

Spring 2007

Reformed
Church in
America

Called to Serve

Deacons and Elders Together

The Ministry of Compassion

Almost every Sunday I see them sitting together in the back pew of the church—an elderly church member with special needs and a faithful elder. He picks her up at the assisted living center, sits with her, helps her find the hymns, and walks with her after the service to the place where we gather for fellowship. She fills the church with her joyful presence: “I just love to be here with everyone.” The care and compassion of the elder makes it possible for her to be with us. A church member is loved, and the community is nourished.

Most often, acts of compassion are simple ones. When you intentionally perform an act of compassion in Christ’s name, you are representing Christ to those in need. As you read through the articles in this issue, consider how God is calling you to encourage one another through the ministry of compassion.

“As God’s chosen ones, holy and beloved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience” (Colossians 3:12).

—Ellen Ratmeyer, coordinator of consistory training and ministry services

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
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Called to Be a Deacon

Church Wait Staff

by Jay Harsevoort, RCA coordinator for volunteers

When we think of deacons, for many of us an image springs to mind of the collection plate being passed down the church aisle. After the service the deacons retreat into an office to count the money that was collected. Hopefully that is not the only thing we imagine deacons do.



There are many ways for a deacon to serve, and collecting and counting is just one way. It is often the most visible thing that deacons do. But is that all it means to be a deacon? The scriptural reference to the office of deacon can be found in Acts 6, when the seven were chosen literally to “wait on tables”—*diakonos*—to feed the hungry and take care of the widows and orphans.

And the twelve called together the whole community of the disciples and said, “It is not right that we should neglect the word of God in order to wait on tables. Therefore, friends, select from among yourselves seven men of good standing, full of the Spirit and of wisdom, whom we may appoint to this task,

while we, for our part, will devote ourselves to prayer and to serving the word (Acts 6:2-4).

Deacons are called to serve. The RCA liturgy tells us that deacons are set apart for a ministry of mercy, service, and outreach. Deacons gather gifts and offerings, care for them faithfully, and distribute them with wisdom and compassion to people in need and for purposes that advance God’s kingdom on earth. I even checked my grandfather’s liturgy book—he was an RCA pastor in the early part of the previous century—to check if generations before me heard the same thing when those deacons were installed. I found that then there was an even greater emphasis on service and feeding the hungry.

Deacons serve as a bridge to the congregation, providing connections and opportunities to serve and be involved in the ministry of the church. It is not about passing the plate but about what happens to that money—the benevolences, the mission and ministry they support: mercy, service, and outreach. Waiting on tables is what deacons are called to do. They are called to serve the church, the community, and the world through volunteer opportunities, ministries of care and outreach, caring for creation, supporting disaster relief efforts and local and global mission, and working with issues of stewardship and giving.

When I think back to my own childhood in the church, I do think of another image. It happened a couple times that I can remember, but it is the image of the deacons serving breakfast before a church service, the older men in the church who donned

aprons and picked up spatulas to serve pancakes to the congregation. I don’t remember what these breakfasts were raising money for, but I hope it was for mission and ministry of some kind, service to the hungry or the widows and orphans of the world.

It is an interesting image: deacons, with towels over their arms, presenting a menu of opportunities for the congregation, serving the church, the community, and the world. The menu connects the congregation to ministry, to missionaries, to the poor and hungry, and to service opportunities in the neighborhood and around the world. Most importantly, it allows the opportunity to give to outreach and ministry for the kingdom of God.



Called to Be an Elder

The Grace-Full Visit

by Jennifer Reece, pastor, St. John's Reformed Church, St. Johnsville, New York

"The pastor doesn't visit enough."

I am sure that either you or someone in your congregation has made this statement. I know it has been made in my congregation. And it's true. No pastor visits "enough." People are hungry for relationship, for a sense that their church cares for and listens to them, for

spiritual guidance—in short, for God. Even in a small parish, the minister cannot satisfy that hunger. The good news for both pastors and churches is that it is not the pastor's job to do it all.

Then whose job is it to visit the sick, to bring comfort, to listen to the members, to reach out to those who are disaffected, and to be "the very presence of God in a lost and broken world"? As

our mission statement points out, this is the "job" of the whole church. The leaders of the church—pastors, elders, and deacons together—share the responsibility of making sure it will be a job done well in their congregation. Elders and deacons need to take on the challenge and joy of visiting, not to help the pastor but to take up a vital ministry of



The Synod of Albany's Consistory Enrichment Days included a "grace-full visit" workshop

Practice

- Share an experience of someone helping you in a time of difficulty. What did they do that worked? What did it teach you about caring for other people?
- Make a list of the ways you might offer compassion by your actions and words.
- Share with one another the biblical passages, hymn texts, prayers, and other resources that you have found useful in caring for others.

their congregation and provide a good model for all the members as they continue the tradition of the New Testament church: "Every day...they broke bread in their homes and ate together" (Acts 2:46, NIV).

After the elder or deacon has left, sometimes the sigh is heard, "But it's not the same as having the pastor visit." Indeed, some in the church will be disappointed to find it's merely a

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Principles of Holy Listening

Listening deeply to another person places us on sacred ground. We can pay attention to how God is present for and through the other person, and how God is present to us personally in the time of listening. In any conversation with another person, but especially around matters of faith, you can practice these basic preparations and principles of listening:

- Take a few slow breaths, remembering who you and the other person are in God's sight: beloved children of God. Allow yourself to be aware of the divine presence and invite the Spirit to help you listen well.
- Set aside your own agenda. Give your whole attention to the other person. If you have ideas, feelings, or advice you wish to communicate, hold them for later. Ask clarifying questions only if you need to.
- Look into the other person's eyes with warmth and receptivity. Indicate by your physical posture that you are available to listen. Let your hands and feet be relaxed. You need not keep constant eye contact, but let it be with an open, loving look when your eyes meet.
- Listen with your heart as well as your head. Attend to the feelings and mood expressed in the other person's posture, gestures, and tone of voice. The words being spoken are only part of the whole message being communicated.
- Try to remain aware of God's presence with you both. Breathe little prayers of praise, gratitude, or supplication as you feel so moved in the course of listening to the other person.
- At the end of your time together, thank the other person for the opportunity to hear his or her story or struggles. Indicate that you are enriched for getting to know him or her more fully.
- Jot down notes in your journal on what you learn by listening in this way.

Taken from *Companions in Christ: Exploring the Way*, pages 51-52, Upper Room Books, www.companionsinchrist.org.

Classis Empowers Its Leaders!

by Lynn Ann Huizingh, leadership training director, Rocky Mountain Classis, and elder, Faith Community Church, Littleton, Colorado

Two years ago, Rocky Mountain Classis voted to develop and implement a comprehensive leadership development plan. The plan includes intentional training for elders and deacons along with commissioned leader training and commissioned pastor training. This three-year cycle of offerings began with a look at biblical leadership led by Betty



Lynn Ann Huizingh

and Dennis Voskuil. This year's training event, led by Ellen Ratmeyer, focused on elders and deacons as empowering leaders. Next year's training focus will be on the spiritual disciplines.

Leadership development in such an intentional way is new to our classis. The biggest blessing so far is new relationships with leaders from other churches in our classis. When leaders who lead in different settings get together, they begin to see a bigger picture of what God's kingdom is really about!

The relationships that are beginning to form help us learn that we need to work together not only as a classis, but with our local community churches as well. The kingdom of God is best ushered in when we break down the barriers and learn from each other in community.

It seems as humans we are a bit hesitant to move in a new direction. However, when we step out in faith according to God's Word and in the power of his Holy Spirit, we find more beauty than ashes! I encourage each of our classes to take leadership development seriously and to begin praying about

how God would move you to build up and edify the leaders. They in turn will come along and build up and edify God's people to accomplish the work he has prepared for them.

If you have questions about what we are doing, please feel free to give me a call at (720) 934-2744 or email me at matdirector@comcast.net. I would love to visit with you.

The Grace-Full Visit

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consistory member at the door. But I believe the vast majority will never feel this way, provided that in the visit they have a real experience of the bread of the gospel—of God's grace being shared together.

How to conduct a grace-full visit was the topic of a workshop I led for the Synod of Albany's Consistory Enrichment Days this winter. The first step is so simple we sometimes overlook it: the visitor needs to ask, "Who am I visiting, and why?" There are many different kinds of visits. To become open channels for God's grace, visitors need to be clear in their own minds what the purpose of the visit is, and the particular circumstance of the person visited.

A listening ear and a praying heart are the most important things the visitor brings. Much of our workshop time was spent practicing our listening skills. Sitting with someone who is complaining or grumbling—especially if they are grumbling about the church—is never easy. The listener might be tempted to launch into a defense, to correct a fact, or to bring up a corresponding complaint from their own life. Some listeners are the "Big Fluffy Comforters" who respond to expressions of pain with soothing pats. Others are "Mr. Fix-Its" who rush in with advice at the drop of a hat. Some come with too ready judgments,

and some are so empathetic that they are sucked into whatever feelings are expressed. All of these are dangers. Prayer can teach us how to sit with pain and to hear what the sufferer needs without falling into these traps.

Active, empathetic listening involves asking open-ended questions and paying the kind of attention to the answers that shows genuine caring, without over-identifying with the pain or problems shared. It is a fine line to toe, and it takes prayer, honest self-knowledge, and lots of practice to learn how. Elders and deacons can be of immense help to each other and to the pastor by regularly practicing their listening skills. As leaders skilled in listening and dedicated to prayer they will be able to spearhead a lively visiting ministry in their church.

"We were gentle among you, like a nurse tenderly caring for her own children. So deeply do we care for you that we are determined to share with you not only the gospel of God but also our own selves, because you have become very dear to us" (1 Thessalonians 2:7-8).

"So You've Been Asked to Make Visits," a brochure by Louis M. Tamminga, is available through Faith Alive Christian Resources. Call (800) 333-8300 or visit www.FaithAliveResources.org to order a copy for yourself or enough to distribute to everyone on your consistory.