

Reflections on Being Church

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Gift Discernment Sunday, Apr. 25, 2010

Mark 10:35-45

³⁵James and John, the sons of Zebedee, came forward to him and said to him, “Teacher, we want you to do for us whatever we ask of you.”³⁶ And he said to them, “What is it you want me to do for you?”³⁷ And they said to him, “Grant us to sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in your glory.”³⁸ But Jesus said to them, “You do not know what you are asking. Are you able to drink the cup that I drink, or be baptized with the baptism that I am baptized with?”³⁹ They replied, “We are able.” Then Jesus said to them, “The cup that I drink you will drink; and with the baptism with which I am baptized, you will be baptized;⁴⁰ but to sit at my right hand or at my left is not mine to grant, but it is for those for whom it has been prepared.”

⁴¹When the ten heard this, they began to be angry with James and John.
⁴²So Jesus called them and said to them, “You know that among the Gentiles those whom they recognize as their rulers lord it over them, and their great ones are tyrants over them.⁴³ But it is not so among you; but whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant,⁴⁴ and whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all.⁴⁵ For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many.”

We don't have the problem of James and John. People in our congregation are not privately sidling up to our leaders to lobby for positions of authority. In fact, quite the opposite! When I start calling people to ask if they will

take leadership positions, I'm sometimes afraid they will hang up on me. The pastorate's favorite response from last year's gift discernment process was hearing over the phone what sounded like the nominee rolling on the floor laughing when the invitation came.

At Hyattsville Mennonite, our church constitution deliberately establishes a leadership structure that is "not like the Gentiles, whose leaders lord it over them." This structure was developed as a concrete expression of our mission statement:

It states that the following are "Central to our corporate faith"

- the primacy of the life and teachings of Jesus Christ;
- Anabaptist values and beliefs;
- a commitment to congregation-based decision making and leadership.

We strive to:

- be a compassionate community of Christian fellowship, love, support and stability in this transient setting;
- invite commitment to faith in Jesus Christ and deepen faith through ministries of worship, education, service and hospitality;
- call forth and celebrate the talents and abilities of children and adults in all areas of church life.

This mission statement was adopted January 21, 1990, at a congregational meeting more than 20 years ago! It seems to me that that statement still expresses our vision as a congregation. In support of "congregation-based decision-making and leadership," the constitution specifies an organizational

structure. I'm not going to read the entire constitution to you this morning, but I encourage everyone to take a look at it on our web site under "Constitution" then "Structure." (There will NOT be a quiz!)

Hyattsville Mennonite Church is organized into three principal bodies, the church council, the pastorate and the trustees, all of whom are elected by the congregation.

The church council operates as the basic administrative arm of the congregation, overseeing and coordinating work and congregational decision making. The council is made up of representatives from the standing committees, pastorate and trustees, coordinated by the chair of the congregation.

The pastorate particularly addresses the spiritual care of the congregation and advises the pastor in matters of spiritual or personal concern among the congregation, or in matters that involve the pastor.

The trustees have legal standing for Hyattsville Mennonite Church. They oversee financial/business and physical plant issues.

Standing and ad-hoc committees are made up of people who volunteer and/or are nominated by the congregation. Their appointments are not subject to congregational vote. You can see these committees listed on your gift discernment handout.

What we have here is known as a "flat hierarchy" in organizational and systems speak — in contrast to a "tall hierarchy" or "chain of command." I am very proud of this constitutional organization — in a humble Mennonite way. When I was a faculty advisor for the Solar House team at the University of

Maryland, I introduced the model to the students, and they really embraced and ran with it. At the end, their “org charts” were drawn as circles of task groups surrounding a center, and at the center was not a position or a leader, at the center was the idea, the shared vision of the team, which ultimately gave direction and guided decision making.

The structure represents a flow of information and responsibility — not levels of power and subordination. Now, there are a couple of problems or challenges with this sort of structure.

Meetings. The last thing I need in my life is another set of meetings! In the past few years, committees have found creative ways to deal with this problem. We realized that one barrier to acceptance of chair positions was the expectation that the chair would have to both organize and attend her own committee’s meetings AND the monthly church council meeting. A few committees have found that a co-chairship helps to address this issue. One chair organizes and convenes the committee itself, and the other serves as the representative to council. This solution honors our constitution and leadership model while (hopefully) protecting leaders from burdensome time commitments. Other committees have found ways to organize their work without too many meetings. (As an aside, although I might complain about having to spend my evening at “yet another meeting,” often, afterward, I feel blessed to have shared that time with wonderful people who are my brothers and sisters in this church. If deepening relationships is one of your reasons to attend church, you might want to consider getting involved in this way.)

Another challenge is that it is not always the most efficient model — if you define efficiency as “getting things done quickly.” It takes time to keep people informed, to solicit their ideas and to blend those ideas into decisions and actions. There are probably ways that we can learn to do this better, while continuing to remember that our overarching goal is not efficiency, but faithfulness. At the center of all we do, every decision we make, is the call to follow Jesus, to Love God and neighbor.

Acts 9:36-43

³⁶Now in Joppa there was a disciple whose name was Tabitha, which in Greek is Dorcas. She was devoted to good works and acts of charity. ³⁷At that time she became ill and died. When they had washed her, they laid her in a room upstairs. ³⁸Since Lydda was near Joppa, the disciples, who heard that Peter was there, sent two men to him with the request, “Please come to us without delay.” ³⁹So Peter got up and went with them; and when he arrived, they took him to the room upstairs. All the widows stood beside him, weeping and showing tunics and other clothing that Dorcas had made while she was with them. ⁴⁰Peter put all of them outside, and then he knelt down and prayed. He turned to the body and said, “Tabitha, get up.” Then she opened her eyes, and seeing Peter, she sat up. ⁴¹He gave her his hand and helped her up. Then calling the saints and widows, he showed her to be alive. ⁴²This became known throughout Joppa, and many believed in the Lord. ⁴³Meanwhile he stayed in Joppa for some time with a certain Simon, a tanner.

I know this is the lectionary passage for the day, but I am not sure how to connect it to gift discernment. Dorcas was a hard worker, she was a leader among the widows there in Joppa, and she got sick and died. Peter comes along and brings her back to life.

When we think about the growth of the early church, we might focus on the visible leaders, their actions, their miracles, the apostolic succession. Remember that "Apostle" in Greek derives from the verb "to send" — they were the ones who were sent. This story reminds us that the early church was a community of people with a variety of gifts, who cared for each other. In the case of Dorcas, people who led in quiet, very practical ways, who weren't "sent" like the apostles, but were still "called." So, today, maybe we can focus on who Dorcas was, and how she contributed, rather than Peter's miracle.

It is true that sometimes people who work really hard for the church get tired and feel burnt out and need a break. I have had people tell me at different times "I am taking a break. My life is too stressful right now, I have too many things on my plate. I am taking a break from church committees. I will let you know when I am ready to take up leadership again."

I respect that, we all need a break. Shoot, you all gave me a three-month sabbatical last summer. And you know what? People who say that do take a break, get renewed, we hope, and then they come back and offer their gifts again, maybe with a bit more perspective and with better boundaries. Saying "no" for a season may seem like a miracle. I hope we all don't decide to lie down at the same time, but we all do need to take a break, and I know that some of you

are choosing that in this coming year. I applaud you and hope that it is a restful and rejuvenating year. And we look forward to when you are just itching to come back. But for now it creates room for OTHER people to test their gifts, experience the Spirit alive in them in new ways.

I Corinthians 12:4-13

1 -Now there are varieties of gifts,

2 - but the same Spirit;

1 - and there are varieties of services,

2 - but the same Lord;

1- and there are varieties of activities,

2 - but it is the same God who activates all of them in everyone. ⁷To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good. ⁸To one is given through the Spirit the utterance of wisdom,

1- and to another the utterance of knowledge according to the same Spirit,

2 - to another faith by the same Spirit,

1- to another gifts of healing by the one Spirit,

2 - to another the working of miracles,

1- to another prophecy,

2 -to another the discernment of spirits,

1 - to another various kinds of tongues,

2 – to another the interpretation of tongues.

1 - All these are activated by one and the same Spirit, who allots to each one individually just as the Spirit chooses.

*2 - For just as the body is one
1 - and has many members,
2 - and all the members of the body, though many,
1 - are one body,
1 and 2 - so it is with Christ.
1 - For in the one Spirit we were all baptized into one body—
2 - Jews or Greeks,
1 - slaves or free—
1 and 2 - and we were all made to drink of one Spirit.*

I was the worship arts and music coordinator here in the congregation for six years. When I became the pastor, someone noticed that it was too much for me to keep putting the banners up each week. Marie Schmidt (who moved to Utah about five or six years ago) suggested that she gather some people to work on worship arts. I was grateful that she saw the need and filled it.

And then, worship arts started to take on a life of its own. It was no longer just my tired mind, there were many creative minds at work and wow, what people come up with week after week. I am so grateful that this part of the body has found its legs so to speak, that people have tested their gifts in the arts and share them with the congregation. But how do you know what your gift is? I wish Michelle Jantz was here to tell her story. At another church she attended, she participated in a class that helped people discover and uncover their spiritual gifts. She discovered her spiritual gifts include the gift of administration. This is a spiritual gift? Let me tell you how she has offered that to us here at HMC.

Every fall we have a congregational retreat. And every year for quite a number of years, one person on the retreat committee deals with the spread sheet that tracks payments, housing and food needs. It is a lot of info to track and each year the person doing this task says, "I will never do this again." At pastorate, we talked about this problem. We don't like people to burn out from work they dislike. But we also weren't sure if we could find someone to do what must be a dreadful job, since everybody complained so much. Michelle is on pastorate now. She listened carefully to the story and said, "I can do that, I like doing that, it is easy for me." And she was so right. We had been asking the foot to do the work of the arm and it just wasn't working. Now we have the right body part, the right person for the job.

As you look around this morning, as you search through your church directory, think of the gifts you see in others. Write down the name of the person you think would be good as the congregational chair-elect. Even write down why you think that person would be good, what is the spiritual gift you see in that person that would make them good at the position? Sometimes it is helpful to hear from other people what we don't see or can't name in ourselves.

Yes, there are people who have done certain jobs for a long time, and done them well. As part of caring for each other, let's give them a break — a sabbatical.

There are people who feel comfortable speaking up and being in front. There are also those still waters that run deep, quiet people, important behind-the-scenes people with gifts of prayer, caring and discernment.

We are all a part of the body, we all have gifts to offer. Let's get to work (or rest.)