

Called to Serve:

Editor's Box

"I really do care, and I know I'm supposed to do something," a deacon said. "But what, or how—that's what I need to know."

That's what this issue of *Called to Serve* is all about. From their complementary work both within a congregation and outward from the congregation to the local community and the world, elders and deacons care for others by being the hands and feet of Christ.

The stories of elders and deacons featured in this issue of *Called to Serve* are not intended as personal promotion but to inspire you, in your own way and in your own context of ministry, to ask how your consistory may lead in ministries of care and compassion. We hope you find these stories helpful.

Betty Voskuil and
Jeff Japinga
editors



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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.

Deacons and Elders Together

The Caring Congregation

Over the past few years Steve DeYoung has helped his congregation assemble thousands of health care kits that have been used both around the corner and around the world. Lynn Gilgore has brought a ministry of prayer and presence to hundreds of church and community members.



Steve is a deacon; Lynn is an elder. Like hundreds of their counterparts in RCA churches across North America, both Steve and Lynn have answered God's clear call to share the gospel in word and in deed, and in doing so, to care for the world and its people. But if this practice of service and caring is the whole church's calling, who is finally responsible for its oversight: elders or deacons?

Caring for people is the common work of elders and deacons. Elders provide a ministry of caring and nurture through spiritual growth and pastoral care of the church, deacons through ministries of mercy, service, and outreach.

That often means that the caring work of elders is focused on the spiritual well-being of members of the congregation and, by extension, the assemblies to which the congregation is accountable. The work of the deacon looks both locally and globally, ministering to the whole person in ways that are most often concrete and tangible.

Which is most relevant to the call of the church to care for the world and its people? It's elders and deacons, working together with ministers of Word and sacrament—each incomplete without the others, and all three dependent on the call of Christ and the leading of the Spirit. Together, their leadership empowers the caring congregation.

Called to Be a Deacon

Caring for Our Neighbors, Near and Far

Deacons lead the way in providing opportunities for congregations to show their love for God and neighbor. They are called to care for widows, orphans, and people with special individual and family needs, locally and globally.

This can be done locally in many ways. Bruce reports that deacons at his church conclude their meetings by writing a note to a person in the congregation who needs to hear that someone cares. At Ann's church, deacons give young parents a night out by providing a few hours of child care at the church. Bob has helped establish a "Deacon's Servant Network" at his church to provide for a variety of special individual and family concerns. One deacon is on call each month to match those needs to volunteers who will help meet them.

But how can deacons respond globally to people who need our care and compassion? The Reformed



Third-five percent of Afghan children under five are malnourished, and one of four under the age of five dies.

Church in America offers two opportunities for global response.

The RCA's Office of Volunteer Services connects a volunteer—or a whole group of volunteers—to a specific site where particular skills are needed, sometimes around the corner and sometimes half a world away. Volunteer individuals and groups, in offering themselves in

service, also extend the Christian care and compassion of an entire congregation. And, like most ministries of service and outreach, volunteer work is rarely a one-way street; volunteers report a deepening of their own spiritual life and commitment, and that of their congregations, through their work.

Reformed Church World Service offers compassion and hope through worldwide emergency response and care. Recently, RCWS coordinator Betty Voskuil traveled to Afghanistan to witness firsthand how gifts sent by people in the RCA were being used. The

Reformed Church in America has sent \$191,000 to date to assist in rebuilding Afghanistan, virtually all of it given by individuals or congregations in the RCA.

Everywhere Voskuil went in Afghanistan, people said, "Please thank people in the RCA for not forgetting us. Thank you for caring for us in this difficult time of recovery and rehabilitation after twenty-three years of war." (Learn more about what RCWS is doing in Afghanistan at rcws.rca.org.)

Mercy, service, and outreach—that's the role of deacons. By volunteering your time and talents, or by supporting the work of Reformed Church World Service with your gifts, you can carry out this role. For more information on volunteer opportunities, call Mary Hondorp at 1-800-968-3943 or email her at volunteer@rca.org. To learn more about Reformed Church World Service, log on to the new website at rcws.rca.org, call 1-800-968-3943, or email Betty Voskuil at bvoskuil@rca.org.

"The board of deacons shall serve those in distress and need. The deacons shall minister to the sick, the poor, the hurt, and the helpless, shall aid the victims of the world's abuse, and shall express the social concerns of the church. They shall oversee and carry out their work as those concerned with the redemption of humankind. Their focus is turned toward service and ministry both to the world and in the church."

—*Book of Church Order*, Chapter 1, Part I, Article 6, Section 2

Update on RCWS Response in Iraq

RCWS recently sent \$10,000 in support of the "All Our Children" appeal issued by Church World Service (CWS). CWS reported that a shipment of 5.8 metric tons of laundry detergent and 5.5 metric tons of soap has been delivered for children in pediatric hospitals in Iraq. Two more shipments of medical supplies, wheelchairs, blankets, and bedding kits are en route. RCWS is requesting funds to support recovery efforts in Iraq. There is also a need for health and school kits. More information about all appeals for Iraq and the instructions for kit assembly can be found at the RCA website, rcws.rca.org.

The Health of a Congregation

Elders are called to “oversee the household of faith” (Book of Church Order, Chapter 1, Part I, Article 1, Section 8). That happens in many ways, in the context of a congregation’s particular needs and opportunities. Elder Mark Warner tells how Pompton Reformed Church in Pompton Lakes, New Jersey, through its elders, cares in specific ways for both the physical and the spiritual health of the congregation.

“Is any one of you in trouble? He should pray. Is anyone happy? Let him sing songs of praise. Is any one of you sick? He should call on the elders of the church to pray over him and anoint him with oil in the name of the Lord. And the prayer offered in faith will make the sick person well; the Lord will raise him up. If he has sinned, he will be forgiven” (James 5:13-15).

For several years the congregation at Pompton Reformed Church in Pompton Lakes, New Jersey, has prayerfully and joyfully celebrated a “healing service” to put the apostle James’s instructions into practice.

On the third Sunday of each month, our pastor invites anyone so moved to come forward to receive prayer, the laying on of hands, and anointing for themselves or on behalf of others. Our elders join the pastor, ensuring that all those who come forward have an elder to pray with them and lay on hands. The pastor, sometimes with the assistance of an elder, anoints each individual while offering additional prayer. In recent years we have also begun to encircle the entire congregation



with elders of the greater consistory so that the entire community of faith can be lifted up. This has become a touching symbol of how God’s ever-present love enfolds us.

I have participated in these services for many years, both up front and in the pews, and it always amazes me what a moving and powerful sense of loving Christian community we experience. For our congregation, this service has become a means of grace in which

the presence of the Holy Spirit is especially palpable. There is a solemn stillness as the entire church family is lifting up their brothers and sisters in prayer while softly singing what have become our traditional healing service hymns, “Spirit Song” and “There Is a Balm in Gilead.”

This is not hocus-pocus, nor is it a faith-healing service of the sort which understandably has many Christians uneasy. We fully recognize that it is infinitely more important to be made spiritually well than physically well. In Scripture, oil is associated with medicine (Luke 10:30-37) and serves as a symbol of the Spirit of God (1 Samuel 16:1-13). We pray, of course, that in all things God’s will be done. In many instances, we realize that physical healing is not a part of God’s plan.

This service we have come to treasure is simply a sacred gathering of believers in which we prayerfully share the burdens of our brothers and sisters, love and support them, and enjoy Christ’s healing presence among us.

In his book *Pastoral Care in Hospitals* (Morehouse, 1999), Neville A. Kirkwood shares his wisdom, gained as a hospital chaplain, on the art of visitation. He provides practical guidance for anyone who seeks to bring comfort and concern to the bedside of the sick or dying. His chapter on prayer is especially helpful in responding to the frequently asked questions “When should I pray?” and “How do I pray?” This resource is available through the RCA Distribution Center, orders@rca.org or 1-800-968-7221.

“The office of elder is one of servanthood and service representing Christ through the action of the Holy Spirit. In the local church, elders are chosen members of spiritual discernment, exemplary life, charitable spirit, and wisdom grounded in God’s Word. Elders, together with the installed minister/s serving under a call, are to have supervision of the church entrusted to them...thereby empowering all members to live out their Christian vocation in the world.”

—Book of Church Order, Chapter 1, Part I, Article 1, Section 8

Confessions of a Procrastinator

Karen Mulder is an elder at Hope Church (RCA) in Holland, Michigan. The following is taken from *The Compassionate Congregation: A Handbook for People Who Care (Faith Alive Christian Resources and Reformed Church Press, 2002)*, which Karen coauthored with Ginger Jurries. The *Compassionate Congregation* is available from the RCA Distribution Center, 1-800-968-7221 or orders@rca.org.

Like Moses resisting God's directive at the burning bush, I avoid, put off, and excuse myself from potentially unpleasant encounters with people in need. So I really don't know why I agreed to become a member of my church's pastoral care team. Sometimes I think God eases us into some situations without our full logical approval. Nevertheless, my first assignment as a member of the care team was to make contact with Joan. Joan had cancer.

Contacting Joan became a personal struggle. My archenemy, procrastination, successfully reigned for days. Finally "The Day" arrived, and I knew that I must do it—I *had* to phone Joan! So I set the timer on the microwave and promised myself that when the buzzer sounded I would make the call. I did, but not before offering what had to be the most urgent prayer of the month, if not the year. "O God," I prayed, "I don't know how to do this. I don't know what to say. What will I say if she starts crying, or if she is angry, or...Please, God, *help me!*" (Actually, I hoped that Joan was away at the grocery store, far from her phone.)

So with my heart beating aerobically, I dialed Joan's number and, as her phone started ringing, I started counting—one ring, two,

three. I had told myself that if Joan didn't answer in six rings I could hang up and try again another day, but she answered! I don't remember what *I* said, but I do remember what *she* said. She told me how much it hurt, not the cancer so much as the way her friends seemed to avoid her and disappear. "My friends don't call much anymore," she said, "and in the grocery store even acquaintances avoid me. That hurts a lot!"

Forty-five minutes later, I hung up the phone and whispered a heartfelt thanks to our faithful God. (The Lord says to each of us, "My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness"—2 Corinthians 12:9.) Joan had been very receptive to my call, and with only an occasional question or comment from me, she had shared her thoughts and her feelings. She had actually appreciated the phone call.

During the following twelve months I contacted Joan five times.

At the most, I offered five small and quick gestures of caring: maybe two phone calls, one plant, one visit to her home, and one visit to the hospital. That's it.

On September 5, 1988, Joan died. As I was pouring coffee at the reception following the funeral service, Joan's handsome sons gave me a big hug and thanked me for being such a good friend to their mom. I was speechless. I was tempted to say, "Oops, there's been a mistake here. I only offered your mom a few, quick tokens of caring."

Today, years later, the promise running through my book and caregiving workshops is this: *little* becomes *BIG*. Learning from experiences such as the one with Joan, we realize that our caregiving doesn't have to be polished and perfect and profound. God takes each sincere, small, and clumsy gesture of compassion and turns it into something big, bright, and beautiful (*The Compassionate Congregation*, pp. 8-9).

Five Steps for Caregiving

- Be inconvenienced.

If we are going to care for one another, we also must be willing to be inconvenienced, to change our plans, to tear up the day's urgent "to do" list, to choose to do the really important thing.

- Take a risk.

How would you rate your readiness to take a risk if necessary to care for someone else?

- Anticipate needs.

Ask yourself this question: What kind of help and caring would I need and appreciate if I were in her or his situation? Then, just do it!

- Practice.

Like the Good Samaritan, God will give you the peripheral vision to see, the sensitivity to care, and the love energy to stop and lend a helping hand to those who have fallen.

- Pray.

Pray this simple prayer: "Help me to realize that although I cannot do everything to alleviate the suffering in this world, I can do something. And even if that something is a very little thing, it is better than turning my head and walking away. Amen."

—*The Compassionate Congregation*, pp. 269-275