
Reaction or Prescription: Balancing the Church's Order and Need

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“Do you want to be made well?” This was the question of Jesus in John 5:6. It was a question to a lame man lying by the pool of Bethesda, a question to a man who had no ability to become healthy on his own. This man’s legs did not possess the power to walk, much less provide the movement to make it into the pool.

“Do you want to be made well?” is also a question that can be asked to a number of denominations in North America today, and even specifically of congregations within the Reformed Church in America. Churches on the sidelines. Churches not at full strength. Churches longing to be healthy, making a difference for Jesus Christ in their communities.

The response of the lame man was solution-based: “Sir, I have no one to put me into the pool when the water is stirred up; and while I am making my way, someone else steps down ahead of me” (v. 7). He knew what needed to happen. He knew what needed to change. He had thirty-eight years of watching how healing took place and desperately wanting it. Needing it. Praying for it. But never able to get it.

In the lame man’s understanding, all Jesus needed to do was help him into the pool, but Jesus was working out of another understanding. Healing can come in more than one way, and often it is not the obvious or natural way, but a supernatural way.

In verse 8 we read, “Jesus said to him, ‘Stand up, take your mat and walk.’” Jesus broke through thirty-eight years of preconceived longing, of hoping daily for one way for change to occur. And, in an instant, the man was changed.

He didn’t argue that he had to get into the pool for healing—as if that were the only correct way for the change, the healing, to occur. He didn’t ask for the directions to be repeated. He didn’t ask for a vote of the other blind, lame, and paralyzed folks around him. He so wanted to be made well that he just did it: “At once the man was made well, and he took up his mat and began to walk” (v. 9). But at the end of verse 9 a problem looms: “Now that day was a Sabbath.”

That was the issue that got the attention. People were more concerned that this man was breaking Sabbath law by carrying his mat than by the fact that after thirty-eight years he was made well—his life had changed. So a few verses later we read, “Therefore the Jews started persecuting Jesus, because he was doing such things on the Sabbath (v. 16).” The Jews were not just a little upset or irritated. They were angry to the point of persecution, because Jesus was changing lives.

There are pastors and churches in the Far West synod of the Reformed Church in America that are seeing significant change, in their ministry collectively and in the lives of their people, but it's "on the Sabbath." It's happening in unconventional ways, with new paradigms. It is not orderly.

God is at work and inviting us to join him as Jesus did the work of the Father in John 5:17: "My Father is still working, and I also am working." Pastors and churches are about the work of the Father, and it is working. The faith is going forward. The harvest is being brought in. Lives are being changed. The unrighteous are moving to a place of righteousness before God because of a personal confession of faith in Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord.

Since 1998, five new churches have started with six nonordained leaders within the Synod of the Far West. The result has been more than five hundred new people—over 70 percent with no previous church or faith experience—attending new Reformed churches. They are house churches, Hispanic churches, urban churches, and suburban churches. You could hang an "*Out of Order*" sign on each one of those churches, but the people attending them would never know the difference. For them, these churches have provided the biggest impact in their lives. A life-changing impact. An eternal impact.

I am not advocating bending or breaking rules. I am asking for understanding that when one is engaged on a mission field—one that is no longer exclusively global, but now very much local—the ways of doing ministry must change. When ministry is traditional and orderly there is great value in order. But as Jesus showed again and again, there is also value in ministering outside the system. God is a God of order, but also a God of love.

The compassion of Jesus brought action for change, for healing, for eternity. The heart of God is to serve a broken world. As a denomination, we are struggling with our health. This phenomenon is not exclusive to us—most mainline denominations are experiencing a similar malady. In some places we have congregations that are alive and thriving, while in others there is disease and dysfunction.

As Erwin Raphael McManus, an urban pastor in East Los Angeles, rightly observes, the state of the church today in North America may not be the result of shrinking numbers, but it may be the experience of living in a state of atrophy. It may be a wasting away of the body as from defective nutrition or nerve damage (have we lost our nerve?), degeneration or decline as from disuse. It may be a decrease in size, withering, or deteriorating. The problem, he concludes, may not be in how the church is in existence today, but may go beyond that. He says:

If only we could summarize the problem of the American church by simply saying that most churches are not growing. But it's worse than that. Even to say that churches are declining and closing their doors is not to speak of the real tragedy. This may seem strange, but the real tragedy is not that churches are dying but that churches have lost their reason to live!¹

In the Reformed Church we may not be on life support, but Jesus' question is appropriate for us: "Do you want to be made well?" Do you want to have a reason to live? Do you want to get off the sidelines? Do you want to be at full strength? Do you want to make an impact for eternity?

The Value of Order

The introduction to the *Book of Church Order* answers the question, "What is church order and why do we need it?" in this way: "Order is a way to express our unity and achieve cooperation and harmony in the body of Christ as we seek to fulfill our mission. It is our theology lived out in the ways we live and work together."² Order balances against chaos and anarchy. A movement cannot advance without unity, cooperation, and harmony. Order provides structure—methods by which resources flow through an organization to accomplish its work. From the order of creation in Genesis 1 to the design of the Holy City in Revelation 21, we see the validity of the apostle Paul's statement in 1 Corinthians 14 that God is not a God of disorder. In Exodus 18 and Numbers 11 we read about Moses' attempts to bring order to what was a very disorderly ministry situation. Interestingly, in both situations the solution included adding leaders who could help carry the load. In Num. 11:16-18 we are told what God did to help bring order to the structure:

The Lord said to Moses: "Bring me seventy of Israel's elders who are known to you as leaders and officials among the people. Have them come to the Tent of Meeting, that they may stand there with you. I will come down and speak with you there, and I will take of the Spirit that is on you and put the Spirit on them. They will help you carry the burden of the people so that you will not have to carry it alone."

Moses couldn't handle all the responsibilities in leading Israel. God provided the plan for a new structure: empower seventy qualified leaders and let them help carry the burden. It was an opportunity for unity, cooperation, and harmony.

Order has value. It provides structure. It offers security. It promotes predictability. Order helps large organizations function.

The Dark Side of Order

There is also a dark side to how organizations use their structure. Control comes first to mind. Control is a way for those in power to keep their power. Those in power are able to manipulate the system in order to achieve or maintain a desired end. Considering the place issues such as racism, gender equity, and empowerment hold in institutions, is it not possible that the institutional order provides a structure for those in power to maintain control? The gatekeepers

whose knowledge and position provide a power base have the ability to limit those who would enter in.

On the dark side of order is maintaining the structure as an organization rather than an organism. It is often when the order takes priority that the system becomes lifeless instead of life giving. The body of Christ is no longer alive and vibrant and vital, but mechanistic, legalistic, or limiting. Margaret Wheatley made the observation in her book, *Leadership and the New Science*:

It is hard to open ourselves to a world of inherent orderliness. "In life, the issue is not control, but dynamic connectedness." . . . I want to act from that knowledge I want to trust in this universe so much that I give up playing God. I want to stop struggling to hold things together. I want to experience such security that the concept of "allowing"—trusting that the appropriate forms will emerge—ceases to be scary. I want to surrender my fear of the universe and join with everyone I know in an organization that opens willingly to its environment, participating gracefully in the unfolding dance of order.³

Today we are engaged in the "unfolding dance of order." It is our opportunity to move into an emerging form, sensing God's Spirit leading us.

In the building and construction industry the statement is often made, "We form our buildings and then our buildings form us." We see this in the construction of our churches as well. The principle may also be true of our structure as well as our structures: "We form our order and then our order forms us." We have followed our order for not only years, but decades—and beyond decades for centuries. We are products of the *Book of Church Order*. We value the fact that for almost 375 years we have done things decently and in order.

The 2002 General Synod did something that was out of order. It made a decision to move out in faith to meet a need within our denomination. It requested that order follow need, not dictate or limit it. This has caused anger, frustration, questioning, criticism, and concern. It has also opened a door to a future where we can live out being the body of Christ in a vibrant, vital, and effective way. Our acting is preceding our planning—that allows us to affect our system by creating a new environment that produces opportunities and potentials both for ministries and for new leaders. The re-forming that is happening can occur both according to and in conjunction with the Word of God, the will of God, and the working of God's Spirit.

We are not creating positions, but empowering people. We are not controlling order, but creating the environment for what is envisioned in Eph. 4:11-16 to flourish. It is an opening up of the possibility of greater participation—an expression of the principle of complementarity where our unity is expressed with greater diversity.

The Needs of the Church

When talking about order and the needs of the church, one moves from a very objective viewpoint—*order*—to a very subjective one—*needs*. What are the needs of the church? They are probably myriad and, depending upon whom you talk to, vary depending upon context, culture, and each congregation. To help bring greater objectivity to defining the needs of the church, I included an inquiry on a survey that was sent to the one hundred churches within the Far West Synod. Forty-five responses were returned. Responding to the question, “What does the local church need today?” the top five answers included:

1. The raising up of leaders in the church who are visionary and able to provide direction, influence, and equipping.
2. A passion for evangelism to share the good news of Jesus Christ in their communities.
3. The practical development of disciples who are devoted followers of Jesus Christ in their life and lifestyle.
4. An increased passion for prayer.
5. A clear vision and sense of purpose in their ministry.

The raising up of leaders in the church today is seen as the primary need of the local church. The pattern of Jesus was the investment in leaders who could influence a movement to transform the world. In Luke 10 we read of Jesus’ experience, similar to Moses’, in developing seventy leaders:

Later the Master selected seventy and sent them ahead of him in pairs to every town and place where he intended to go. He gave them this charge: “What a huge harvest! And how few the harvest hands. So on your knees; ask the God of the Harvest to send harvest hands” (Luke 10:1-2, *The Message*).

From Jesus we see that the first step in raising leaders is *spiritual empowerment*. The power to reach communities with the gospel of Jesus Christ will not come from human potential. Our need is to be filled with the Holy Spirit—just like the early church in Acts 1:8—in order to make disciples and be witnesses. We are encouraged to:

Pray. Mobilizing leaders for the church starts with people who are on their knees before God, interceding for our Lord’s blessing and favor in the process.

Ask. The need for leaders who can mobilize churches today for mission and ministry is great, and we must ask God to provide

the new leaders necessary to lead the church forward in mission.

Believe. Do we have a supernatural expectation, believing when we pray that God will act in providing for our needs and raising leaders who can reach the harvest?

The next step involves the *selection process*. How did Jesus know how to select the seventy? How do we know today who the leaders are for the church as it moves into the future? Leadership selection and development looks closely at the call of God on a leader's life. It identifies the hand of God at work through a lifetime of preparation that culminates in faithfulness and fruitfulness as one lives out his or her divine calling.

The third step is the evolution into a *sending movement*. As men and women are sent into the harvest, how can we ensure they have the character and competencies necessary to reap a bountiful harvest? Leaders are disciples who possess a Christlike character that is evident. As disciples, they are able to make more disciples who are able to follow Christ in mission. As leaders, they have been trained to influence groups of people in order to achieve God's purposes for their ministry.

As we seek within the Far West Synod to help churches fulfill this need, we have identified several values from our existing pastors that should be incorporated into a leadership development process:

- *In-Ministry Formation.* Hands-on ministry within the context of the local church provides a prime location for leadership development. Opportunities to grow in real-life ministry situations can give direction in forming and informing emerging leaders.
- *Competency-based Equipping.* While the value of education is maintained, it is also expanded to include the need for leaders who are equipped with ministry skills that will provide greater effectiveness for local church ministry. The test of a leader is not executed exclusively in a classroom, but in a conference room, small group, discipleship relationship, and in moving a group of gifted ministry workers forward in living out their vision for ministry.
- *Missional Context.* The vision of the church as a maintained organization or as a covenant community in mission will determine our motivation for sending workers into the harvest. If we see the need as Jesus did in Luke 10; if we see the incredible potential for ministry that requires many, many more laborers; if we see the fields white for the harvest, how can we help but respond with a vision for raising up as many workers for the harvest as possible?
- *Lifelong Learning, Mobilizing Leaders.* This process values the fact that leaders are learners. Cultivating one's leadership takes a

commitment that lasts a lifetime. Regular training, equipping, and assessing provide insight and information to challenge and develop leaders who expand their ministry influence. Whether it is the "Connects" program of Western Theological Seminary, seminars, the Center for the Continuing Education of the Church at Western Seminary, or symposiums, personal leadership development is a key component of learning that grows one's capacity to lead.

These are many of the values that have emerged over the last generation with the educational track of ministry formation. They are learnings that need not be retained only at a Master of Divinity level but offer opportunities for new leaders who are being called forth.

Process Versus Position

As a region, in launching our Mobilizing Leaders process, we place more value on process than on a position called "commissioned pastor."

If you think back to your own development as a leader, you can identify a progression. You probably were entrusted with and then faithful with little before you were given the opportunity to be faithful with much. I found emerging leaders in my ministry who may first have begun with setting up chairs and the sound system in our church plant. Then they moved to an apprenticing leadership role, and then overseeing a specific aspect of ministry. I may have disciplined them weekly before asking them to lead someone else through a process of discipleship. They may have sat with me in my small group, and after some time been given the opportunity to teach a portion of a lesson, then a whole lesson, then lead their own group. For me, leadership began with five junior high students, then thirty high school students, then a hundred college students, and then almost seven hundred parishioners.

Seminary, educational development, and continued learning were foundational values in my process. Those values should be foundational for every leadership development process. And it included the influence of my father, Ray De Vries, a 1957 Western Seminary graduate who saw his task as spiritual leader and father to see the realization of my leadership potential.

Leaders are developed daily, not just in a day. We have taken the position of commissioned pastor and have made it into a developmental process in order to grow leaders as they move toward greater ministry influence.

Three levels of leadership have been identified to help leaders discover their call and level of effectiveness in ministry. It is not expected or assumed that every future leader will aspire and grow to the third level. The majority will move into the first level of mobilizing leaders and discover that is exactly where they desire to be and where God called them to be. Each level brings greater responsibilities, greater challenges, and a greater sense of call to ministry.

The first level is "Commissioned Leader." Commissioned leaders minister under the authority and within the context of the local church. They are usually

elders who have sensed a deeper call and are willing make a deeper commitment to serving the church in ministry. Commissioned leaders may have a specific responsibility over an entire ministry area within a church: youth ministry, small groups, Christian education, worship design and team, pastoral care, or any others that would coordinate the needs of the church with the passion of a potential leader.

The commissioned leader serves at staff level within the local church. It may be as a part-time or full-time staff person, and it may or may not be as a volunteer or include compensation. These issues would be determined by the needs of the church and the desires of the consistory, pastor, and commissioned leader candidate.

Commissioned leaders are set apart and confirmed for ministry by a local congregation and have begun the process by applying to the classis as an initial step into the mobilizing leaders process. They are given tools to help them move forward with in-ministry formation and ministry competency development. They are coached and mentored by pastors in discipleship relationships and are evaluated annually. Upon demonstrating competency in designated areas, they take the "commissioned leader assessment." With valid completion of the assessment, they are confirmed by their congregations as commissioned leaders. Reaffirmation of their calls would be celebrated and confirmed every five years to discern an ongoing call to ministry, continuing learning and growth, and increasing ministry influence and impact.

The next level is "commissioned pastor." Commissioned pastors have demonstrated competency as commissioned leaders, have completed the assessment, reflect a growing and sanctifying work of the Holy Spirit in their lives, and sense God calling them to move into a larger ministry role. The internal call is confirmed by church leaders and by evidence of growing ministry influence and effectiveness. They are beginning to move from leading a group of followers to reproducing and directing other emerging leaders.

The ministry of a commissioned pastor candidate may have grown to oversight of the church's entire small group ministry with ten to fifteen small group leaders being trained and reporting to this person. He or she may have spiritual responsibility over a hundred people within the congregation—teaching, discipling, and caring for a Sunday school class or entire ministry area. The candidate may be the children's minister with more than thirty volunteers, or a youth director who provides spiritual oversight and development for both the middle and high school students and a youth staff of fifteen to twenty.

A commissioned pastor serves under the authority and supervision of a classis, consistent with the guidelines and standards provided by the denomination. The classis takes responsibility for training and equipping candidates, and confirming their call to become commissioned pastors. Mentoring by an assigned coach is a critical component of this process, as is involvement in a network with other candidates within the classis who can provide encouragement, accountability, and experiences that will expand and enhance a

growing leader's ministry knowledge and skills. The classis may authorize a commissioned pastor to:

- Preach the Word;
- Administer the sacraments;
- Serve as the presiding officer of the consistory;
- Preside at the ordination and installation of elders and deacons;
- Have a voice and vote at classis meetings;
- Perform a service of Christian marriage when approved by the consistory and allowed by state law.

Commissioned pastors will be subject to the disciplinary procedures of the classes to which they belong. Annual evaluation by the classis should reflect a commitment to the mobilizing leaders paradigm including lifelong learning, in-ministry formation, competency-based equipping, within the missional context. Reaffirmation of a commissioned pastor's call will be evaluated by the classis every five years to discern a continued commitment to the ministry of commissioned pastor.

The third level is "missionary pastor." Mission stations require missionary pastors. The ability to serve in this capacity requires significant effort and affirmation of call in the life of a leader. A missionary pastor would have the opportunity to serve as a solo or senior pastor or a church planter. The missionary pastor is entrusted with leading a local congregation or starting a new church.

Missionary pastors have been confirmed, developing through the positions of commissioned leader and commissioned pastor. Having participated in the mobilizing leaders process, they have grown in their competence as pastors, proving themselves spiritual leaders within a congregation, influencing the lives of many and seeing both spiritual and leadership reproduction and ministry multiplication as the fruit of their labors.

A classis accepts the responsibility of training and equipping missionary pastors to face the responsibilities of a senior leadership role. It will help them grow in biblical knowledge, ministry skills, and character development. Coaching is provided, and involvement in a leadership network is an integral part of growing and learning at this level. Annual evaluation is required from the classis and the church where the missionary pastor is serving, and reaffirmation of a missionary pastor's call occurs every five years to confirm the call of God upon their lives and ministries, gifting consistent with their ministry service, and a commitment for ongoing growth and development. Missionary pastors may serve churches within the entire Far West region and may receive calls from churches of other classes within the region based upon similar by-laws and/or policies of each of the five classes and the acceptance of the missionary pastor to the new classis.

Progressive leadership with developing gifts and opportunities, under the guidance and encouragement of other leaders, will allow for a process that will affirm a leader's specific role and calling. Mobilizing leaders allows emerging leaders to grow to their maximum potential by responding to greater responsibilities, greater challenges, and a greater sense of call to ministry—while impacting the harvest for Jesus Christ.

The delivery system for much of the development of new church leaders will take place, we believe and hope, in conjunction with seminaries, through distance learning, and especially using the gift that the General Synod professors of theology provide the larger church in developing a new generation of leaders. The foundation that has been built upon through the last generation of leaders can be passed on as we commission new leaders to use those gifts and live out their divine call in ministry.

Toward a New Order

John Stewart is one of the first commissioned pastors to be commissioned by the Classis of California. He is a youth pastor at the Palm Canyon Community Church, Moreno Valley, California, and previously served at the New Life Community Church in Cerritos, California. John has served in youth ministry for more than fifteen years. He received his B.A. from Azusa Pacific University, including a credential in youth ministry. John pursued additional study in the sacraments, Reformed theology, the standards, and Reformed polity and missions before being examined by the classis and accepted for commissioning.

John ministers to more than 250 junior high and high school students each week. He has one full-time staff person under him, and more than fifteen volunteers who serve on his youth staff. John has two young men and one young woman who have heard the call to ministry and are now serving full time as youth pastors—he has “reproduced himself” as a leader and disciple in them. Dozens of students have made confessions of faith and been baptized as a result of John's ministry.

Loren van Woudenberg will be one of the next commissioned pastors to be commissioned by the Classis of California. He was a Christian high school Bible teacher who heard the call to ministry more than twenty years ago. He discipled John Stewart. He has served in three churches—one in the Classis of the Cascades, where he was an associate pastor with the responsibility of equipping small group leaders and starting new small groups. Under Loren's ministry, forty small groups were started and more than forty leaders were trained.

Loren is now a church planter in Ontario, California. Serving with Paul Thé, another commissioned pastor, the new congregation has been worshiping for eighteen months. Last month it added a second Sunday morning service because the first was at standing room only capacity. The services are averaging more than two hundred adults and children each week, and the pastors have baptized more than thirty adults who have made confession of faith. Worship at The

Bridge is vibrant, alive, and makes an impact in the lives of many men and women who have had little previous faith experience.

The Reformed Church in America is at a crossroads in equipping and empowering new leaders for this new century. Our order recognizes four offices: deacon, elder, minister of Word and sacrament, and General Synod professor of theology. Is there room for John and Loren? For Courtney and Jeremy and Tim who have been raised up from within a Reformed Church youth ministry and are now serving in Reformed churches? Is being an elder adequate as an ordination to serve in full-time ministry? Should they be required to become ministers of Word and sacrament? To receive a master of divinity degree?

They do not see themselves as second-class ministers. Their churches and the people to whom they minister do not view them as sub-par, minister of Word and sacrament “wannabes.” They do not care that they are not making a compensation package of more than \$60,000. They see themselves as full partners in ministry who have seen drug overdoses, suicide attempts, runaways, divorces, marital infidelity, and children die from cancer at way too young an age. They have taught the Word of God, helped people find new life in Jesus Christ, baptized new believers, invested themselves in new disciples, walked with people in spiritual gifts discovery and deployment, and reproduced themselves in numerous new leaders.

Where is their place in the system? Where do they fit in the order? Their concern for order is secondary to their desire to see change occur in the lives of the people to whom they are called.

When ministry and mission is our purpose, we do not need to preserve a system but to allow the system to move from being reactionary to providing prescriptions for progress into the future. Thirty-eight years ago in 1964, in a sermon on Pentecost, Howard Hageman said these prophetic words:

Some of you may know that for the past year or so I have been working on a history of the Christian Church for young people. It has now gone to the publisher and will be out sometime next fall. Well, time and again as I was reading and studying for that book, I was impressed by the same fact. Over and over again in history, the church became so rigid, so defensive, and so insensitive to the world around it that any good historian would know that nothing could save it. But always at those moments in history, the church experienced renewal, reformation. We speak about the Reformation and we should, more often than we do. But actually there have been many reformations in the history of the church. And, don't you see, there will be, there must be many more. We may be living through one right now and not quite realizing it. For how can we say as a church that with all our laziness, indifference, and ineptness, we are perfect servants? Sometimes the machinery will creak and the gears will grind. Sometimes it will mean giving up things we thought

we could not do without. But the creator spirit is always at work moving God's people out of the church that was, into the church that shall be. And where the Spirit is not present in creative power, the church is dead.⁴

As we move toward a new order—if we really seek the Spirit first, ministry second, and then office we will discover that it is not about order or even an office, but honesty and hope; not structure, but Scripture; not form or even function, but faith; not rules, but relationship; not being organizational, but organic; not ruling, but releasing.

ENDNOTES

¹ Erwin Raphael McManus, *An Unstoppable Force: Daring to Become the Church God had in Mind* (Loveland, Col: Group Publishing, 2001), 24.

² Reformed Church in America, *The Book of Church Order* (New York: Reformed Church Press, 2002), i.

³ Margaret J. Wheatley, *Leadership and the New Science: Discovering Order in a Chaotic World* (San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler, 1999), 25.

⁴ Gregg A. Mast, ed., *Raising the Dead: Sermons of Howard G. Hageman*. The Historical Series of the Reformed Church in America, No. 34. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), 232.