

Spiritual Community: The Renewing of the Church

Session Starter 26: The hours and forms of public worship

What's On Your Mind? Holidays for ministers — part I

DON MUIR, Associate Secretary, ext. 223

General Assembly Office
The Presbyterian Church in Canada
1-800-619-7301

February 2012

Spiritual Community: The Renewing of the Church

The Rev. Dr. Lonnie S. Atkinson
St. Paul's Presbyterian Church, Ingersoll, Ontario

Once upon a time in a church near you, the elders longed for better days. Some harkened back to the glory days gone by. Others imagined a time when people would flock through their doors. Many believed if they could only find the perfect program led by a charismatic leader, all their problems would be solved. Oh, yes, and they needed more money.

But where were the “add water and stir” solutions? the silver bullets? the straight roads in the wilderness?

Each month the elders met, faithfully following their long established agendas and protocols. After reporting and recording, comparing and commiserating, they would go out again into the long winter's night discouraged.

Being a Christian leader in North America in the 21st century is challenging. We were told in the 1970s of a rising biblical illiteracy (*The Strange Silence of the Bible in the Church Today*, James S. Smart). In the 1980s, disillusionment and despair among church leaders rose rapidly (*Ministry in Crisis*, Roy A. Harrisville). By the 1990s, cultural and religious shifts were clear in the Canadian landscape (*Fragmented Gods*, Reginald Bibby). In the past decade, the impact of the growing influence of an ever-increasing secular society has demanded paradigm shifts for Christians.

Where do we turn? Surely, to God alone. We can look to biblical models of leadership. In Exodus, 1 Peter, 1 Timothy, Acts and the gospels we see called, commissioned, ordered, responsive, shared servant shepherd leaders formed in community and framed in hope. As I

wrote my Doctor of Ministry thesis, “Following From In Front - The Eldership as a Model of Spiritual Leadership,” I became more convinced of the potential the eldership offers to the church.

As Presbyterians, we have a unique gift in the eldership. In a denomination of 105,886 professing members, we have over 10,000 teaching and ruling elders (1,343 teaching and 8,931 ruling elders - *Acts & Proceedings 2011*). Our elders are ordained for life to share in servant leadership in a spiritual community.

Signs of the Spiritual Community

“They devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers” (Acts 2:42).

Imagine: session meetings focused on study and prayer; presbyteries sharing the Lord's Table and fellowship at every gathering; and the General Assembly being a community more than a court.

The steps to change are not radical, but the conversion of the hearts and minds of each body of elders is a challenge. Breaking away from the long taught spiritual sandwich model of church meetings (a brief opening and closing prayer bookending the real meat of a meeting) can seem frightening or, to some, unfaithful to our tradition.

This is where the Acts church's Four Elements of Spiritual Community can open and inform as we seek to no longer simply conform but be transformed (Romans 12:2).

Four Elements of a Spiritual Community

Apostles' Teaching
Fellowship
Breaking of Bread
Prayer

Our ministers of Word and Sacrament are to be teaching elders. This gift is often used in limited ways in worship and the occasional study group. What if at every meeting of session, where devoted leaders of the church family gather, significant discipleship training and spiritual formation was offered? This model can have a natural, organic faith nurturing impact on a much wider community. Equally so, more frequent communion experiences and being active in prayer lead to immeasurable blessings.

The session of St. Paul's, Ingersoll, Ontario, sought to follow this example of spiritual community. The meeting agenda is presented as an order of worship rather than a business docket. Its regular meetings include two times of gathered prayer, study sessions and limited time spent on organizational matters. Pre-circulated reports, increased responsibilities and authority for leadership teams, and a focus on discernment have aided the change. All leadership teams, including the board of managers, share in quarterly study and visioning sessions.

Over the past five years, elder-led teams have offered congregational worship leadership each time the minister is absent. Increased participation and leadership in prayer has occurred. In recent months, a longing for future direction in ministry has led to holding two meetings weekly, one for prayer, the other for discernment.

The revisioning of the church and its ministry has not been solely locally focused. St. Paul's has sought to consult on the future life of our denomination. In the past year, a team of elders met with senior church leaders to prayerfully seek direction and to discover ways each congregation and session could actively seek the way of God for us as Canadian Presbyterians. The Presbytery of Paris, through the encouragement of the Education and Nurture Committee, agreed to follow the Acts church community model. Now each meeting has a longer worship service with more regular communion celebrations, a study session and table fellowship. A presbytery prayer partnership was begun.

Growing Spiritual Leadership

To engage and empower the elder leaders of the church, we must affirm their leadership, equip them spiritually and surround them in prayer.

At St. Paul's, we started by developing an accessible leadership venture called "The Spirit Centre." National and international

Christian leaders, visionaries in many fields (health care, business, social change) and the principals of the three PCC theological colleges have all offered leadership. In-depth studies, including Foster's *Celebration of Discipline* and Yancey's *What's So Amazing About Grace?*, have sought to deepen individual spiritual development of elders and the whole faith community.

During this time, missions and ministries have become more focused and energized. Spiritual leaders long to be servant leaders as well.

Steps Forward to a Spiritual Community

Spiritual communities are led by spiritual leaders.

Spiritual leaders are formed and informed by prayer and surrounded in care.

Sessions and congregations longing for a spiritual community are encouraged to open themselves to discover God's direction, to believe in their purposefulness as Christian communities, and to be thankful for the privilege of being called apostles of Jesus.

To explore and deepen their spiritual journey, sessions are invited to consider the following practices:

- Pray. Start with daily prayer, keep spiritual journals, develop prayer chains, have prayer groups/gatherings.
- Study. Form online reflection groups, study at every church meeting or gathered time, encourage faith development for all ages. Remember Christian education is not just for children.
- Enjoy community. Gather regularly (formally/informally) with your church community. Have fun together. Open arms will open hearts.
- Review your spiritual commitments. Plan recommitment celebrations for marriages, baptism, profession of faith, eldership ordination. Each elder, ruling or teaching, is invited to prayerfully review the vows they made at ordination and renew their devotional commitment.
- Give thanks. Surround each day in thanksgiving. Sing praise at home, work and in community.

For Reflection

Each elder and session is invited to

- read and study Acts 2:42-44, Romans 12 and Philippians 2:1-11;
- pray for discernment and wisdom;
- discuss what you believe about spiritual leadership; the spiritual life of the courts of the church; where God is calling us to go as spiritual communities;
- invite others to join you in this exploration - ask your presbytery to engage in new forms of Christian community.