminding people in the seats of power that the diaconal agenda at the end of the day isn't about charity; it's about justice for all of God's people.
- Deacons are the voice for those who have no voice.

Did you know that your ministry is that important to your congregation, and to Our Call, the ten-year goal of the RCA?

What's a deacon to do? Wait on tables.

Need Specific Help?

Are you new to being a deacon? Or would you like a refresher on the role of deacons and the relationship of deacons both to elders and to ministers of Word and sacrament? The RCA Consistory Center offers specific, practical resources—booklets, PowerPoint guides, answers to frequently asked questions, even a video. Go to: <http://consistory.rca.org/index.html>.

Called to Be an Elder

What's an Elder to Be? A Pastoral Caregiver

by Robert Cleveringa, elder

First Reformed Church in Maurice, Iowa, is in the northwest part of the state in a town of no more than 250 residents. On a typical Sunday morning, worship service attendance reaches 550 members. Up until three years ago, pastoral care was limited primarily to the pastor calling on the members—and thus focused on emergencies, illness, shut-ins, and the elderly.

Yes, the congregation was divided into groups of about thirty to thirty-five family groups, and those groups were assigned to elder/deacon teams that were given the responsibility to call on, visit, and care for the needs of those families and individuals. But it became very clear that we were not able to adequately accomplish the task of regular, ongoing pastoral care—not to mention the broader mandates of the board of elders.

At their annual retreat in February 2003, the consistory agreed to spread the responsibility of congregational care outside the elected consistory members. The consistory appointed a leadership team and gave it the responsibility of lifting up the mission of the church and empowering committees to make administrative decisions. A second action established congregational care teams of gifted and passionate laypersons who would come alongside consistory members in ministering to a growing congregation.

The church leaders introduced this new structure to the congregation in the context of a desire to meet the spiritual, physical, and emotional needs of members. The elders clearly laid out the new structure and communicated

their commitment to provide better care for the community of believers with this new paradigm. They also apologized for the lack of adequate care they had given to the congregation in the past and asked for patience and prayer as the new leadership and



Regular times of training are essential for the success of care teams at Maurice Reformed Church.

care ministry was implemented.

Here's how we're doing it today. The goal of Maurice Reformed Church is building and sustaining a Care Team Ministry at a level of one team for every ten family units. These care teams are made up of volunteers from the congregation, who are recruited based on the results of a spiritual gifts and passions assessment. The senior pastor, the Rev. Wayne Sneller, provides quarterly training of the care teams and coordinates the care givers as they minister to the congregational members assigned to them. The consistory continues to carry part of this responsibility, but a much more manageable number of family units are now assigned to them. Both groups work closely with the small-group leaders of the church, making sure adequate care is given to church and community members who are experiencing challenges in their family or as individuals.

We're not all the way to our goal yet.

We still need more teams to reach our stated ratio, and we're working on that. But here's what we've already accomplished: this new structure has spread out the responsibility of leadership and care of the congregation. It has also empowered laypeople to exercise the gifts God has given them. It has allowed us to become the body of Christ.

Resources for pastoral care:

- *The Compassionate Congregation: A Handbook for People Who Care*, by Karen Mulder and Ginger Jurries. (Faith Alive Christian Resources)
- *90% of Helping Is Just Showing Up*, by James Kok. (Faith Alive Christian Resources)
- *A Primer in Pastoral Care*, by Jeanne Stevenson-Moessner. From the Creative Pastoral Care and Counseling series. (Fortress)

The above resources are available through Faith Alive Christian Resources: www.FaithAliveResources.org or (800) 333-8300. The first two titles are in stock; the third is available by special order.

"A Day for Elders"

How can you deepen your own spiritual journey, and how can you walk with those who are themselves seeking a closer walk with God and a closer relationship with the church? The "A Day for Elders" workshop introduces the *Companions on the Way* process to graciously welcome seekers into the community of faith. To bring this training event for elders to your area, or to inquire about other resources for elders, contact Ministry Services manager Ellen Ratmeyer at (212) 870-2957 or eratmeyer@rca.org.

You Want to Spend What?!

by Philip Bakelaar, pastor of Ocean Community Church in Manahawkin, New Jersey

As I've worked with churches in conflict and struggling with change, I've observed dedicated and well-meaning people becoming very frustrated.

The way people interact either helps or hurts their ability to solve problems. Case studies like the one below are developed to support a transformation in how consistories interact by offering a communication process perspective. Try this one:

The proposal for spending \$10,000 on training and equipment for the children's ministry was not a surprise, but it still created a stir in the consistory. People had been talking about it for weeks. Typical statements heard during the hours-long discussion were:

- "If we are going to keep growing, we've got to invest in our young people."
- "We can't even pay our bills now; where are we going to get the money?"
- "We don't give enough to missions anyway; I think we should do more for mission."
- "Have faith—God will provide!"
- "If the pastor preached more on tithing, this wouldn't be a problem."
- "Kids expect too much today anyway. When I was growing up..."

With all of these different perspectives in play, this meeting is headed for trouble! The conflict about this may damage relationships and leave a bad feeling between members of the consistory. On the other hand, if there is attention to how the consistory might use these different perspectives to learn about each other, and then to build a shared vision of what they want to accomplish together, the end result may be more effective ministry. It depends on whether the consistory has

learned the conversational/discussion/process skills that will help it turn potentially destructive conflict into productive learning.

This case brings up issues of attitudes toward money. Jesus identified this as a



major spiritual issue when he said, "For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also" (Matthew 6:21). Different generations of people tend to have different views about spending, especially spending connected to the church. Each member of the consistory brings a personal history and background about money and spending. There are strong emotional components to these habits. If people can reflect on their own formation as spenders and stewards, there is more possibility of productive discussion about new spending within the church. It is helpful for each person to share what his or her hopes and fears are around this issue. Hopes and fears are interests that stand behind and give rise to people's positions.

Getting to Yes, by William Ury and Roger Fisher, along with their other books on negotiation, stresses that productive collaboration is best accom-

plished when people understand the interests of others, not just their pronounced positions. There may be other ways for people's interests to be met; this cannot be determined until those interests are verbalized. It may be that, once those opposed to a particular suggestion understand the interests of others and see that they share those interests, they will consider changing their position. Or a new collaborative position may become apparent.

Beyond personal hopes, fears, and other interests stands the ever-present question of the church's vision and mission. We may want to explore what God's interests are, and whether we are willing to allow those to direct our decision processes. This is another opportunity for creative thinking. Are there other ways to meet these interests? Is this the right time? Are these expenditures the best ones? How else might we accomplish our goals?

As you help a group of God's people think about this case, they will learn new habits of working together that will have effects far beyond working through an imaginary case study.

The RCA's web-based Consistory Center features twelve case studies for consistories, including a facilitator's process guide and a list of questions for each case. To access the cases, go to <http://consistory.rca.org>. You will also find a wealth of additional resources at the Consistory Center to assist you as a consistory in your work together and in your own spiritual journeys. Note: the Consistory Center is also available in Spanish.