Introduction

As a lay leader in your church you are empowered to minister alongside your pastor(s) and other lay leaders in a collegial framework that furthers Christ’s mission on earth. That simply means that ministry isn’t the prerogative of the ordained minister of Word and sacrament but a responsibility that we all can and must share as the priesthood of believers (1 Peter 2:9). “Then [Jesus] said to his disciples, ‘The harvest is plentiful but the workers are few. Ask the Lord of the harvest, therefore, to send out workers into his harvest field’” (Matthew 9:37-38, NIV). The RCA Consistory Empowerment Team was established to motivate and encourage lay leaders to develop and use their gifts as ministry partners with all those whom God has called to share in the harvest. Our vision for healthy congregations establishes a blueprint for lay participation in ministry.

An Ideal Vision for Healthy Congregations

In Healthy Congregations, Ministry Isn’t Left to the Minister!

- Dynamic ministry is accomplished through implementing God’s call for each person’s life.
- Vibrant Spirit-filled leaders require a deep reliance on the Bible, to walk with Christ, and to truly love all.
- Leaders in flourishing congregations cultivate an environment of honesty, trust, and mutually beneficial relationships.

Because these three principles are vital to healthy congregations, the Consistory Empowerment Team advocates for the assessment of spiritual gifts, leadership training, and the use of leadership resources.

It is our hope that the following leadership devotions developed on the above principles will energize, motivate and enable you to live out God’s call in your life: to walk with Christ, partner with him in mission, and shape strong, lasting relationships that build God-pleasing communities of faith. Use these resources individually, in small groups or as full consistory devotions. They can be easily shortened or lengthened to suit your available timeframe.

May God bless you,

Bart Strong
Consistory Empowerment Team
Reformed Church in America
January
What Gifts!
Andrea L. Baker


The Story of the Raising of Sister Sunshine

The nine members of the consistory met for the call meeting. Deacon Discernment declared, “Something is wrong with Sister Sunshine, the light of our congregation who can cheer up anyone. She still smiles but it’s not as bright as always. I spoke with her and she shared that she has to have surgery and would need four weeks of recovery, but because she lives alone she doesn’t know how she will make it through. I told her that as people of God we could and would do something to help.”

Elder Administrator immediately chimed in, “Let’s put a plan of action together so that we and other members of the congregation can each contribute to helping her through this time of need.”

Elder Service said, “I can cook meals for her during her recovery.”

Deacon Giving said, “I will donate the funds needed to buy the supplies. This must be the reason God recently blessed me with an unexpected gift.”

“I can pick her up and bring her to my home for dinner a couple of times so that she can get out of the house. We live only a few blocks apart,” said Elder Hospitality, a nurse, who knew that exercise would be important to a speedy recovery.

Deacons Artistry and Writing both spoke at the same time, causing the rest of the consistory to look heavenward. It was widely known that though they were completely opposite in personality they seemed to receive similar divine inspiration at the same time. “We will create a card with art and words depicting Romans 12:1-13 so that she can be encouraged, and the congregation can sign it.”

Elder Intercession promptly pulled out the iPad and programmed Sister Sunshine’s name into the prayer calendar.

Minister Pastor smiled and said, “This is the body of Christ in action. What a blessing.”

Five weeks later Sister Sunshine, her face glowing, rose from her seat in the pew to give her testimony. She expressed her praise and thanks to God for providing such a caring body that helped bring her through a difficult time, further deepening her faith, trust, and love in him. “I am back to use my gift even more for God’s glory,” she said.

In our Bible reading, Paul speaks to the Romans of the early church about the importance of working together, using the spiritual gifts that they possess to build up and benefit the body of Christ. The members of the church in Corinth were equally curious about spiritual gifts and
questioned Paul about them as well (1 Corinthians 12:1-11). Spiritual gifts are given to God’s people by the Holy Spirit for the good of the body of Christ.

Today, we share with our fellow believers of the early church this same curiosity about spiritual gifts—what are they and how do we use them in our lives to the glory of God? He sent each of us into the world on a specific mission, equipping us, through the Holy Spirit, with these specialized gifts to persist and do it well. However, he knew that we would need each other to accomplish this, so we need to figure out how to fit the gifts together to make it work. Therefore, what are your spiritual gifts? Often, I believe that we are aware of what our gifts are but sometimes do not trust the leading of the Spirit, or we doubt we got it right, or we allow others to lead us away from what we know is true. Let us look at the gifts that we have been given and how we are asked to use them.

**Trust the leading of the Holy Spirit, carefully examine and meditate on the following list of spiritual gifts.**

**Administration**: the gift that enables a believer to formulate, direct, and carry out plans necessary to fulfill a purpose.

**Artistry**: the gift that gives the believer the skill of creating artistic expressions that produce a spiritual response of strength and inspiration.

**Discernment**: the gift that motivates a believer to seek God’s will and purpose and apply that understanding to individual and congregational situations.

**Evangelism**: the gift that moves believers to reach nonbelievers in such a way that they are baptized and become active members of the Christian community.

**Exhortation**: the gift that moves the believer to reach out with Christian love and presence to people in personal conflict or facing a spiritual void.

**Faith**: the gift that gives a believer the eyes to see the Spirit at work and the ability to trust the Spirit’s leading without indication of where it all might lead.

**Giving**: the gift that enables a believer to recognize God’s blessings and to respond to those blessings by generously and sacrificially giving of her or his resources (time, talent, and treasure).

**Hospitality**: the gift that causes a believer to joyfully welcome and receive guests and those in need of food and lodging.

**Intercession**: the gift that enables a believer to pray with the certainty that prayer is heard and when requests are made, answers will come.

**Knowledge**: the gift that drives a person to learn, analyze, and uncover new insights with regard to the Bible and faith.

**Leadership**: the gift that gives a believer the confidence to step forward, give direction, and provide motivation to fulfill a dream or complete a task.
Mercy: the gift that motivates a believer to feel deeply for those in physical, spiritual, or emotional need and then act to meet that need.

Music—Vocal: the gift that gives a believer the capability and opportunity to present personal witness and inspiration to others through singing.

Music—Instrumental: the gift that inspires a believer to express personal faith and provide inspiration and comfort through the playing of a musical instrument.

Pastoring (Shepherding): the gift that gives a believer the confidence, capability, and compassion to provide spiritual leadership and direction for individuals or groups of believers.

Service (Helps): the gift that enables a believer to work gladly behind the scenes in order that God's work is fulfilled.

Skilled Craft: the gift that enables a believer to create, build, maintain, or repair items used within the church.

Teaching: the gift that enables a believer to communicate a personal understanding of the Bible and faith in such a way that it becomes clear and understood by others.

Wisdom: the gift that allows the believer to sort through opinions, facts, and thoughts in order to determine what solution would be best for the individual believer or the community of believers.

Writing: the gift that gives a believer the ability to express truth in a written form; a form that can edify, instruct, and strengthen the community of believers.

(Adapted from “Finding Your Spiritual Gifts,” by Neal Boese and Patricia Haller. Produced by the Division for Congregational Ministries, ELCA.)

For Discussion:

1. Which spiritual gift do you identify with the most? Did it provide a confirmation for you or were you surprised by what you learned?

2. Which spiritual gift do you identify in your fellow consistory member? Was it a confirmation or a surprise for them?

3. Why do you think God has gathered your group as a consistory together at this time with your particular spiritual gifts? What do you think he wants you to accomplish together?

“In his grace, God has given us different gifts for doing certain things well…” (Roman 12:6, NLT).

“Spiritual gifts are the power of the Holy Spirit flowing through you to impact others.” ~Unknown
Further Study

It is not enough just to know what your spiritual gifts are. It is also important to use them for their intended purpose. Many online resources to help assess spiritual gifts and how to implement those gifts as part of the consistory's and congregation's call are available at www.rca.org/spiritualgifts.
February

Are You Being a Believable Witness?

Curt Patterson

In 2004 I was clearly given the biblical mandate below to go along with my life. It changed my daily calling; maybe it could propel you forward also.

*My counsel for you is simple and straightforward: Just go ahead with what you’ve been given. You received Christ Jesus, the Master; now live him. You’re deeply rooted in him. You’re well constructed upon him. You know your way around the faith. Now do what you’ve been taught. School’s out; quit studying the subject and start living it! And let your living spill over into thanksgiving.*

*Colossians 2:6-7, The Message*

What stands out to you in these words from Paul? As a Christ follower, as a shining light in the kingdom of God, are you implementing these words daily? If so, where? If not, what is holding you back? Paul calls us to live out the light that is within us where we are, daily. There are no special circumstances. There is not a better day or time. Let’s not compromise our call and be reluctant.

A young follower, Ben Patterson, writes in his blog a message clearly from God about drifting along unintentionally:

**BEING COMPROMISED AS A WITNESS FOR GOD**

Posted by Ben Patterson. Used with his permission.

Some people drift through life, letting their surroundings determine their choices. Lot was this kind of guy. Check out Genesis 19 when he has to get out of Sodom, the city he was living in at the time.

*Genesis 19:14-16 (NLT):*

So Lot rushed out to tell his daughters’ fiancés, “Quick, get out of the city! The Lord is about to destroy it.” But the young men thought he was only joking. At dawn the next morning the angels became insistent. “Hurry,” they said to Lot. “Take your wife and your two daughters who are here. Get out right now, or you will be swept away in the destruction of the city!”

When Lot still hesitated, the angels seized his hand and the hands of his wife and two daughters and rushed them to safety outside the city, for the Lord was merciful. Lot had been living so long and content with ungodly people that he was no longer a believable witness for God. He had allowed the environment to shape him instead of shaping his environment.

That was me during my freshman year of college, totally shaped by the environment. I let new friends and a new town trick me into thinking I had a “new start.” I was choosing the easy road and only thinking of myself.
When I finally realized the path I was on was the crooked one I tried to speak against it but my message fell on deaf ears. Nobody wanted my “good news.”

Have you ever become useless to God because you are too much like your environment? To make a difference, you must first decide to be different in your faith and in your conduct. God wants us to do more than drift through life, he wants us to be an influence for him.

For discussion:

1. How are you being an influence for Christ?

2. How is your leadership board being an influence for Christ with each other and the body of Christ?

3. How is your body of Christ being an influence in your community?
When I came to you, brothers, I did not come with eloquence or superior wisdom as I proclaimed to you the testimony about God. For I resolved to know nothing while I was with you except Jesus Christ and him crucified. I came to you in weakness and fear, and with much trembling. My message and my preaching were not with wise and persuasive words, but with a demonstration of the Spirit's power, so that your faith might not rest on men's wisdom, but on God's power.

1 Corinthians 2:1–5, NIV (1984)

While Paul was in Ephesus he wrote to the church that he had started in Corinth. He addressed a number of problems that the Corinthian church had encountered in his absence. In his letters he strove for obedience, unity, humility, and love in the church. He had come to Corinth in weakness and fear and much trembling. He admits that he was not very wise and not a powerful, persuasive preacher, but with the Spirit's help he confronted his fears, overcame his shortcomings, and focused on the main thing: Jesus Christ and him crucified.

Fear can be a powerful motivator but it can also cause paralysis. In the church it often paralyzes us into complacency or an inability to take action. There are many different fears that can stop us from doing what is right or from growing spiritually. The fear of confrontation, of being unpopular, of expressing anger, being wrong, being the sole dissenting voice, speaking out, bearing bad news, being unprepared, showing a lack of wisdom or knowledge, losing friends, gaining enemies, public speaking, public praying, losing members, evangelizing, giving your testimony…

We often spend more time justifying our inaction than actually facing and doing what we fear most, even when we know it is right. In a leadership environment of honesty, trust, and mutually respectful relationships we need to discuss and confront our fears openly and find respectful ways that we can collaboratively deal with fear and anxiety so that we can be the leaders that God called us to be. It might surprise you to know that you are not alone with your fears. Many of your colleagues around the table likely have the same anxieties, but in order to overcome them you need to do as Paul did, focus first on Jesus Christ and him crucified.

For discussion:

1. Why do you think Paul came to Corinth in fear?

2. Read 1 Corinthians 1:18-24. How does this passage help you understand Paul's fears and the way he deals with them?
3. What are your greatest fears as a leader in the church?

4. How will you deal with them?
April

Lifelong Learning Is Essential

Bart Strong

Therefore, dear friends, since you already know this, be on your guard so that you may not be carried away by the error of lawless men and fall from your secure position. But grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. To him be glory both now and forever! Amen.


Peter starts chapter three of his second letter by reminding the followers of Christ that his two letters are meant to stimulate them to wholesome thinking. Two of the themes he uses to support this point are spiritual awareness and spiritual growth.

First, his love for the believers was so great that Peter was constantly concerned for their spiritual welfare, especially when he foresaw the danger that others might influence them to stumble and fall. For this reason he warned his readers to be spiritually alert and on their guard. Second, he recommended a focus on spiritual growth. Earlier, in chapter 1:3-11 Peter emphasized how important it was for the believers to make every effort to confirm their calling by living a godly life through participation in Christ's divine nature: “for if you do this, you will never stumble” (v. 10, NRSV). Now in chapter three it is apparent that not only will spiritual growth guard against stumbling but guarding against stumbling will also make a safe space for growth. Thus the two main themes of Second Peter are inextricably intertwined: 1) watching out for subversive and false teachers who can undermine the security and hope that is ours in Jesus Christ and 2) growing in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior.

I don’t know about you but my growth in grace and knowledge is sometimes very sporadic. I have difficulty determining if I’m growing unless I look back incrementally to clarify where I came from and how I got to where I am now. There’s no chart on the wall to measure my growth! Sometimes others can see my outward growth but they don’t see me on the inside. Only God holds that measuring stick. It’s been said that growth in grace and knowledge is made known by an increase in love, an increase in faith, an increase of the knowledge of God, and an increase in the fruit of the Spirit. Let us challenge one another as leaders in the church to be on our guard against stumbling and to live godly lives through Christ by immersing ourselves in the Word so that we may grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. To God be the glory! Amen.

Frederick William Robertson once wrote:

“It is not the number of books you read, nor the variety of sermons you hear, nor the amount of religious conversation in which you mix, but it is the frequency and earnestness with which you meditate on these things until the truth in them becomes your own and part of your being, that ensures your growth.”
For discussion:

1. As you look at your own life over the last five years can you see an increase in love, faith, knowledge of God, and fruit of the Spirit? What can you do about it? Take this home with you!

2. As you look at your church over the last 5 years can you see an increase in love, faith, knowledge of God and fruit of the spirit? What can you, as leaders in the church, do about it?
Then [God] said to me, “Prophesy to the breath, prophesy, mortal, and say to the breath: Thus says the Lord God: Come from the four winds, O breath, and breathe upon these slain, that they may live.” I prophesied as he commanded me, and the breath came into them, and they lived, and stood on their feet, a vast multitude.

Ezekiel 37:9-10

When the day of Pentecost had come, they were all together in one place. And suddenly from heaven there came a sound like the rush of a violent wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting. Divided tongues, as of fire, appeared among them, and a tongue rested on each of them. All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability. Now there were devout Jews from every nation under heaven living in Jerusalem. And at this sound the crowd gathered and was bewildered, because each one heard them speaking in the native language of each.

Acts 2:1-6

Breath: We all need it to live, in the literal sense. Even fire needs “breath”—no oxygen, no flame. The breath of God: in the words of one venerable hymn, it fills us with life anew and sends us off with a renewed desire to do God’s work in the world. It is unlikely that our call from God is as visceral as the ones chronicled in these passages from Ezekiel and Acts, though the Spirit works in manifold ways to reach us. But if we are leaders in a congregation, we probably know that we are called to do God’s work.

The Bible gives us ample testimony to the potential power of God’s call to us to do ministry. But walking with Christ means serving the world, not ruling it as if we were kings. Ezekiel’s prophesying to the Jews in exile was an act of love, and acts of love have a remarkable way of breathing life into some of the driest of bones. The followers of Jesus at Pentecost talked to other Jews in their own languages. Those few have been followed by innumerable Christians who understand that talking to others in language they understand is a gift of those who would serve—and one of our best ways of following Jesus. In this month as we move into Pentecost, let us think about how to breathe life into our own ministries and congregations.

For discussion:

1. Read the complete passages on the Valley of the Dry Bones (Ezekiel 37:1-14) and Pentecost (Acts 2:1-21). Have you felt or seen the power of God to change lives as the Bible testifies that they were changed in these passages?
2. In your work as a leader or member of your church, have you ever felt like you were called to do the impossible—to resuscitate dry bones? What might these passages tell you about how to start?

3. How can you and others in ministry breathe life into your work together in your church and your collective ministries outside your church walls?
When Jesus had called the Twelve together, he gave them power and authority to drive out all demons and to cure diseases, and he sent them out to preach the kingdom of God and to heal the sick. He told them: “Take nothing for the journey—no staff, no bag, no bread, no money, no extra tunic. Whatever house you enter, stay there until you leave that town. If people do not welcome you, shake the dust off your feet when you leave their town, as a testimony against them.” So they set out and went from village to village, preaching the gospel and healing people everywhere.

Luke 9:1-6, NIV

Luke 8 tells us that the twelve were with Jesus as he travelled about from one town and village to another proclaiming the good news of the kingdom of God. What an incredible opportunity that would have been for the disciples to watch and learn from the master. When Jesus judged the time to be right he called the twelve together and empowered them to preach the kingdom of God and heal the sick. The students were on their own now! Class was dismissed! Luke 9 tells us that Jesus gave the disciples final instructions before they set out and went from village to village preaching the gospel and healing people everywhere. What must it have felt like to receive that kind of power and authority directly from Christ? I can only imagine what the disciples might have been thinking. Our power and authority as lay leaders in the church also comes from Jesus Christ! How is that possible?

As the head of his church Jesus empowers us as he empowered his disciples to watch and learn, then to train and equip others to do ministry. The Book of Church Order defines the offices of minister, elder, and deacon as offices of servanthood and service representing Christ through the action of the Holy Spirit. Natural Church Development suggests that “Empowering Leadership is lay and clergy leadership that support, mentor and encourage the leadership of others.” As a servant of Christ and leader in the church you are empowered to partner with him in fulfilling his mission as the disciples did and to utilize the gifts that have been given to you to their utmost and to his glory.

For discussion:

1. How have you personally been empowered by Jesus?

2. How do you as church leaders recruit and develop new leaders rather than just new followers?

3. How do you as church leaders encourage and support change, even change that diminishes your authority or importance?
4. How are your church leaders more like spiritual leaders rather than organizational or business leaders?”

* Questions 2-4 are from Natural Church Development: A Guide to Eight Essential Qualities of Healthy Churches, by Christian Schwarz (Churchsmart Resources, 1996).
Read 1 Peter 4:8–11.

"Dear Christian, your mission, should you decide to accept it…"

If you have ever watched a television episode of the *Mission: Impossible* series you will know that this is an adaptation of the opening line to the lead agent of the M.I. team. They would then execute undercover operations to achieve the mission. Each member of the team had a particular skill that was absolutely vital to the success of the mission. They constantly practiced and honed their skills so that they were prepared whenever they were called into service. This preparation enabled them to accept these impossible missions even with the premise that they would be disavowed if they were caught.

What about your consistory team? Would you be ready if God spoke this mission call to you? Believe it or not, He already has. In our reading Peter says God has given everyone spiritual gifts and asks that they use them to serve others well. There are many examples in the Bible of people using their gifts to accomplish missions on his behalf. The wonderful thing is that he was always with them and they never had to go on a mission alone, unless they chose to and oftentimes that was not a wise decision. Those agents, who accepted the call, helped the establishment, growth, and spread of the Christian faith. The question is will you accept or decline the mission to further the cause of the kingdom? What will you need to accomplish the mission? First, you will need to know and understand your gift; second, train and practice for the mission, and, third, put the training into action. Once you have accomplished that mission; repeat the process again. The consistory, like the Mission: Impossible team, is being called by God to use their particular gifts to fulfill goals where he has placed them.

Let us look at two such agents who, when called by God, accepted and accomplished their mission: Joshua, Son of Nun; and Mary Magdalene. They used their spiritual gifts to serve others well. Joshua, Son of Nun, possessed the gift of leadership. It is the confidence to step forward, give direction according to God’s purpose, and provide motivation for people to work together to fulfill a dream or complete a task or goal. God made it possible for Joshua to fulfill his mission by showing him poor leadership (the Pharaohs) and good leadership (Moses) during his days as a slave. He observed Moses’ strength as he led the children of Israel out of the Egypt, his patience as he listened to them complain along the journey, and his failure when he went against God’s direction. He developed humility and a reliance on God when he saw the plagues, the parting of the Red Sea, and the pillars of cloud and fire that guided the people of Israel through the wilderness. He was trusted by his tribe, Ephraim, to be their representative when the twelve spies were sent into the land of Canaan. He showed leadership when he reported back that it was possible for the Israelites to defeat their enemies. He was mentored by Moses while serving as his trusted aide and eventually completed Moses’ mission of leading the Israelites into the promised land. Whenever he led his army into battle his leadership was guided by God, and the one time he chose to do it on his own he met with defeat. He led the army around the walls of Jericho in
obedience to God, conquering the city when the walls fell. Joshua, told by God to “be strong and courageous” activated his gift through his many experiences. He had the confidence (guided by the Spirit) to step forward and give direction and provide motivation to lead the children of Israel into the Promised Land. He became a remarkable leader by using his gift while leaning on God.

Mary Magdalene possessed the gift of faith, which is a special conviction to be firmly persuaded of God’s power and promises to accomplish his will and purpose and to display such a confidence in Him and His Word that circumstances and obstacles do not shake that conviction. Her journey to activating her gift of faith began when Jesus delivered her from the seven demons. Mary had experienced the worst under those demons and now was experiencing the best in the company of Christ, leaving everything to follow him through the remainder of his walk on Earth. She came from the wealthy city of Magdala and used her considerable resources to help sustain Jesus’ ministry. Her faith was fundamental to her mission of walking with Jesus, especially as a (single) woman in biblical times who suffered indignities in that society under the cruel rule of the Romans. She was at the foot of the cross when all the apostles had deserted him. Her deep faith in and closeness to Christ has sullied her reputation down through the centuries, but Jesus made sure that she would be remembered positively by choosing her to be the one who announced to the apostles and therefore to the world that he had risen from the dead. Mary deeply and wholeheartedly believed Jesus when he said that he would rise from the grave. Her faith made her a convincing messenger to the apostles when she told them about the empty tomb. It is not hard to believe that Mary was one of the disciples in the upper room waiting for the Comforter to arrive. Mary’s faith helped her witness to others and encourage them in those radical times during and after Jesus’ earthly walk. The “People of the Way” were blessed by this vivid example of the gift of faith in action and persisted in building and spreading the Word of God.

We, as children of God, will be attacked and our work discredited when we activate our gifts for the building of the kingdom of God. But unlike the agents on the Mission: Impossible team, we have the Lord God Almighty who will never leave us and will acknowledge that he sent us on this “mission possible.” How are you preparing for your mission?

For discussion:

1. Have you recognized and accepted that you have been given at least one spiritual gift that is vital to the successful mission for Jesus Christ? Do you know your spiritual gift?

2. How will you as a consistory develop your spiritual gifts? What resources will you commit to this development?

3. Once you have developed your gifts, how will you put them into practice as a consistory? What actions will you take to make this possible? How do you envision sharing this with your congregation?

God has given each of you a gift from his great variety of spiritual gifts. Use them well to serve one another.
1 Peter 4:10, NLT

Activate your gift to accomplish God’s mission.
Are we beginning to commend ourselves again? Or do we need, like some people, letters of recommendation to you or from you? You yourselves are our letter, written on our hearts, known and read by everyone. You show that you are a letter from Christ, the result of our ministry, written not with ink but with the Spirit of the living God, not on tablets of stone but on tablets of human hearts. Such confidence we have through Christ before God. Not that we are competent in ourselves to claim anything for ourselves, but our competence comes from God. He has made us competent as ministers of a new covenant—not of the letter but of the Spirit; for the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life.

2 Corinthians 3:1-6, NIV

Sometimes being in leadership is hard. Paul experienced that with the church in Corinth. He seemed to no sooner get one problem dealt with and two more popped up…sound familiar? Paul was forced to finally defend his authority and challenge and direct the leadership in the Corinthian church. He was battling their human desire to follow false teachers and had to bring them back from their tendency to fall away from the truth. In spite of that, Paul saw these people as “Letters from Christ.” Because Paul was a vibrant Spirit-filled leader, the Spirit worked through him to change their lives. Paul was humble before God and realized that he and the church could not claim to be adequate or competent without the Spirit.

How often do we find our churches in a similar place as the Corinthian church? As leaders, it is so easy to let the exercise of authority turn into the exercise of power. We let our focus be turned away from the Spirit’s leading and rely on ourselves to accomplish what we determine to be done. I doubt any of us have stories to tell of great success for the kingdom when we have relied on our own direction. That’s when we need to hear again that we are not the Author but the ink. Paul tells the Corinthians, “You yourselves are our letter.” We have to come back to a reliance on the Spirit’s leading and let God write our letter. As leaders we need to realize our total need and dependence on the Spirit’s work in and through our lives.

On the page of my Bible next to these verses in 2 Corinthians, I have written “Faith + Grace = Salvation.” How simple. Why do we tend to muddy things up? The Message Bible says, “The plan wasn’t written out with ink on paper, with pages and pages of legal footnotes, killing your spirit. It’s written with Spirit on spirit, his life on our lives!” All we need to do is reflect Christ and the evidence of God’s Spirit and power will be seen in our lives and the lives of our congregations.

For discussion:

1. What issues is your congregation or leadership dealing with that turn your attention off of the Spirit’s leading?
2. How are you using your authority in those situations like Paul had to with the church in Corinth to bring it back into alignment with the Spirit?

3. How do you see Christ and the Holy Spirit reflected in your congregation?
If the whole body were an eye, where would the sense of hearing be? If the whole body were an ear, where would the sense of smell be? But in fact God has placed the parts in the body, every one of them, just as he wanted them to be. If they were all one part, where would the body be? As it is, there are many parts, but one body.

1 Corinthians 12:17-20, NIV

Sarah is a meanderer. She walks slowly. She stops to smell the roses. She sees enjoying and appreciating God’s creation as a way to honor God. Melissa is driven. She walks so fast she’s almost at an angle. She sees moving with purpose to finish her task as a way to honor God.

Who is right, Sarah or Melissa? Who is honoring God? Could both of them be right? Perhaps God created Sarah and Melissa differently, and perhaps they both honor God in their actions—in being who God created them to be.

We believe that elders and deacons are called by God to serve in those roles and that you have a responsibility to work together as a team to lead your church. And I bet some of you are different. Some of you may even have trouble working together, just like Sarah and Melissa might have trouble finding a comfortable walking pace together. So who is right? You or the person you struggle to work with? Maybe you’re both right. Maybe you’re simply different.

One of the secrets of working together as a powerful team is to understand yourself and to understand those you are working with. God created us differently and uses us differently. We all have individual strengths, weaknesses, and passions, and we’re all broken by sin in some way. If you can learn to understand and love each other on consistory, you have already made incredible progress toward becoming a powerful team.

The strongest consistory teams are those that understand each other and build their committees and teams based on that understanding. That will allow you to maximize the gifts and passions God has given you to do his work.

For discussion:

1. Who did God create you to be? What are some of your strengths and weaknesses? What are you especially passionate about?

2. Are you using your strengths and passions to their fullest in your role on consistory?

3. How might you as a consistory become stronger together? How might you realign to live into your God-ordained role and to lead your church into the future God has for it?
October

Fire

Curt Patterson

The following is a poem by Judy Brown that is used in the Vantage Point 3 materials currently being used by many RCA congregations. If you are looking for great spiritual growth that really changes a person from the inside out, consider using the Emerging Journey process from Vantage Point 3. It will create a healthy change in your congregation.

Read the poem aloud three times. Allow different people to read each time. Listen and ask, what stands out to you?

Fire

What makes a fire burn
is space between the logs,
a breathing space.
Too much of a good thing,
too many logs
packed in too tight
can douse the flames
almost as surely
as a pail of water.

So building first
requires attention
to the spaces in between,
as much as to the wood.

When we are able to build
open spaces
in the same way
we have learned
to pile on logs,
then we come to see how
it is fuel, and the absence of fuel
together, that make fire possible.

We only need to lay a log
lightly from time to time.
A fire grows
simply because the space is there,
with openings
in which the flame
that knows just how it wants to burn
can find its way.
Rejoice always, pray continually, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is God’s will for you in Christ Jesus. Do not quench the Spirit. Do not treat prophecies with contempt but test them all; hold on to what is good, reject every kind of evil. May God himself, the God of peace, sanctify you through and through. May your whole spirit, soul and body be kept blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. The one who calls you is faithful, and he will do it.

1 Thessalonians 5:16-24, NIV

As Christians we should live always with a thankful heart, but sometimes—like the church in Thessalonica—we need to be reminded of that and have it put before us again and again. Often when you are in leadership positions in a church, you see the underbelly and the politics of it and can easily get discouraged. The devil can get a foothold at those times and cloud our vision with despair and a sense of defeat. There are times in all churches when those valleys come but even in those experiences, Paul tells us to give thanks in all circumstances, knowing we have not fallen out of God’s will for us. The Message Bible phrases it, “Thank God no matter what happens.” That means in our wonderfully awesome times as a church and those times that we have struggles and frustrations.

When we have the confidence that the One who called us is completely dependable (faithful) we know that his Spirit will lead us on the path that he desires us to travel. In both the mountaintop and the valley times and all the times in between, you, as leaders, have to hold on to that confidence boldly. Listen for and follow the Spirit’s leading. Rely on his Word and his promises. Uphold each other in prayer and love each other and your congregation…even those who are not easily lovable. Choose to be thankful. A congregation is going to mirror its leadership. If you as leaders live in the expectancy of God’s faithfulness and are willing to be led by the Holy Spirit’s guidance, your congregation will live in that same expectancy. That is when you can be used as a church for the advancement of the kingdom in ways you never thought possible.

For discussion:

1. Where do you see your church right now? On a mountaintop, in a valley, or somewhere in between?

2. What can you be thankful for in the current experience of your congregation?

3. Where do you see the Spirit’s leading in your congregation and the life of your church?
And Mary said, “My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, for he has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant. Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed; for the Mighty One has done great things for me, and holy is his name. His mercy is for those who fear him from generation to generation. He has shown strength with his arm; he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts. He has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly; he has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty. He has helped his servant Israel, in remembrance of his mercy, according to the promise he made to our ancestors, to Abraham and to his descendants forever.”

Luke 1:46-55

This powerful passage, the Magnificat of Mary, is spoken during an extended visit between Mary, mother of Jesus, and her relative, Elizabeth, mother of John the Baptist. At times the church has ignored the passage’s power or even found it subversive, or emphasized Mary’s submissiveness to God’s will.

But suppose we asked what the passage suggests about leadership? Jesus was expected by many Jews to be the Messiah who would free Israel from the Romans. He did not. He was hated and feared by much of the church hierarchy during his public ministry because his work threatened their power over the temple and Jewish society. He was, to the powerful of the day, a dangerous or failed leader. But Mary’s mention of Abraham reminds us of what God calls Christian leaders to do: that “in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed” (Genesis 12:3).

All of us holding ordained office in the Reformed tradition—elder or deacon or minister of Word and sacrament or General Synod professor—are called to be servant leaders: to meet the needs of the church to operate decently and in good order, to preach and teach and feed the hungry and bless the world as we do God’s work. Perhaps not surprisingly, there is a lot of evidence that leaders in flourishing congregations cultivate an environment of honesty, trust, and mutually beneficial relationships. We are called to be servants together, not form hierarchies. And we are always accountable to one another as we seek to follow one Lord, Jesus Christ.

For discussion:

1. What does this passage say to you about leadership? Do you welcome it?

2. Read the entire story (Luke 1:5-56) about the relationships among Mary, Elizabeth, and Elizabeth’s husband, Zechariah (a Jewish priest). How did their relationships aid their understanding of God’s calling for each of them?

3. Has your consistory ever discussed this passage? Should it?