

Winter 2008

Reformed  
Church in  
America

# Called to Serve

## Deacons and Elders Together

### Learning to Lead

It was Sunday morning and the third grade Sunday school class had gone along with the elders to take communion to people in a senior living center. Now, as the pastor asked them where they had been, they excitedly responded, "We took church to the seniors!" In that moment I realized that the faith community is where we often learn to respond to God's call to discipleship—it is the place where we learn to lead.

This issue of *Called to Serve* focuses on learning together how to lead. Take a few moments to think about the ways God might be calling you to grow as a leader. Consider when and how you have been involved in the learning process—both as leader and learner. When did your best learning take place?

Let me hear your stories and questions about consistory training. I'd love to hear from you!

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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.

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# Called to Be a Deacon

## The Lesson I Learned as a Leader

by Betty Voskuil

Several years ago I was leading a diaconal ministries workshop for deacons in Florida. At the end of a particularly inspiring session, I looked around the room, spotted one of the deacon leaders in the classis, and asked



Betty Voskuil

him if he would close the session with a prayer. He looked very uncomfortable when he replied that he would rather have someone else pray. I was surprised because he was an outstanding congregational leader in every way, and I had assumed this would be easy for him to do. The experience taught me a valuable lesson in leadership:

Know your constituency.

Recognize that deacons (and other servant leaders) have an amazing variety of gifts to offer, but they have different comfort levels in using some of those gifts. It was clear to me that Martin (name changed for privacy) had significant spiritual gifts and leadership skills which he generously utilized. I had witnessed him using them in several settings. But in our respective leadership roles, I had failed to recognize that praying in public was not a gift with which he was at ease.

People learn to lead in different ways and in a variety of areas. It is important for each person to recognize the leadership skills and gifts that he or she is most able and willing to offer and utilize, and which ones need a bit more incubating and nurturing.

Deacons are called to be congregational leaders in ministries of mercy, justice, service, and outreach. Which areas can you identify as your strengths or your weaknesses? Start by praying for wisdom to know your gifts. Then listen for the Spirit to direct your possible

response. Have courage that you will continue to learn to lead. And I promise you will! A few years later I again asked Martin (in private) if he would be willing to close in prayer, and he said, "Of course!"

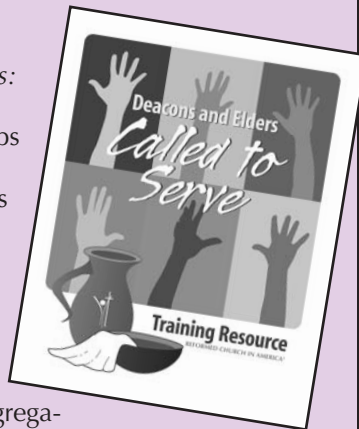
*Betty Voskuil retired in November 2007 as the RCA's coordinator for Reformed Church World Service, diaconal ministries, and hunger education.*

**An exciting new training resource especially for Reformed Church in America consistories is hot off the press.**

*Deacons and Elders: Called to Serve* helps deacons and elders become better prepared to serve as leaders in their congregations.

It combines the best of several books, pamphlets, and videos that have been used in the past to train RCA elders and deacons, and adds case studies and other materials that invite participants to interact and learn together.

The new resource features a combined leader and participant booklet, a pamphlet entitled "A Three-Minute Tour of the Reformed Church in America," and a DVD to complement material in the booklet. To order, contact Faith Alive Christian Resources at [sales@FaithAliveResources.org](mailto:sales@FaithAliveResources.org) or (800) 333-8300.



### Deepening Our Learning through Reflection

*Adapted from Shaping Spiritual Leaders, by Abigail Johnson*

#### Name the Experience

Choose an event, a moment, a conversation, or a situation to reflect on.

As you recall the event, ask yourself:

- What happened?
- Who was involved?
- What did you do or say?

#### Explore the Experience

To explore another layer in this event, ask yourself:

- How did you feel?
- What challenged, stimulated, or disturbed you?
- How did others react in the situation?

#### Make Faith Connections

To find God at work in this event, ask yourself:

- Where is God present for you in this situation?
- Does this event remind you of a Scripture passage or a hymn?
- In what ways are you affirmed or challenged?

#### Learn

To name your discoveries, ask yourself:

- What questions still linger?
- What have you learned about yourself?
- What have you learned about others?
- What have you learned about God?
- What will you do now?

# Called to Be an Elder

## On Being a New Leader

by Susan Kerr

I approach how I pastor with the concept that all who believe and are baptized have a ministry of service and are an integral part of this piece of the body of Christ. Since God put us together in this place at this time, it's our job together to figure out what God intends for us to be and do in this world, right here, right now!

By the Holy Spirit all who believe and are baptized receive a ministry to witness to Jesus as Savior and Lord, and to love and serve those with whom they live and work. We are ambassadors for Christ, who reconciles and makes whole. We are the salt of the earth; we are the light of the world.\*

1 Timothy 4:11-14 instructs us:

...set the believers an example in speech, in conduct, in love, in faith, in purity...give attention to the public reading of scripture, to exhorting, to teaching. Do not neglect the gift that is in you.

The first task has been to figure out what we all think we know, and then learn together what we really do know...about God, each other, about our gifts for ministry...how to witness to the world together in faith by sharing our gifts. To help accomplish that, I have been mixing cognitive "lists" and outlines with storytelling and sharing with the consistory (What is Robert's Rules and why is it useful? What was the first car you ever owned? Who will go with me to this theology class so we

\*"Order for the Ordination and Installation of Elders and Deacons," *Worship the Lord: The Liturgy of the Reformed Church in America* (2005), p. 44.

can talk "shop" to each other and others in the congregation?). I constantly solicit feedback informally from a diverse swath of congregants, while relying specifically on the elders. That process affirms their office and their



*The consistory of New Baltimore Reformed Church gathers for leadership training*

gifts, and fosters broader and stronger ties with the members of the congregation. It is a "we" in ministry, not "me" doing church!

In my own Clinical Pastoral Education training and study of family systems, I learned the value and discipline of continuously practicing and encouraging healthy, direct, construc-

tive ways of communicating. I share that I participate in a couple of clergy groups, one to look at the lectionary and "check in" with each other on a weekly basis, the other a network of like-minded ministers who meet monthly to share leadership experiences in a reflective, supportive environment. I am open and intentional about sharing information and learnings (not confidences!) from those groups. My goal is to practice an "us" approach to ministry rather than a "me/us vs. them" attitude.

We work at modeling behaviors that enable reconciliation and make way for wholeness with integrity, recognizing and honoring the individual gifts of one another. I have found great value in acknowledging and apologizing for my own mistakes, as well as openly admitting my foibles, ignorance, and new experiences.

The crafters of the words of our ordination liturgy remain as constant mentors to me. They inform both how I approach challenges and my relationship with the flesh-and-bones folks alongside whom I walk (and sometimes wander!). It seems that when we pay closest attention to the liturgical promises we made, we wind up somewhere joyfully closest to what the Holy Spirit has intended for us—I, with the congregation I serve, and the Savior in whose name we serve our God.

*Susan Kerr is pastor of New Baltimore Reformed Church in New Baltimore, New York.*

Here are ways your consistory can continue to learn and grow:

- Use materials on the RCA consistory website: [consistory.rca.org](http://consistory.rca.org).
- Partner with another consistory (or two or three) around times of learning, support, and accountability.
- Go on retreat. Sometimes it's best simply to get away and talk about the future. How might your consistory carve out eight uninterrupted hours to consider the future callings of your congregation—and to consider how consistory members themselves are being nurtured spiritually?

## How God Leads through Us

by Kirsty DePree

It was a typical afternoon at the office until the phone rang. On the other end was the chair of the deacons, and he wondered if he could come in and talk immediately. I said, "Absolutely." As I hung up, I began to wonder: What was the urgency? Was the church heading into a major financial downfall? Was there a scandal, or worse yet, was he resigning from consistory?

He entered my office with a sense of peace and put all my fears to rest when he said, "I now realize what it really means to listen to God." This man was the exemplar deacon: he never missed a meeting, he led a small group, and he had just completed our adult education class on listening prayer. He said, "I need to tell you a story."

He told his story in such a way that I was right there with him, and in his sharing we both experienced the presence of God. He had gone on a fishing trip alone. On his way to find the river, he went into the woods, and he got lost. His first instinct was to seek God's direction; he prayed diligently and heard nothing. He looked to the left and then to the right, and in each instance he found himself more confused. He eventually was walking in circles and had lost all sense of direction. He wandered for hours. He was dehydrated, hungry, and weary and continued to cry out, but felt like he was all alone. He prayed even more and really tried to listen for the voice of God. He looked up in the sky and saw the sun setting, which caused him more anxiety, but at least he now knew that he was facing west. He was able to get his bearings.

He pleaded with God and felt an overwhelming sense to follow a very rough, out of the way path, but he listened. Eventually he made his way back to his car.

The gist of his story was this: leaders need to know how to listen for and hear the voice of God. As a leader you will

certainly have times in which you are lost and alone, and it is in those times that you find out what the heart of a leader is. It is in those times that leaders learn the most, because they begin to rely fully on God.

This story reminds each consistory member that leadership is not based purely on one's own ability to lead, but on God's ability to lead through us. Each leader can identify with this dea-



con's plea. Leaders learn to lead by acknowledging their need for direction and clarity. Leaders also lead based on who they are. This deacon was a man of prayer, study, community, and accountability. He was living his faith in a holistic way through service, worship, teaching, learning, and prayer. He had committed his life to discipleship. He was practicing his faith, he was following and listening to Christ, he was sensing transformation and the Holy Spirit residing with and dwelling in him, and by his actions people knew that he was a disciple. The beauty of his story is that in realizing he was lost, he began to have more empathy for people who were lost and far from God.

He embodied the call to be a deacon in his servanthood, his service after the example of Christ. His ability to be a deacon came from his willingness to be

a disciple. He knew that he could not lead effectively unless he was in relationship with Christ and was discerning and hearing God's voice. He was seeking Christ in numerous ways and that resulted in his ability to effectively chair the deacons and move them in energizing, Spirit-filled ways.

As elders and deacons, we are called to serve, and we serve because we are disciples called by God. The discipleship office has defined discipleship as the practice of following Jesus Christ, becoming more like him in all we think, say, and do, empowered by the Holy Spirit to be the very presence of Christ in the world.

In order for our consistories to see transformational change and growth, it is important that each elder or deacon participate in some form of discipleship. A consistory that is committed to being students of God's Word will be fueled and energized by leaders who are spiritually prepared to handle the challenges of leading and walking in territory that may seem foreign or unknown. You will be prepared to hear and discern the voice of God. When that happens, you will also have stories to share of how you have heard the voice of God.

*Kirsty DePree is the RCA's coordinator of Discipleship.*

### Reflection Questions

Share a time when as a consistory you were confused and lost concerning a decision. Describe how you handled it.

What spiritual practices do you encourage for your consistory? How do you hold one another accountable?