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To Each Is Given

by Nancy McNiven

Scripture reading

Ephesians 4:7, 11-13

Opening prayer

Dear Lord, may the study of your Word enlighten us. May our conversation serve to encourage us and deepen our commitment to discipleship. Amen.

How does becoming more fully a disciple of Christ help in revitalization? Scripture certainly points to one way it can happen, and that is by using the spiritual gifts we are given.

In my role as Christian educator and deacon I became intrigued with the potential released in individuals and congregations when they discover and use their spiritual gifts. I've seen how a study or retreat can energize and equip a community of believers to live out Christ's call to true discipleship. Gift-conscious ministry must be a key component of any new church start or church revitalization effort. A healthy congregation needs to utilize the potential of each of its members and adherents in, as the RCA Statement of Mission and Vision says, "following Christ in mission, in a lost and broken world so loved by God" (see p. 51).

A growing number of resources focus on spiritual gifts. The definitions and names of the gifts vary, but all the resources emphasize that spiritual gifts are special abilities given by Christ through the Holy Spirit to empower each believer for the ministries of the body and the call of God

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in their lives. These abilities include the gifts of administration, creative ability, discernment, encouragement, evangelism, faith, giving, hospitality, intercession, knowledge, leadership, mercy, service, shepherding, teaching, and wisdom.

Each of you has at least one of these special gifts that needs to be used in the work of the body of believers. Normally when I say that in a group, at least one person says, “No way!” Our Scripture passage clearly indicates not only that we have a gift, but that the gift is blessed. Sometimes our gift or gifts mirror something we would recognize as a natural talent, or our selected profession. In other cases, our gift is radically different. I know public school teachers who use their gifts of service, hospitality, and mercy to serve meals to homeless people, stock cans of food in food pantries, and organize Christmas gift collections for people with HIV/AIDS. I know carpenters, nurses, and computer specialists who are committed to sharing their knowledge of Scripture and their faith in the teaching ministry of the church.

Because being a disciple of Christ calls for transformation and growth, we can also expect a few surprises along the way. We may be called to use a particular gift for a period of time and then encouraged or prompted to engage in another ministry that uses a new or different gift in ways we could not have imagined.

Here’s an example. I was leading an adult study on spiritual gifts and enjoyed spending time with an elderly woman who was taking the course because she just loved to learn. As part of the study we gave each participant a gift survey to fill out. We then matched the gifts identified on their surveys with active or potential ministries in their congregation.

When I asked participants to acknowledge a gift, this elderly woman gave a chuckle and said, “I have the gift of hospitality, but how can I use that? I’m basically housebound.” Well, this congregation wanted to strengthen their outreach to visitors and new members. We found out that our elderly disciple of Christ was a retired administrator who was very comfortable talking on the phone. With a huge smile on her face, she volunteered to be a phone contact person in this new ministry!

Do you see what can happen when we let the Spirit take command?

Many times that means letting go of our fears, perceived limitations, or egos.

Elizabeth O'Connor, in her book *Eighth Day of Creation: Discovering Your Gifts and Using Them*, writes, “No gift is unimportant. There are no lesser gifts. Each is crucial to the proper functioning of the Body; each contributes to the rich diversity needed by the Church for its work within the total organism of humanity.”

I like O'Connor's words because they compel the church to constantly discover, explore, and fine-tune the focus on gifts. *We cannot fulfill what God wants us to do and who he want us to be in this time and in this place if we do not use our gifts in partnership with each other.*

That partnership must be inclusive. Hear the words of Galatians 3:25-29:

But now that faith has come, we are no longer subject to a disciplinarian, for in Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith. As many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male or female, for all of you are one in Christ Jesus. And if you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's offspring, heirs according to the promise.

Scripture mandates inclusivity, and our Reformed covenant theology celebrates it. We are all family—each loved, known, and forgiven by God. We are all family—each committed to respect and love one another, each striving to become more Christlike each day, each committed to being Christ's disciple in the world.

The church in the twenty-first century can no longer pretend ignorance or display arrogance when it comes to the lack of full participation of certain groups within the body of the church. The apostle Paul talks time and time again about each of us being part of one body and responsible to each other. We each have different gifts and functions. All parts must be encouraged, equipped, and allowed to function fully “for the work of ministry” (Ephesians 4:12).

When each member of the body is using her or his gift or gifts properly, we become more fully the disciples Christ wants us to be. We then impact the church, whether it's a new church start, a church in revitalization, or a healthy congregation. When we commit to the words of the Ephesians text, this is the potential.

First of all, church communities will be energized and experience a strong sense of commitment as members seek their rightful place in them. No longer does anyone simply “fill a slot.” Each person is called to ministry and empowered by the Spirit to use her or his gift(s) as Christ deems. Second, these congregations should experience a strong spirit of unity. People no longer feel inferior or unnecessary when they realize that they are a vital part of the body of Christ. Because discovering, exploring, and using one's gifts are seen as a vital part of discipleship, these Christians will be supported, encouraged, and empowered by the congregation.

Third, outreach ministries in these congregations will be strengthened, and the potential for growth will grow as individuals develop their gifts. Finally, individuals and congregations will experience spiritual growth and maturity as they build up the body of Christ and move toward, as Ephesians says, “the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to maturity, to the measure of the full stature of Christ.”

With all these wonderful possibilities in mind, we acknowledge that we face enormous challenges in today's world. The church has lost its dominance in contemporary society. We are just one option in a world that wants a quick fix, sees time as money, and seems focused on personal gain. Seekers go shopping for the church that can offer the best “goods and services,” so the RCA, like other denominations, struggles with how to remain faithful and yet relevant in a secular society. We are divided on issues that concern worship, lifestyle choices, and, most certainly, our theology.

So while it is very important that we develop our gifts, we must continue to commit ourselves to prayer, worship, Bible study, reflection, and participation in our sacraments. These disciplines will serve to gird us and help us along our journey in faith. We can also rest assured and live in hope that as our discipleship is defined and matures, Christ goes

with us and before us. The answer to question one of the Heidelberg Catechism (“What is your only comfort in life and in death?”) begins with the following statement:

That I am not my own,
but belong—body and soul,
in life and in death—
to my faithful Savior Jesus Christ.

I have a plaque on my wall that is many years old. It held a very prominent spot in my parents’ family room. It reads, “Only one life, will soon be past. Only what’s done for Christ will last.” What will you do as Christ’s disciple, today and tomorrow?

Questions

1. The title of this chapter is “To Each Is Given.” Reread Ephesians 4, verses 7 and 11 through 13, and the definition of spiritual gifts in the third paragraph of this chapter (pp. 21–22). Why do you suppose some believers have a hard time believing they are spiritually gifted?
2. Look at the Ephesians passage and the following scriptures: Romans 12:6-8 and 1 Corinthians 12:7-11 and 27-30. Certain gifts, often referred to as the “spectacular gifts,” are not mentioned in this study. Why do gift-conscious congregations explore more actively the gifts that are named in this study?
3. Read 1 Peter 2:4-5. Now read the list of gifts in this study (pp. 21–22). Share in small groups the story of a woman who modeled or models a gift and who is a “living stone”—one of the priesthood of believers.
4. How does the story of the elderly woman who discovered how to use her gift of hospitality (p. 22) relate to becoming more fully a disciple of Christ, and to the revitalization of a congregation?
5. Statistics on the participation of women in leadership roles in the RCA are disturbing: for example, of the 8,006 elders and deacons serving RCA congregations at this time, only 28 percent are women. Reread the quote from Elizabeth O’Connor (p. 23) and Galatians 3:25-29. How

can these words serve to encourage women to participate in ministry and also to advocate for their inclusion in ministry?

6. Looking at the study, review the potential for congregations when each member is using her or his gifts. Can you share a story that supports this?
7. What are some of the challenges the church faces today?
8. As we explore our gifts, how can the words from the catechism (p. 25) serve to encourage us?

Closing prayer

Dear God, in love you gave humanity the greatest gift, your Son, Jesus Christ. His sacrifice on the cross has paid for all my sins. Because I belong to him and because of your love for me, I now offer up my gifts for your purpose. Amen.