

Rev. Dr. Rebecca L. Kiser
Staying Connected to God - Using Gifts of Leadership
5/16/2021 Easter 7B

We hear a lot of people speak positively and enthusiastically about the early church, those small cells planted after the Day of Pentecost or started by the apostle Paul on his missionary journeys. We read about their passion, their spiritual gifts, their closeness to the first apostles, teaching about that first-hand experience walking with Jesus, and filled with the spirit in such magnificent ways. Many writers and speakers chide our current ways of being the Christ's Church as somehow lacking the verve, the energy, the fervor of those first believers, and urge us to return to the model of those first gatherings.

However, they weren't that different from us today - here in the passage we read from the book The Acts of the Apostles we see even those early folks realized the need for some structure, some organization, some recognized leaders - or else various groups could fly off in many directions. This Jesus movement, unless it would become just a hodge-podge of people all doing their own thing, needed some leadership. We read that the 12 disciples who actually walked with Jesus, now 11 because of losing Judas Iscariot, seek to fill that place so that they have enough witnesses to the resurrection to move forward. Notice the words - *So one of the men who have accompanied us during all the time that the Lord Jesus went in and out among us,*²² *beginning from the baptism of John until the day when he was taken up from us—one of these must become a witness with us to his resurrection.* Evidently there were MANY who followed Jesus from the time of his baptism by John, then through his death, and even witnessing his resurrection. Yes, they chose between 2 men. HOWEVER, there were also women who followed Jesus, paid for food and clothing, and probably cooked. Mary of Magdala was among them, and perhaps the other women who went to the tomb and found the rock rolled away. The 12 were called "disciples," evidently a cadre that Jesus sought to teach in a more intensive way. 12 is a good number, as in the 12 tribes of Israel.

So even from the start, Christ-followers organized their work, which was in response to the Spirit - probably to keep the remembrance of Jesus' words and actions pure, to make sure groups in various places didn't go off on tangents, perhaps to make sure all the teachings of Jesus were handed on correctly - lots of reasons. Movements eventually have to be organized to some extent, and leaders chosen to carry things on in ways that Jesus taught. Maybe we've tended to be over-organized to the point of squashing the creativity of the Spirit, got too hierarchical and promoted too much a professional class of ministers. We can fix that. Yet the need to have some structure and leadership, and a way to work together, is necessary for our

witness and ministry to be effective. God's Spirit inspires us and nudges us in the direction God wills - we organize or structure how we will set out to do it, being responsive, of course, to what the Spirit does.

Now certain personalities like organizing more than other personalities... Presbyterians joke that their theme verse is Paul's declaration, "Let everything be done decently and in order." I used to have a sweatshirt with that on it.... We also make jokes about appointing committee after committee. In that joke about how many Presbyterians does it take to change a lightbulb, there are a couple answers... one is "let's appoint a committee to study the issues"....the other is, "What do you mean, CHANGE?????" Many Presbyterians like things done properly, which, even though it's a noble goal, can get bogged down. A film I used to show for New Member classes talked about a balance of "Order" and "Ardor." Try saying that - "order and ardor." What it means is to not let the organizing drown the passion!! Don't forget the impetus of the Spirit, the fire of love, the creative bursting out of new life. See, ardor can get out of hand, with passionate people all doing what they think is best. Also, order can get overdone - we can get caught up, tied up, in trying to follow the right ways to do everything. (It's interesting that this is the text assigned for the Sunday prior to Pentecost - select leaders, yes, and don't forget that God's Spirit is unchained.)

In one of my pastor groups, someone asked what were the differences between Presbies and Methodists - most of the answers had to do with how we order ourselves - ie polity, i.e. the way we do things and what we call them. Both denominations, and probably most denominations, have the same goals as far as being able to tell the gospel, teach the words of Jesus, grow persons' faith, and do the loving and serving mission of Christ. How we structure ourselves to do these things may differ and may be called by different names. The path to ordination differs, whether pastors are called or appointed, whether we're in Districts with a DS, or in presbyteries with a Resource Presbyter. Local congregations are led either by a Council or a Session; both denominations are connected to other regional congregations through the denomination. Through it all, Presbies and Methodists come out quite similar in living the life of faith, in dedication and commitment, in the praxis, or practice, or practical living out of the life of a Christ-follower.

The whole point of a structure is getting the job done - we need enough structure to be all pulling in the same direction, to share goals of mission, and to allow spaces for spontaneous and creative innovation as well. In the lists of spiritual gifts in the letters apostles wrote to those early cells of believers, there are always gifts of leadership mentioned. Spiritual gifts, as written about in these letters, seem to be similar to personality traits and things that pull us - but with

something more added - the element that it's God's Spirit that has had a hand in it all, especially in developing and using those gifts and talents for the building up of Christ's church, and making sure each congregation has within it the gifts that it needs. We can be confident in our praying, that if God is calling us in certain directions, God's Spirit is preparing the leaders for it.

In our Visioning Process, we pooled the ideas that the spirit had been nudging in us as we prayed for this congregation. We massaged them into 5 main directions: an expanded view of mission nationally, internationally and locally, a better visibility to and welcoming of community folks, better Christian formation and education for children and adults, better fellowship within the congregation, and an increased vitality in worship, including music & tech. I've been asking folks to sign up under one of these interest areas, in order to start pursuing them. My vision is that these 5 groups will gather to talk over the already suggested ideas, choose a couple, bring them to the Council for approval, which is our structure here, and get started.

The 2 Directions that had the most ideas in them were to increase our mission, and to broaden our visibility to the community, both outreach-oriented and other-oriented directions. As your pastor, this pleased me - I work in every congregation I've ever been in to move the focus outward to the world, because it's so easy to think firstly of ourselves - and to me, the gospel is always about witness outwardly. Yes, we need support and culture to do our service and work for the spread of the gospel - and yes, we need training and education to shape our own lives of faith. But to me, most congregations have trouble with the outreach.... Honestly? It does take more effort; it moves us into more unknown territory; it asks us to stretch. It asks us to think of those not like us.

Not so strangely, the only direction folks have signed up for is to have more fellowship internally. There are a couple names under the other directions, only because I've put them there as I've been talking to folks and remembering who had the ideas.

Admittedly, asking folks to sign up is not the best way of recruiting, but its way to start. Personal talks and phone calls are a better way to recruit.

But friends, this is your church, and these are the directions you were led to by the Spirit. I love you all, and I love this congregation, but ultimately this is not my church - it's your church. My call as pastor is to teach you and build you up to do the work of ministry - it's not my call to do it all. Maybe you're thinking, let's wait for the real pastor to get here and see what ideas she has. (Or he has.) The best thinking in the larger church now is to see that all clergy are actually transitional clergy - clergy leadership comes and goes - those who live here are the continuity.

YOU are the church. Clergy's call is to build YOU up and walk alongside you in covering all the bases of what makes up church.

Presbyterians and Methodists both have a high view of what is called the laity, all you dedicated believers who are not called to be ordained clergy, but are gifted in so many other ways with those gifts and talents granted by God's Spirit. YOU are actually the ministers. We have a doctrine called "the priesthood of the believer," which says that each of us called to follow Jesus are fully called as ambassadors for God (Paul's words), priests for God (Jesus' words), and called to serve. I am called as a Teaching Elder, or a Minister of Word and Sacrament, depending on which Book of Order one reads.... I am a guide, a teacher and preacher of the Word ie Jesus Christ; and I am granted the responsibility of performing the sacraments of communion and baptism. YOU are the ministers, called and gifted for the rest of the work of the church. Every one of you. Your calling and your faith is vital, important, and needed, despite your age or gender or education or personality. God has called each of us as Christ-followers, and each of us are important.

I would honestly love it if folks here would stand behind the ideas the Spirit gave us, and claim your interest, gifts, & desire to help this congregation in these directions we envisioned. I love it when folks step forward and volunteer. I also have learned how to call folks and ask personally, which I will do if I have to, because my call and my gift is to guide you all into your own callings, and sometimes we feel like its presumptuous of us to put ourselves forward, or else we feel nervous, or else our self-esteem is low, or many other reasons.

We may have confidence that as God has led us to these directions as important for our congregation's future, God will also give us the gifts and abilities to follow them up. God has the various leaders in mind to help us step out into these directions God gave us.

It's one of the failings of the modern congregational model that it has become more dependent upon the professional clergy. People are busy, and often our faith falls to the sidelines in competition with making a living, getting ahead, raising kids with all their activities, and just feeding ourselves and paying for our houses. Life is complex, and even more as the speed of life increases. To me, my faith and my profession merge; I like to think I would be very involved with my local church even if I had a different vocation. As it is, it's probably easier for me to be involved with the church and its needs because this is my vocation. I realize it's not the same for other folks.

HOWEVER, investment in the works of faith is something we have all been called to. My point this morning is to urge folks to step into it: step into the vision you have for this church to grow in mission in the larger Syracuse area, the nation and the world. Step into the vision of

a greater visibility and welcome to folks in our area. Step into the vision of increased training of adults and teaching faith to our children. Step into the vision for meaningful worship and music. Step into the vision of supporting and knowing those already within our congregation, not just the ones we've known for 20 years. AMEN.