

The Ministry of the Elder

Robert White

*Guiding and Nurturing
God's People*



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Introduction

Elders are important people in an RCA congregation. I've known this for a long time. My father was elected to this office when I was a boy. I always sensed that being an elder meant even more to him than selling real estate—which he never did on Sunday!

Looking back, I realize how many of the people who shaped my Christian faith and life were elders of the church. Of course, I had fine ministers to look up to, but elders proved to me that the Christian faith can be lived in the “real world” as well as in church.

I'm a minister now, and elders have often been my pastors! Their care, insight, and constructive criticism have made me a better person and pastor. Ministers tend to come and go. The elders provide a continuity of commitment and leadership in the church.

Elders represent a unique insight of our Reformed tradition. Ministers do not serve alone. The church is not the church without dedicated elders who serve Jesus Christ while earning their living and living their faith in the world.

I assume you are reading this booklet because you are an elder. Maybe you have been elected for the first time. Whether you are a novice or veteran, I hope this brief introduction to the elders' ministry will help equip you for effective service. You join the ranks of an ancient and honorable company. You also face unprecedented change and challenge as a church leader in the twenty-first century.

New crises and opportunities demand fresh insights and creative church leadership. New awareness of the church's “missionary situation” and renewed emphasis on lay ministries and training in the RCA make this an exciting time to be an elder. This booklet is one minister's modest attempt to help you prepare for your important ministry.

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Full, Gray Beards?

Most ancient peoples looked to the “elders” among them for wisdom, leadership, and government. The word elder implies maturity, insight born of experience, and discretion. In Hebrew the word literally means “a full, gray beard”! Most elders in ancient times were older, the patriarchs of prominent families.

Elders appear early and often in the Bible. They are mentioned first by God in that famous conversation with Moses at the burning bush. God told Moses to return to Egypt and assemble the elders of God’s enslaved people. They were the first to hear the good news of Israel’s liberation: “I declare that I will bring you up out of the misery of Egypt” (Exod. 3:17).

When the burdens of leadership became too heavy, Moses heeded the advice of his father-in-law, Jethro. He appointed “able men” to help oversee the faith and conduct of God’s people (Exod. 18:13-27). These officers were drawn from the ranks of Israel’s elders.



Later, the elders met at the gate of each city to settle disputes and administer the justice God required (Ruth 4:1, 11; Job 29; Amos 5:15). At crucial moments in Israel’s history—when the priesthood was established (Exod. 9) and when the people yearned for a king (1 Sam. 8:4-5)—the elders were present to represent the people and to seek God’s will for their community.

At the time of Jesus’ ministry, councils of elders, together with the local rabbis, governed the affairs of Jewish synagogues. When the first Christian congregations organized for worship and mission in Christ’s name, they naturally turned to this familiar model.

Primary leadership was provided by the apostles, who had known and followed the Lord. They traveled about, preaching, teaching, and establishing churches. Local congregations were guided and governed by elders, who were recognized as possessing the gifts of mature faith, leadership, and administration. Paul and Barnabas appointed elders in each church they founded (Acts 14:23). The New Testament word for elder, *presbuteros*, is the source of the word presbyterian. It means government by councils of elders, as most churches in the Reformed tradition are governed to this day.



The early church, of course, recognized other important ministries. We read of prophets, evangelists, pastors, teachers, healers, and administrators, among others (1 Cor. 12:28, Eph. 4:11). Some biblical texts speak of elders and bishops or overseers interchangeably (1 Tim. 3:1-7, 5:17-22, Titus 1:5-9). Apparently, some elders were appointed to preach the Word and serve the sacraments, while others provided local decision-making, direction, and discipline.

Leadership positions were fluid and flexible in New Testament times. They varied from church to church, depending on the gifts of the Holy Spirit and local needs.

It is clear that elders played a crucial role in the life and witness of the first Christian congregations. They shared the ministry of leadership with other “presbyters” or “bishops” who preached and served the sacraments and with “deacons,” who served widows and the poor (Acts 6). A sharp division between clergy and laity is not found in the New Testament.

When Elders Disappeared

The distinction between clergy and laity began to arise as early as the second century. Strong central leadership was required in the face of persecution and heresy. Bishops were given control in local congregations and eventually over churches in a wider region. With the rise to prominence of the bishop of Rome and the doctrine of apostolic succession, a hierarchical concept of ministry and a separation between clergy and laity emerged. The Pope as Peter's successor became the supreme leader of the church. Only bishops and priests ordained by papal approval were said to possess the authority of Christ to guide his flock, the power to forgive sins, and the right to administer the sacraments, upon which the laity were taught to depend for saving grace. By the fourth century, clergy dominance had won the day and the office of elder had disappeared.

Four Offices of the Church

The Protestant Reformation sought renewal of church government as well as worship and theology. Salvation by works, a superstitious sacramentalism, and clergy dominance were subjected to new scrutiny in light of the holy Scriptures, the Word of God. Martin Luther reinvigorated the church with his emphasis on “the priesthood of all believers.” But the reformer John Calvin did most to restore the laity to their rightful place in church government.

Calvin identified four New Testament ministries which he believed to be



essential and permanent offices of the church.¹ Pastors, he said, are called to preach the Word of God, administer the sacraments, and care for the flock. Ruling elders maintain order, exercise Christian discipline, and assist in pastoral care. Deacons provide ministries of mercy and justice for the poor. To this “three-fold ministry” of the local church, Calvin added a fourth office, that of teacher or doctor responsible for sound doctrine and the education of ministerial students.

Calvin’s church order was dictated by biblical theology, not by ecclesiastical efficiency! Rejecting the clergy hierarchy, he called for a government founded on the sovereignty of God and the lordship of Jesus Christ. Christ is the only head, and the church is his body (Eph. 4:11-15). All ministry is a representation and extension of Christ’s ministry. His ministry is given to the entire body, not just to a few clerics! At baptism every Christian is ordained to the one ministry of Jesus Christ.

The Representative Principle

Every Christian is a minister. But not every Christian is a church leader. Within the one ministry of Jesus Christ, some are called by God, gifted by the Holy Spirit, and elected by the church to fulfill leadership functions essential to the life and witness of the whole.

RCA government is representative government. The congregation elects some members to serve as elders and deacons, then pledges to honor them and abide by their decisions on consistory. The similarities to civil government in the U.S. and Canada are obvious, but there is a crucial difference. Elders and deacons are accountable first to Jesus Christ, the head of the church, not to their electorate. Elders should be sensitive to the desires of the people. But their first duty is to seek and follow the will of Christ for the church, even if some members disagree.

Called and Ordained

The RCA liturgy for elders' ordination and installation asks a key question: "Do you believe in your heart that you are called by Christ's church, and therefore by God, to this office?"² Church leaders are more than volunteers. We do not choose to lead; we are chosen. God takes the initiative in calling all Christians to faith and service and some to ministries of leadership. The Reformed tradition speaks of an "inner call" of the heart and the "outer call" by the church. Both are required for ordained leadership.

Ministers usually hear the inner call of God first. It must be confirmed through years of seminary preparation, examination by a classis, and the call of the church to a particular ministry.

For elders and deacons, the call of the church often comes first to awaken an inner sense of call. Your first response may be "Why me? Isn't so-and-so more qualified?" By asking you to serve as an elder, your church recognizes in you the Holy Spirit's gifts for mature Christian leadership. The call of the church is truly God's call. You may accept it with that assurance and inner conviction.

Ordination is a public rite of recognition and commissioning. Persons called by God and elected by the church receive the authority of Jesus Christ to fulfill their respective ministries within his body. Since the earliest days of the church, ordination includes prayer for God's continuing grace and gifts, with the laying on of hands in the presence of the congregation (Acts 6:6, 13:3, 1 Tim. 4:14, 2 Tim. 1:6). Elders are "installed" at the beginning of each term on consistory. But they are ordained as elders only once and for life. Ordination is a great moment for any Christian leader.

You Have an Office!

The essential leadership functions in an RCA congregation are called the “offices” of minister of Word and sacrament, elder, and deacon. Offices may be status symbols in our secular society, especially if they have a window or washroom! But status-seeking has no place in Reformed Church government. The word “office” comes from the Latin *officium*. It meant duty or responsibility. An office in the church is a God-given responsibility, not a superior position.

Jesus is our model. “I am among you as one who serves,” he said (Luke 22:27). “Whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all” (Mark 10:44). A key principle of Reformed Church government is that the call to church office is a call to servanthood, not status!



Lone Rangers Need Not Apply!

Elders never act individually or in isolation. They join with the minister as a board of elders to provide oversight and care for members. The consistory incorporates the three offices of elder, deacon, and minister in decision-making. Reformed Church government is collegial, not hierarchical. Those elected to church offices are equals. Recognizing the power of self-interest and the reality of sin, people in the Reformed tradi-

Who Elders Are

What do a young mother, a successful Korean-American businessman, a retired farmer, an African-American college professor, and an unemployed factory worker have in common? Each one belongs to an ancient and honorable company of leaders with deep roots in the history of God's people. Each one is an elder in the RCA!

But what is it that makes these very different people qualified to be elders in the church? Clearly, it is not human distinctions of age, gender, ethnicity, education, or economic status. Rather, it is

God's call and the gifts of the Holy Spirit discerned by the church that are the key qualifications.



Those qualifications, and how we might see them lived out in people, were set down long ago by the apostle Paul. He set a standard for church leadership which, admittedly, could not be attained perfectly by anyone, but

which nevertheless illustrates his high regard for the office. A spiritual leader, says Paul, must be “above reproach, married only once, temperate, sensible, respectable, hospitable, an able teacher, not a drunkard, not violent but gentle, not quarrelsome, and not a lover of money” (1 Tim. 3:2-3). Paul's list of qualifications goes on to include healthy family relationships and being “well thought of by outsiders” (vss. 4, 7). Elders are people of sound reputation in their church and community.

Perhaps the biblical word maturity best sums up an elder's qualifications. Paul urged the Corinthians: “do not be children in your thinking; rather be infants in evil, but in thinking be adults”

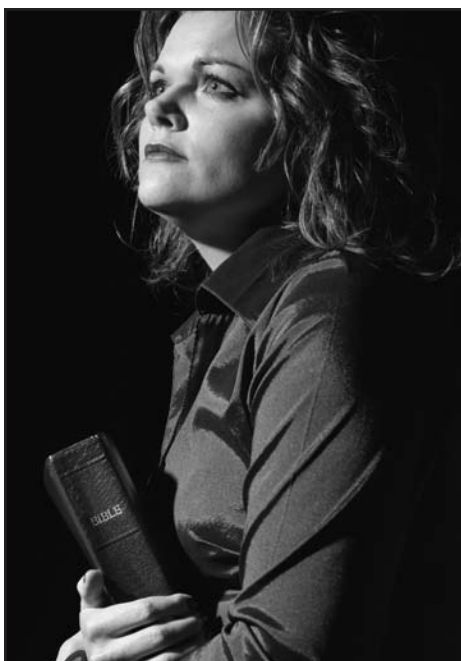
(1 Cor. 14:20). Ephesians 4:13, central to a Reformed understanding of church government, states the goal of Christian ministry:

to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, until all of us come to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to *maturity* [my emphasis], to the measure of the full stature of Christ.

Elders need not be older, but they must be mature! Jesus Christ is the measure of a mature Christian life. Those who lead the church should have a vital relationship with the Lord of the church. This personal commitment will be visible in their lives. Elders are people who pray and study the Scriptures. Growing in their own relationship with Jesus Christ, they are able to teach and guide others to do the same.

Elders have a mature self-awareness, neither thinking more highly of themselves than they ought to think (Rom. 12:3), nor insecure and reluctant to use their God-given gifts (2 Tim. 1:6). Elders are open and sensitive to people. They think, pray, and work well with others. Elders have courage to stand firm on major issues of faith, grace to yield minor points for the peace of the church, and wisdom to know the difference.

These qualifications of elders have endured since the beginning of the church. But as times have changed, so have some of the traditional pictures of elders. For instance, elder does not necessarily mean older anymore. Before the industrial revolution, change came slowly to societies. People gained the wisdom of experience simply by living longer. Now, young



people grow up in a world quite different from that of their parents and grandparents. While some in our congregations remember life before electricity, others surf the internet. Faith perspectives and spiritual needs will be very different from generation to generation.³ Where the Holy Spirit is present, young people see visions and old people dream dreams (Acts 2:17). Intergenerational leadership among elders will help a church discern God's will for today and tomorrow.

Similarly, many women are now being called to places of leadership in our congregations. In those places, the ministry of the elders has been deepened and enriched in a new way through the truth Paul declared: "there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus" (Gal. 3:28).

A living faith, a healthy sense of self, and deep concern for people: these are marks of mature leadership. People who possess these Christ-like qualities are far from perfect. Christian maturity is a lifetime journey, after all. The best church leaders are those who have made good progress on the way. They are qualified to lead God's people and to "present everyone mature in Christ" (Col. 1:28).

What Elders Do

The RCA Constitution includes the doctrinal standards (the Belgic Confession, the Canons of Dort, and the Heidelberg Catechism), the Liturgy, and the *Book of Church Order*.⁴ Every elder should be familiar with these documents that set forth the doctrine, worship, and government of our church. Your pastor can help you obtain copies. The duties of elders are spelled out in each of the three constitutional documents. This shows that the office of elder is grounded in the church's belief and worship as well as in its polity.

Oversight—Guiding and Nurturing

The elders, together with the deacons and minister in consistory, are responsible for overseeing the entire life and mission of the congregation. Elders and ministers are particularly responsible for “spiritual oversight”—to “look diligently whether every member of the church lives in the way of Christ”—as the 1968 edition of our liturgy expresses it. That’s why this book carries the subtitle, “Guiding and Nurturing God’s People.” A wise consistory makes sure its elders are fully involved in the committees and programs that provide Christian nurture for children and adults, pastoral care, and the worship of the church. And that its elders are active in these teaching and caring ministries.

But spiritual oversight is not limited to the faith, conduct, and care of members. Elders share in consistory decisions about building maintenance, staff salaries, the annual budget, and paving the parking lot.



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people believe that God is sovereign and Jesus is Lord over all of life, including the practical details!

A neglected facility, a decline in giving, a poorly paid pastor, or inadequate parking may hinder the church’s ministry and indicate deeper spiritual problems. Elders watch over the whole. They cannot avoid maintenance issues. But wise elders make sure that worship, pastoral care, and mission are high on the consistory agenda, not pushed to a late hour by maintenance concerns. Spiritual oversight includes setting the right priorities!

Discipline Means Discipling

Since Reformation times, church discipline has been a defining responsibility of the elders. Church members are accountable to Jesus Christ and to one another for the faith they profess and the lives they live. Choosing “to live in the way of Christ” means turning away from false values and lifestyles to join a community of faith, hope, and love. Elders, together with the minister, are responsible for holding each other and the community to a loving accountability.



Effective church discipline rejects the legalism, coercion, and punishment sometimes practiced in the past. In our age of democracy, individualism, and the volunteer, people are always free to find another church. Many do, when confronted by judgmental church leaders! Yet people hunger for the security of an authentic faith and a responsible community.

The words discipline and disciple have the same root. The positive purpose of church discipline is to guide members to mature discipleship. Ministers and elders

lead first by example. They accept the cost of discipleship themselves. Then they challenge others to do so in freedom and love. The goal of church discipline is commitment, not mere compliance!⁵ Discipline means discipling.

The board of elders is required to meet at least four times a year to exercise its ministry of discipline. These meetings originally

preceded the quarterly celebration of the Lord's Supper in Reformed churches. The purpose was to guard the Lord's Table from being profaned by people of questionable faith or morals. This tie between church discipline and the Lord's Table has a lasting and positive meaning. In communion we remember and experience anew both the grace of Jesus Christ and the high cost of our salvation. We are nourished for discipleship.

The questions the elders now must ask before communion focus on ministry to members, not their exclusion. Are any of our members in need of special care? Are any members not attending worship? If not, why not? How shall we extend Christian ministry to these members?⁶

If the integrity of Christ's body is to be maintained, the board of elders will confront instances of immoral character or conduct in the congregation or among themselves. These are rare and should be handled with grace and sensitivity. The goal is the person's repentance and restoration to the community. Beyond these exceptions, the elders' ministry of discipline will be a continuous effort to provide the example, care, and nurture that helps each member grow as a disciple of Jesus Christ. The elders have many opportunities to practice discipline as discipling.

Gatekeeping

Israel's elders sat in the city gate to serve the people. Today's elders are gatekeepers, too! The board of elders welcomes new members, admits children to the Lord's Table, hears young and old make their confessions of faith, and acts on requests for infant baptism. Elders are also charged to review church membership rolls annually, to declare "inactive" those members who have withdrawn from the worship and life of the church, and to seek diligently to restore them. The elders may remove members who remain inactive and transfer members to other congregations.⁷

As gatekeepers, elders have special opportunities to know and guide members toward deeper faith and discipleship. Transition

times are teachable moments in members' lives. When parents ask to have their baby baptized or to bring their children to the Lord's Table, they may be especially receptive to the assurances and responsibilities of our covenant theology—a theology which emphasizes God's eternal commitment to us and our commitments in return both to God and to each other.

Most churches provide classes for potential members prior to their joining. In these, elders can play a major teaching role. As lay leaders, elders are well qualified to explain the benefits and commitments



involved in faithful church membership, because they live them.

Teenagers in a class for new members may pay closer attention if they know their faith and learning will be explored in a meeting with the elders. In some Reformed churches, elders serve as mentors for individual students throughout the teaching and nurturing process.

As gatekeepers, elders should do more than meet among themselves to talk about church members, determine their status, and act on their requests. Beyond perfunctory motions, members need to be known, included, instructed, and loved. Your position at the gateway of the church enables you to touch lives and deepen discipleship at moments when people are most receptive to God's call.

Visiting

The Reformed Church's *Book of Church Order* says that the elders shall "assist the minister/s . . . in the task of visitation." Eugene Heideman, in *Reformed Bishops and Catholic Elders*, points out that visits in members' homes replaced the Roman Catholic sacrament of penance in Reformed churches after the Reformation.⁸ The church went out to the people rather than expecting the people to come to the church to confess their sins and to ask for forgiveness and grace.

A graceful ministry of visitation is needed even more in today's secular society. When people stop coming to church, as they are in growing numbers, the church must go to them. Ministers are responsible for this outreach, but they cannot do it alone. Nor should they. Elders, who live and work in that same secular society, are credible representatives of Christ and the church in the world of members' homes, families, and daily concerns.



In some Reformed churches, members complain that their leaders never visit except to ask for a financial pledge! Belonging and commitment increase when the focus of a visit is the member's faith, involvement, and needs, not the church budget or program.

Elders are urged to visit members' homes in pairs, to invite members to share their perspectives and concerns, and to do more listening than talking! Careful preparation and training in active listening skills will make calls more effective and elders more comfortable in this role. A plan for regular home visitation and the discipline to carry it out are essential. Excellent resources are available to help elders in this important discipling ministry.⁹

Elders and the Pastor

Do you ever wonder who ministers to your pastor? In a Reformed Church the elders are supposed to. Your ministry to the minister involves both oversight and care. The RCA Liturgy and *Book of Church Order* specify that the elders' oversight includes the conduct of the minister, especially in preaching and teaching.

Most elders have neither studied the Bible in its original languages nor attended seminary. You expect your pastor to know more about the Scriptures than you do, and rightly so. But effective preaching and teaching always connects the truth of God's Word to human lives, needs, and challenges here and now. Elders



can apply the test of relevance. If preaching falls short, the constructive counsel of elders may help a pastor move from what the Bible said to what it says as a living Word for today.

The minister's conduct is also the elders' concern. Most pastors are highly dedicated,

hard-working people. Their sincere desire is to preach powerfully and helpfully, to serve the people gracefully, and to lead the church in mission effectively. People rely on their pastor in times of crisis and stress. Many confidences must be kept. The burdens are often heavy, and the ministry can be a lonely calling. Pastors are also people with families, personal emergencies, and human frailties.

Pastors need the same care and spiritual nurture we all do.

Elders, who work closely with the pastor in the ministry of the church, are in a good position to provide that nurture. At least one elders' meeting each year should be devoted solely to the counsel, encouragement, and care of the pastor. A kind word, a listening ear, or a pat on the back are both welcome and needed.

In rare instances, a pastor may be accused of immoral or illegal acts. The elders must know their role and limitations. RCA ministers are finally accountable to the classis of which they are members.¹⁰ The classis approves each minister's call, installs pastors in congregations, and must approve the dissolution of the relationship between pastor and congregation. The classis is also responsible for the conduct and discipline of its ministers.

When allegations of misconduct arise, the board of elders should consult with the pastor and other concerned parties to determine fact and to expose rumor and false information. If the evidence justifies formal charges, they must be submitted to the classis for judgment.

Most boards of elders are never faced with the issue of pastoral misconduct. But every board of elders has a pastor to counsel, encourage, and support. When elders are pastors to their pastor, good ministers grow to be even better preachers, teachers, shepherds, and leaders. The best care-givers are pastors who are cared for in their own inevitable moments of crisis and vulnerability. At these times, let the elders take care!

At First Reformed Church in Schenectady, New York, worship begins when the elders enter the sanctuary and occupy their pew in front of the pulpit. It's an old Dutch custom. We've been doing it here for over three hundred years!

Much has changed in church and society. But the essentials remain. Under the watchful eye of the elders, the Word is still preached, sacraments are served, praise and prayer are offered to God, and the people are renewed for discipleship in the world. I pray it will always be so in the Reformed Church in America—by God's grace and through the ministry of faithful elders like you!

Looking Ahead

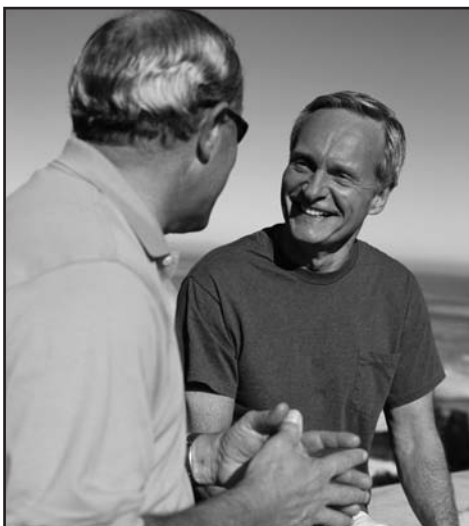
The duties of pastors and elders, as we presently define them, are largely lived out within the congregation and walls of our churches. But what about the millions of people, perhaps now even the majority of people, within North America for whom church is no longer important? Does an elder have any responsibility for them?

When people stop coming to church, then the church must go out to the people. While some have suggested that a new office of evangelist or missionary be created to lead the church into mission in society—a change we certainly could consider—to be Reformed is to seek and welcome whatever new forms of ministry best serve the church and witness to God’s saving grace in a changing world.

That means in today’s society, every church leader and member needs to spend less time in church activities and more time living by faith

where secular people gather. Kennon Callahan insists that our unchurched culture “invites pastors to leave the safety of their offices and the pleasantness of their committee meetings to be active courageously in the world.”¹¹

Elders already spend most of their time living and working in the world. Growing churches in the twenty-first century have elders and pastors who are able and willing to share their faith, minister to people, and make disciples—not only at church, but in offices, market places, soccer fields, and shopping malls. Their mission is one: to understand our culture as well as they understand the



gospel, and find new and exciting way to connect one to the other.

This generation of seekers¹² has many questions for the church and is rarely satisfied with doctrinaire or traditional answers. The times call for elders who can translate the Christian faith into new words and deeds of witness and into new forms of worship. Can we communicate with seekers without compromising the enduring insights of our tradition or the truth of the gospel?

That is a tall task! It will mean better training, more resources, and a commitment from pastors, classes, regional synods, and the denomination to work together, to provide elders with the knowledge and skills necessary for effective leadership, discipling, and pastoral care. It will mean raising up a new and hopeful vision of what elders can be and do in the service of Christ's kingdom. With God's help, it can be done.

End Notes

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²*Worship the Lord: The Liturgy of the Reformed Church in America* (Reformed Church Press, 2005), p. 47.

³See Douglas Alan Walrath's perceptive analysis in *Frameworks: Patterns for Living and Believing Today* (New York: The Pilgrim Press, 1987).

⁴See Daniel J. Meeter, *Meeting Each Other in Doctrine, Liturgy & Government* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1993).

⁵This distinction and other helpful insights are found in Ronald A. Heifetz, *Leadership without Easy Answers* (Cambridge and London: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1994).

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⁸Eugene P. Heideman, *Reformed Bishops and Catholic Elders* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1970), p. 131.

⁹For example, see Kennon L. Callahan, *Visiting in an Age of Mission: A Handbook for Person-to-Person Ministry* (New York: Harper Collins Publishers, 1994).

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¹¹Kennon L. Callahan, *Twelve Keys to an Effective Church* (San Francisco: Harper & Row Publishers, 1983), p. 15.

¹²See Wade Clark Roof, *A Generation of Seekers: The Spiritual Journeys of the Baby Boom Generation*, (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 1993).

For Further Reading

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