

What Are We Paying You For? Shifting the Way We Ask Lay Leaders to Run the Church

Posted on January 13, 2009 by Alban

1

Do you know any lay leaders who are spiritually depleted rather than spiritually enriched as a result of their leadership duties? Have you ever known an elected church leader to worship occasionally with a church across town because it has become almost impossible to worship authentically in the congregation where he runs the education program or she runs the annual stewardship campaign? Does the question, “What are we paying you for?” have a familiar ring? How about the following scenario?

A faithful member serving as the chairperson of the congregation’s property committee takes her seat in the pews for worship on a Sunday morning only to have an usher track her down and whisper into her ear, “Do you know where we could find extra light bulbs?” She leaves her pew to go find light bulbs, during which a Sunday school teacher breathlessly tells her that the toilet in the kindergarten restroom is flooding. After many months—or years—of these kinds of interruptions to her own spiritual nourishment, she feels spiritually bankrupt and bitter by the time her term of service ends.

Or how about this story? The elder who heads up the mission committee has found it easier to do much of the mission herself, so she serves dinner at the shelter every Monday night with one or two reliable helpers, shelves soup cans and cereal boxes every fourth Saturday of the month, and drags her husband along to help her move donated furniture several times a year. She complains often that she “needs more

help.” And she considers herself less a “spiritual leader” and more an unappreciated committee of one.

Or perhaps this story is more familiar: The “worship elder” who is in charge of heading up that particular committee doesn’t have time to pray for herself much less to pray for other church members—which she heard somewhere was her role as a “spiritual leader.” And besides, she feels uncomfortable praying out loud one-on-one with her friends. They might think she’s acting “holier than thou.”

Outmoded Ways

If these stories don’t sound familiar to you, they certainly do to me. After 15 years of serving a Presbyterian congregation of 150 accomplished, busy, well-educated professionals, it had become excruciatingly clear that something had to change in terms of the programming responsibilities of the elders in charge. (The position of “elder” has a different name in different traditions, but “elder” here refers to the elected lay leaders who are vested with responsibilities of church oversight and spiritual leadership.)

The role of our elders was to chair committees of the church—an organizational model familiar to many mainline congregations. Each elder was responsible for a committee, which we often called a team, but the truth was that our elders were often teams of one. And our monthly Session meetings often ran like committees of the whole; each elder promoted his or her own committee’s programs, competing for budget dollars. And they all ran themselves ragged as overworked volunteers.

In my church, the idea of committees was a myth. Most “committees” were run by one or two individuals who often complained about having no support while at the same time clinging to the responsibilities or congregational “power.”

Elder-led committees were the preferred organizational model during the mid to late 20th century. When mainline membership numbers were at their peak, when many more women were home during the day—either with school-aged children or as retirees—

the pool of volunteers with free time was much larger. And many congregations could afford to call multiple pastors, as well as educators, music professionals, and support staff to run the church.

The impact of 21st-century cultural shifts on the church is well-documented, but our organizational models in the church have not shifted—or at least not enough. Increasingly, congregations that allow elected officers to “run the church” are finding that this model no longer works—for several reasons:

- People do not become members of a church in order to serve on committees.
- Elected officers charged with being spiritual leaders do not have the time or energy for spiritual leadership if they are also organizing mission trips, scheduling educational events, and overseeing stewardship programs.
- Recruiting new officers becomes increasingly difficult as the congregation observes the enormous time and energy involved in being an elder or deacon.

New models of church organization have blossomed through the blending of the wisdom of secular volunteer management, church transformation, and the personal experience of people who love the church but want our churches to be different. One such model shifts officer responsibilities from “running the church”—which includes managing any program, activity, or organization—to overseeing the vision and ministry of the church with the professional pastor. The everyday running of congregational ministries is then passed on to a staff of paid and volunteer members who are recruited, trained, and supervised by the pastor and others. This kind of shift will arouse immediate concerns:

- “People are too busy to volunteer. We can’t even get them to serve as officers!”
- “Nobody’s going to do this kind of work for the church without getting paid!”
- “What if they do something we don’t like? Can volunteers be fired?”
- “What if new members want to be on this so-called staff? They don’t know enough.” However, the truth is:
 - People with a passion for ministry make time to serve those passions.
 - Many individuals can indeed volunteer their time and find it energizing.
 - Volunteer staff members can work with clear job descriptions and within the parameters of established core values (and the annual budget).
 - New members are often the best staffers because they come with fresh ideas.

Our Biblical Charge

The “priesthood of all believers” is a cherished doctrine of the church and a foundational idea for Protestants, but the reality is that few parishioners consider themselves to be anything resembling priests. Especially if those who gather for worship are “participating Christians” rather than “practicing Christians,” then the divide between those who lead and those who follow increases.

Martin Luther wrote that we are all consecrated priests through our baptism, quoting 1 Peter 2:9 and Revelation 5:10:

“You are a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God’s own people . . .”

“You have made them to be a kingdom and priests serving our God . . .”

But most parishioners happily relinquish all priestly duties to professional clergy, excusing themselves for a variety of reasons:

- They are not sufficiently educated in biblical and theological studies.

- They have their own vocations to worry about—and their vocations have little to do with their spiritual selves.
- They are concerned about being seen as fanatics if they openly talk about their faith or their spiritual leadership role apart from Sunday mornings.
- They are paying someone else to fulfill all spiritual responsibilities in the church.

Many professional priests and pastors happily assume all spiritual responsibilities for similar reasons:

- We have professional degrees that attest to our biblical and theological training.
- We have chosen a spiritual vocation replete with spiritual garb, accoutrements, and historic significance.
- We are expected to speak of holy things and refer to spiritual matters in conversation.
- We are paid to do this, and some of us even spend our off-duty time in church-owned housing.

We consider ourselves to be called, trained, ordained, and sanctified for the purposes of visiting the sick, counseling the aggrieved, burying the dead, marrying the betrothed, teaching the Word, officiating over the sacraments, and offering grace at potluck dinners. This is what we do. This is who we are. The only problem is that this is not our biblical charge. In addition to the passages that Luther lifted up, there is another verse that speaks to the role of the pastor, from Ephesians 4:

“The gifts he gave were that some would be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, some pastors and teachers, to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ . . .”

The word for “pastor” here—poimen in Greek—is also translated “shepherd,” which is a problematic word for clergy in a church culture that demands that the pastor’s role is to serve the sheep. Perhaps we have confused the role of sheep and shepherd because our 21st-century culture is so far removed from agricultural metaphors. Current-day parishioners are often under the impression that the pastor’s role is to lead their congregational sheep into green pastures and beside still waters so that the sheep can spend their lives relaxing in the sun eating clover. But in actual farm life, the purpose of the sheep is to benefit their owner. In fact, in some cases, they give their very lives for the one who owns them. Hmm.

Paul Borden, for one, points out that we professional ministers have completely misunderstood the whole sheep/shepherd metaphor. We call ministers who are supposed to “pastor” congregations—primarily offering pastoral care—when actually, according to Paul’s letter to the Ephesians, the congregation is called to carry out those responsibilities for each other. The pastor/professional minister is called to teach the sheep to do this for each other. Our most fundamental role is to equip the saints for ministry, not to do it all ourselves.

This is a profoundly threatening premise for many professional ministers. We generally enjoy the power of being the one who gains entrance into the intensive care unit by virtue of our pastoral credentials. We like the power of being called in the night and meeting traumatized families in the emergency room like heroes in the night. We might relish the role of savior, often to the point that we hesitate to surrender our power to mere laypeople. And yet to refuse to share in this ministry is an affront to the premise that all baptized people are called to be priests.

Any pastor will attest to the fact that it is a profound privilege to be the one who is called to the bedside of a dying parishioner or to the operating room before a crucial surgery. Some of our holiest moments occur by the incubators in the neonatal intensive care unit or in the living rooms of newly widowed church members. But we should not be the only ones who get to participate in these holy moments. Our chosen lay leaders have been called to participate in this ministry, too. We professional pastors are called to equip them and set them free to serve accordingly.

Just as clergy must relinquish some of the pastoral care to the ruling lay leaders of their congregations, the ruling leaders must also relinquish their assumed power to those who are called and able to run the church's programs on a day-to-day basis. If elders, for example, are freed from running the stewardship campaign and the annual mission fair, they can focus on vision casting and pastoral care while unelected volunteers run the church. Again, this requires giving up often-cherished power and granting permission for others to do these jobs.

Laying the Foundation

Our congregation is now led by a staff of paid and volunteer ministers who run the programs of the church. Our elders and deacons are charged, respectively, with overseeing the ministry in accordance with our core values and offering pastoral care. This has been a dramatic shift in the way our congregation is organized. No longer do our ruling elders control the programs of our church. No longer does the pastor serve as the sole spiritual leader of the parish.

In order to accomplish such a change in congregational organization, certain preparatory work must be done:

- **The elders must establish the core values of their particular congregation**, and an annual budget must be created that provides parameters for both volunteers and paid staff. As long as the church staff works within the basic values and budget of the congregation, they have the freedom to plan programs and events that enhance the spiritual community.
- **All staff—both paid and volunteer—must have clear job descriptions** that spell out their responsibilities, which include the basic duties of recruiting, training, supervising, and evaluating those who assist them on their particular ministry

teams. For example, if a volunteer heads up the mission ministry, that volunteer is called to coordinate the mission program of the congregation but not to serve unilaterally. He/she will create a team to serve in the local and global mission efforts of the congregation. To avoid the “committee of one” issue, the passions and gifts of the members must be assessed. (There are church information programs—some similar to Facebook—that can assist church staffs in collecting information on member interests and talents.)

- **Volunteer and paid staff are evaluated annually by the pastor and/or personnel committee.** Church members often feel queasy about evaluating other church members, but a focus on call and gifts makes this endeavor more about serving God and less about personal turf and negative criticism. Sharing with members what their gifts are and what their gifts are not is part of the discernment process. Again, if ministry is about serving God’s purposes rather than personal power, then leaders will appreciate placement in an area of ministry in which they are gifted and called.
- **Elders, deacons, and other officers also need job descriptions that clarify their roles.** No longer are they called to “run the church.” Their responsibilities are more far-reaching, in the tradition of the Apostolic Church. In addition to overseeing the ministry, offering pastoral care, and serving in whatever capacity their particular denomination requires, they make a commitment to spend time reflecting theologically on the overall ministry of the congregation. They commit to praying, studying scripture, and taking advantage of workshops and other educational opportunities offered by higher judicatories. And all officers make the commitment to support the congregation financially.

While, by definition, the pastor continues to serve as a shepherd within this model, he or she no longer merely watches the sheep graze, tending to those who are sick or who fall into ditches. Instead, the pastor becomes an entrepreneurial shepherd who raises the sheep in a way that they will best benefit the Chief Shepherd who owns them. The professional minister equips the officers and staff, the officers and staff equip others, and eventually the congregation indeed sees itself as engaged in ministry together.

Imagine a church full of people who get this. Imagine a congregation that wants its pastor to be not a chaplain who primarily offers pastoral care but a servant leader who teaches others how to be excellent servants. Imagine elders and deacons who are inspired and nourished spiritually during their terms of office. Imagine volunteers who discover their skills as coordinators of life-changing ministries.

No longer do the organizational models of the late 20th century work in the 21st century.

As the culture continues to shift, the church is also shifting into a community that is becoming more collaborative and more spiritually nurturing, more about practicing our faith and less about participating in a steady stream of programs. It’s about time.

Questions for Reflection

1. Name a specific situation in which your ministry transformed the life of someone in your congregation.
2. Name something in your ministry which has spiritually fed you in the last month.
3. What about your church work energizes you spiritually? What saps you of spiritual energy?
4. How does the organizational structure of your church leadership spread the responsibilities for ministry?
5. If you asked your congregation, "How many true ministers do we have?" what would they say? Who would be identified as a "minister" in your church? Why?

1

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