

Fall 2004

Reformed
Church in
America

Called to Serve:

Deacons and Elders Together

Engaging Our Call

As a whole consistory, and as individual elders and deacons, how will you engage Our Call, the RCA's ten-year goal? Will the goal be just another item on a to-do list? Or will it spark a growing conversation filled with energy and curiosity for digging deeper? Perhaps you are even in the process of implementing new commitments or ready to sign up to do so.

Wherever your congregation is on its path of renewal and mission, Our Call comes as an invitation to listen for God's guidance in the life and ministry of your congregation. That's what this issue of *Called to Serve* is all about—it's an invitation to you, the elders and deacons of our congregations, to consider ways you might hear and act on God's call to revitalize our churches' ministries. May what follows be another step in a creative, energizing look at the ministry work of your congregation.

Visit the new RCA
consistory website
www.rca.org/consistory

In this issue:

**Deacons— Making a
Difference2**

**Elders— Sabbatical
Renewal3**

**A Revitalization
Story4**

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.

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



Called to **Be a Deacon**

What Difference Does Your Congregation Make in Your Community? (And what difference does a deacon make in knowing the answer?)

by Betty Voskuil, RCA coordinator for diaconal ministries

It was a classic struggling-church dilemma: a vicious circle of declining membership, loss of young families, and insufficient income to support a full-time pastor. This Iowa congregation met and prayed and fought about possible solutions, finally settling on just two: they could change, or they could close. In the midst of their discussions, someone asked, “If we didn’t exist as a congregation, what difference would it make in the community?”

Would your church dare ask this question? And if so, what answer do you imagine you might receive? That’s what deacons from across the RCA were asking themselves—and each other—this past spring at the annual Diaconal Ministries Gathering, when RCA general secretary Wesley Granberg-Michaelson told them this story of the Iowa congregation.

Here’s how that story ends. The elders and deacons from this particular congregation courageously sought out the mayor, the school principal, law enforcement officers, and social workers in their community and asked about their future. As a result of what they learned, and after a lot of prayer, they decided to convert their church building into a youth center called “The Cross Walk” and then to restart their thirty-five-member congregation in a new facility. Today The Cross Walk serves two hundred area young people, many of whom struggle with addictions and broken homes, and the “restarted” congregation, Celebrate Community



Wesley Granberg-Michaelson addresses diaconal ministry delegates in Holland, Michigan, in April.

about how their congregations have been transformed and revitalized by new diaconal ministry opportunities. Will you share those stories so we can encourage one another and celebrate how God is working in our midst as we live out our call together? Send your stories to Betty Voskuil at 4500 60th Street SE, Grand Rapids, MI 49512, or email them to her at bvoskuil@rca.org. Please identify them as

Church, worships at four hundred.

Deacons play a vital role in shaping revitalizing congregations through their leadership role in ministries of mercy, justice, service, and outreach. Ken Eriks, the RCA’s new coordinator of congregational revitalization, says that he feels deacons, in particular, are critical in nurturing ministries that contribute to healthier and more just neighborhoods, villages, towns, and cities. Deacons can also play a vital role in developing a giving community of servant leaders who are equipped and empowered for diaconal ministries.

Many deacons have stories to tell

“deacons’ stories.”

You Can Help Every Day

The recent devastation from hurricanes in Florida reminds us that disasters are often sudden; the ongoing genocide in Darfur, Sudan, reminds us that disasters can also have an intractable presence. Reformed Church World Service is present no matter which of these forms a disaster takes, dispensing both aid and comfort in the name of Christ. Your contributions are always needed. You can get all the details at rcws.rca.org.

Christ has no body now on earth but yours, no hands but yours, no feet but yours. Yours are the eyes through which the compassion of Christ is to look out on a hurting world.

Yours are the feet with which he is to go about doing good.

Yours are the hands with which he is to bless now.

—Teresa of Avila

A Sabbatical for the Pastor

To be successful, renewal and revitalization require congregation-wide initiatives led by consistories and other leadership groups within the church. But renewal rarely begins that way; renewal of a congregation most often blossoms from the renewal of a single person—the pastor. And many times, that personal renewal is fostered by a sabbatical.

What is a sabbatical? A sabbatical is a time to focus in-depth on things that are important to a person's work and life with the church. Sabbaticals for pastors are highly recommended in order to renew the calling and creativity of our spiritual leaders. Such sabbaticals should include intentional times for reflection, rekindling the spirit, and deepening spiritual life and family relationships.

Why should we give our pastor a sabbatical? A congregation should arrange for a pastor's sabbatical because it's biblical, and because both the pastor and the church need it. The sabbatical year practiced by the Hebrew people was the final year in a cycle of seven years (Leviticus 25:3-4). It was also a time when the Hebrew people had the opportunity to renew their trust in God as the provider of all of their needs, even during the time when they did not labor.

After a pastor has served a congregation for five years or more, they have a tendency to take God and one another for granted, often falling into frustrating patterns rather than finding a faithful and creative future. A sabbatical for the pastor can provide time to focus on reading, writing, preaching, and prayer, and forces members to exercise their ministries for the good of one another and the gospel.

How does the congregation benefit? In a video presentation entitled

Why You Should Give Your Pastor a Sabbatical, Roy Oswald says, "Granting a sabbatical leave to a pastor becomes a great way for congregants to once again claim certain roles within a congregation that correspond with the gifts they have been given by God."

How do we start planning for a sabbatical? Sabbatical planning should include the church as well as the pastor. Some churches have found that forming a sabbatical committee is a good way to work together. The following suggestions for sabbatical planning are endorsed by the Reformed Church in America:

- Each installed pastor is encouraged to negotiate an appropriate sabbatical leave with the consistory every five years.
- The length of the sabbatical leave may vary. A length of two to four months ought to be given serious consideration by both parties.
- During a sabbatical, salary and benefits shall continue to be paid as during normal service.
- Unusual expenses incurred during a sabbatical leave (cost of tuition, travel, etc.) are the responsibility of the minister, who may choose to use funds set aside for continuing education if the consistory agrees that this is appropriate.
- Provision for sabbatical leaves shall be included in the consistory's call to the minister. Appropriate provision in the annual budget shall be made to ensure that when a plan for a sabbatical is agreed upon, the funds for adjunct pastoral assistance (as needed) are available.

—Adapted from *Minutes of General Synod 1987*, pp. 203-204

Additional Resources

Is it time for you to start thinking about and planning with your pastor for a sabbatical? The following resources will provide additional information to help you develop a sabbatical plan and possibly ways to fund that plan.

- *Why You Should Give Your Pastor a Sabbatical*, Roy Oswald, The Alban Institute, 2001. Video.
- *Journeying toward Renewal: A Spiritual Companion for Pastoral Sabbaticals*, Melissa Bane Sevier, The Alban Institute, 2002.
- *The Contemplative Pastor*, Eugene H. Peterson, William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1989.
- Louisville Institute's Study Grants for Pastoral Leaders Program (www.louisville-institute.org)
- Lilly Endowment Inc.'s National Clergy Renewal Program (www.clergyrenewal.org)

For more information, contact Ellen Ratmeyer, manager for Ministry Services, at (212) 870-2957 or eratmeyer@rca.org.

What's an Elder to Be?

"The elder takes responsibility for the spiritual well-being of the congregation in a missional church, ascertaining that its members are nurtured through Scripture, worship, the sacraments, and prayer."

—From *Faithful Consistories*, a publication of the RCA

The Revitalization of Home Acres

Seven years ago Home Acres Reformed Church, which ministers in an aging, blue-collar neighborhood, was without a pastor, couldn't afford one, and was considering merging with a neighboring congregation. Today, Home Acres is the centerpiece of a community urban renewal plan, and has both a pastor and parishioners who believe deeply in their mission and ministry.

The church's pastor, the Rev. Richard Baukema, and key congregational leader Chris Slabbekoorn say that what is happening at Home Acres is neither complicated nor simple. Rather, it is a faithful expression of a consistory and congregation who wouldn't give in, and who engaged in processes that helped provide commitment and direction: ReFocusing and Natural Church Development.

Richard Baukema: This church started as a Sunday school church seventy-five years ago. Out of the Sunday school, it became a church. Through its history, then, the health of the church was synonymous with outreach with kids. When it pulled back from a ministry with kids, the ministry of the church faltered.

Chris Slabbekoorn: We were struggling to find our feet. There was turmoil—a group of people questioned whether it was right to be here. We wanted to do the right thing; we just didn't know how. Why did we do ReFocusing? Because Pastor B. said we were

going to. If we had known what it was before we committed, we might not have done it. It was hard. Groups of leaders spoke their minds very bluntly in their small groups. We didn't all come from the same place, but we ended up in the same place.

high school group; this year we sent out notices to 55 kids. We have 198 kids registered overall; 15 are from families who are members of our church.

CS: For our education kickoff, we gave virtually all one hundred people a job (we didn't ask). And very few have said no. We would love to have thirty more members in church; that hasn't



Ministry with youth and children has been key to the revitalization of Home Acres Reformed Church.

RB: An unbelievable amount of initiatives have happened out of the ReFocusing process. It has given us a focus—that somehow it is going to work, because God said it and we all heard it. An example: our Wednesday night program. Before, we didn't even have a

happened. But other ministry has changed dramatically. Every week, there are forty to fifty kindergarteners through fifth-graders, forty to fifty middle-schoolers, and twenty to thirty high-schoolers. We must be doing something right.

RB: There was some part of us that thought, "It's going to get better." And then we reach [another huge obstacle]. God is faithful but isn't waving a magic wand here.

CS: I don't think we would have had enough courage on our own. We didn't look deeper until other people pushed us into it. It's not all roses. It's hard work. People get discouraged. I don't want to paint such a beautiful picture. But we're keeping on. God has always been gracious. We support each other in all of our work.

RB: What's happened in our church? One of our deacons recently said to me, "Do you know how neat it is sitting in this consistory? You baptized me, you married me, you baptized my son, you ordained me as a deacon. That's as neat as I can think of." I am in awe of the results.

ReFocusing and Natural Church Development are basic tools to help RCA congregations live out the commitment of Our Call to revitalization. For more information, contact RCA coordinator for revitalization Ken Eriks at (800) 968-3943, ext. 235, or keriks@rca.org.