

Spring 2005

Reformed  
Church in  
America

# Called to Serve:

## Deacons and Elders Together

### Equipped to Serve

The responsibilities of elders and deacons—providing spiritual nurture and missional leadership for a congregation in a changing and challenging world—may seem overwhelming at times. This issue of *Called to Serve* focuses on practices and actions that every consistory, as a group or as individuals, can do to strengthen their calling, their actions, and their daily walk with God. Take a few moments to look inside this newsletter—and inside yourself—for how God might best equip you in your service as elder or deacon.

Visit the new RCA  
consistory website:  
[consistory.rca.org](http://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  
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# Called to Be a Deacon

## Leading by Example

by Betty Voskuil, RCA coordinator for diaconal ministries

The basin and towel remind us: our calling as deacons is to servant leadership. Using the ministry of Jesus Christ as a model, deacons provide leadership by helping the congregation to reach out, basin and towel in hand, to people in need.

I've recently witnessed several examples of this kind of ministry, both locally and globally—experiences that remind me of the sacred calling of deacons, and the innovative means by which deacons are answering that call.

In late February I accompanied a colleague to Florida to do an assessment of hurricane recovery efforts. As we traveled south along the path taken by Hurricane Charley, we were struck by the extent of the damage and how much rebuilding is still needed—three to five years' worth!—but also by the significant recovery efforts already accomplished. Staff at the ecumenical Storm Recovery Center in Lakeland, Florida, told us of the encouragement they have received from the RCA groups that have called to inquire about possible work assignments. And Margie, a 78-year-old woman whose home had just been rebuilt by a volunteer group from Meredith Drive Reformed Church in Des Moines, Iowa, told us, "You can't imagine how encouraging it has been to have these wonderful people come and do so much work on my home."

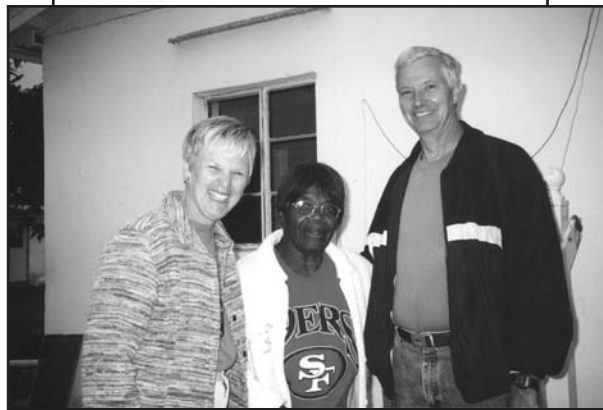
Colleagues returning from visits to Indonesia report tsunami survivors who are deeply traumatized grabbing on to hope wherever they can find it. One couple, now employed as staff at the Church World Service office in Indonesia, told of losing their four- and eight-year-old sons. "Maybe we can earn enough money to build a small house, and maybe we can have more children," they said. Encouraging people

who have lost so much to dream of new possibilities is part of taking the basin and the towel to every corner of the world; to that end, generous members of the RCA, through Reformed Church World Service, have already sent

homeless people. Giving locally in many places is down, sometimes dramatically, while requests for assistance are up. The director of one agency thanked me for helping share this story with the public. "It encourages us during these challenging times."

Recently I had the privilege of presenting a Basin and Towel award to the consistory of Trinity Reformed Church in Grand Rapids, Michigan, at a Synod of the Great Lakes leadership training event. This urban congregation is involved in a long litany of ministries of mercy, service, justice, and outreach. One of the consistory members commented how encouraging it was to receive the award.

So let's continue to provide servant leadership in the RCA by taking the basin and towel to wash the feet of those in need. In doing so, we are also living out the words of 1 Thessalonians 5:11: "Therefore encourage one another and build up each other, as indeed you are doing." A little encouragement goes a long way in building homes made of bricks, mortar, and stone, but also to lighten hearts in need of some cheer.



*Bruce and Laurie Hawley, RCA mutual mission facilitators, shown with Margie Neal in front of her home which was severely damaged by hurricanes and recently repaired by RCA volunteer mission groups*

\$425,000 for tsunami relief.

The basin and towel are also urgently needed at home. Amid stories of global generosity and service, I heard local hunger agencies describe the challenge today of meeting the needs of an increased number of hungry and

### What's a Deacon to Do?

Here are four ways you (or others, through your encouragement) can take up the basin and towel **this week**:

- **Contact a shut-in** from the congregation or community. Offer a card, a call, a visit—something to extend the love of Christ.
- **Write a note** of encouragement to someone else on the front lines of helping: your pastor, your custodian, someone laboring at a local nonprofit agency. Affirming their commitment and work will also strengthen their commitment and work.
- **Pray**—for the leadership of your church, for your community, for the world. Be specific. Naming others builds your connections and commitment to them.
- **Give a contribution.** Maybe \$5 is what you can afford this week; maybe it's \$500. Be intentional. How can you be a blessing financially for a group that's a blessing to others?

# Called to Be an Elder

## Transforming Grace

by Ellen Ratmeyer, manager for RCA Ministry Services

*“Men and women called to be agents of transformation must themselves be undergoing transformation...Here the offices of the church stand front stage center. Their first responsibility is not to train men and women for mission, but to communicate transforming grace that creates missional believers.”*  
—Paul R. Fries, *“Faithful Consistories: Office, Ministry, and Mission in the Reformed Church in America”*

The call to be an elder may be sudden or it may come gradually. It may be obvious or subtle, clear or murky, immediate or gradual. And it may come in the unlikelyst of places, as it did for me—on an airplane between Iowa and New Jersey.

I was weary, eager to get home—hardly in the mood to talk. Apparently, that wasn’t true of the man sitting next to me. He seemed to welcome an opportunity to talk about his experience as an elder delegate to the annual General Synod meeting of the Reformed Church in America. (Yes, I had been at the same meeting, as a staff member for the RCA.) Soon we were sharing stories of our lives in the church, and then more personal stories of transformational moments in our lives.

As we talked, I noticed that something in me was stirring. When I shared with him my desire to find a new church home, he described the congregation as “a place where grace happens” and invited me to **come and see** his church. His invitation reminded me of the story in John’s gospel about when Jesus was calling his disciples. When he saw them following, he said to them, “What are you looking for?...Come and see” (John 1:38-39).

There’s obviously a lot more to my story, but that plane ride is still for me an important moment on my journey. Not only did I respond to the invitation to **“come and see”** a particular congrega-

tion, but there I was also nurtured in my faith and called to be an elder. The “transforming grace” shared with me on that plane became a transforming moment in my life!

My call to be an elder started me on a journey with the elders who have gone before me. My guides have been pastors, other elders and deacons, and all the other people of the church. Now I have the opportunity to respond to your request for more resources and training to support your ministry as elders. RCA Ministry Services is joining hands with regional synods to cosponsor training events for elders. These workshops, called “A Day for Elders,” invite pastors and elders to **“come and see”** ways we can sharpen our ministry focus and encourage each other to develop new skills and stimulate new ministry concepts. It is unlikely that all your questions will be answered, but hopefully together we will more fully live into our call to “communicate transforming grace.”

*For more information about resources and training for elders, con-*

*tact Ellen Ratmeyer at (212) 870-2957 or [eratmeyer@rca.org](mailto:eratmeyer@rca.org).*

### What Next?

I was filled with questions about what it means to be an elder in the church today. I was most helped by making intentional space to listen for God. How are you aware of God’s continuing call in your life? What actions might you take to nurture faith for others whom God may be calling to be an elder? Here are four options you can explore individually or together, as a board of elders:

- **Share** your own sense of God’s call in your life—with family members, with a small group, with other elders. Telling the story of your journey and call invites others to listen for God in their own lives.
- **Pray** for those in your congregation who may have a call to become an elder, deacon, or minister of Word and sacrament.
- **Study** *Hearing God’s Call: Ways of Discernment for Laity and Clergy*, by Ben Campbell Johnson, or *Listening to God: Spiritual Formation in Congregations*, by John Ackerman.
- **Use** the resource “Every Christian—Called by God, Gifted for Ministry” ([www.rca.org/disciples/spiritgifts](http://www.rca.org/disciples/spiritgifts)), which introduces the concept of spiritual gifts and includes an implementation guide.

—Ellen Ratmeyer

### Points for reflection and discussion in an elders’ meeting:

“Thus through the offices of minister of Word and sacrament, elder and deacons, Christ communicates life-transforming grace and instructs the people of God in the ways of God” (“Faithful Consistories”).

- What unique gifts has God given you for loving and serving God’s people in your church?
- How has your life experience honored these gifts?
- Consider all that you are doing now. How is God calling you to use your gifts in new ways?

## All By Myself?

by Jeff Japinga, minister for education and faith development

The conversation was direct, urgent, passionate—and quickly spiraling downhill. Who could have known that a simple question about next year's budget for Sunday school curriculum would turn into a broad discussion—well, actually, an argument by now—about how and why this congregation might or might not be going down the tubes?

Sound familiar?

Every week, RCA consistories find themselves in important conversations about the current and future ministries of their congregations. Sometimes those conversations go very well, uncovering new callings and new means by which to share the gospel message of Jesus Christ with the community. Other times, like that evening when an innocent question of curriculum budget quickly turned into a consistory fight, the conversation goes very badly.

The difference between very well and very badly, report elders and deacons from across the Reformed Church in America, is often a matter of perspective and information. Consistories that consistently take time outside of their normal business to look at their role—and equip themselves to carry it out—are consistories that consistently are the most effective in the spiritual leadership of the congregation. That's not my conclusion; it's the conclusion of elders and deacons who have stepped outside the consistory room of their own congregations and into places of learning and challenge. Here, for example, in their own words, are reflections of participants at "Called to Lead Christ's Church: Leading Learning Adults," a one-day gathering of consistory members in the Regional Synod of

Albany in March:

- "I was looking for some ways to become more equipped to serve on consistory at my church. I feel I was enriched!"
- "I feel better equipped for the challenge of being an elder. I have a better idea of resources that are available."



*Beverly Feindt, an elder from Interlaken, New York, was one of 130 Albany Synod consistory members who came together on a snowy March weekend to learn and grow.*

- "I view it as one more step in my faith journey and will seek to apply this experience to my everyday life."
- "I always enjoy the opportunity to get to see people from around the synod, hear a good speaker, and get new ideas from workshops."
- "This event gives me the nourishment I need to continue as part of the body of Christ. I wish there were more..."

"We try to feed elders and deacons spiritually and intellectually and physically," says Phyllis Palsma, the Albany Synod staff person who coordinated the event. "If a consistory can do its work in a healthy manner, that will permeate the entire congregation."

Opportunities for consistory learning and equipping continue to grow and expand. The Regional Synod of the Great Lakes saw the number of churches attending their annual equipping grow by more than 50 percent this year; they've already scheduled next year's event for February 25, 2006. Central Iowa Classis gathered its deacons in January; so did Southwest Michigan. Your consistory can do so as well, even if there's not an organized gathering in your classis or regional synod. Here are four ways:

- **Use materials** on the RCA consistory website, <http://consistory.rca.org>. There is already a variety of resources for elders or deacons. Soon to be added is a series of case studies that will guide consistories in discussions of key issues.
- **Invite an outside speaker.** Every community has key leaders who can challenge people's thinking and increase their skills. Engage a local human resources professional, teacher, or business leader, or the mayor; find out what key learnings have helped them, and see how they might help you.
- **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?

It's all too easy to see your challenges as simply your own. According to one elder from Michigan—in his own words—"I learned I'm not all by myself."