A Response to “Elder-Pastors and Deacon-Evangelists” and “From Maintenance to Ministry”

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We don't get it. The truth is we just don't get it. Those of us who attend worship faithfully every Sunday, contribute regularly, and raise our children in the church don't really understand “office.” Most congregants who are approached to serve as elders and deacons respond with two questions: “Why me?” and “What does an elder or deacon do anyway?”

There has been a serious breakdown in communication between what Christ wants from his followers and how the church has been structured. We spend so much time organizing ourselves, attending meetings, and arguing over decisions that we have precious little time left for doing what God calls the church to do, and somewhere along the line we have failed to communicate to believers the joy of discipleship. The credibility gap between living the abundant life and finding enough people to serve on a consistory is huge. When I was first elected a deacon in my church, I was so thrilled that I invited my close friends to a celebratory luncheon the day I was ordained. How is it, then, that so many people see serving in the church as a burden rather than a blessing? How can we talk about honoring office when we fail to perceive what a privilege it is to be about God's work?

I once heard our current General Synod president John Chang say that Reformed people have their own version of the Holy Trinity—the Holy Father, the Holy Son, and the Holy Bible. He lamented the fact that we give short shrift to the Holy Spirit in our expectations and understandings of the Christian walk. Where is the presence of the Holy Spirit in our understanding of office? How much is it a factor when we are looking for individuals to serve on our consistories? I would rather have an elder of my church be someone who has an intimate relationship with God than someone who could cite chapter and verse of the Book of Church Order. I'd rather have a deacon on fire for being the very presence of Jesus in the world than someone gifted at construction or managing money. These qualities, of course, are not mutually exclusive; but, for the kingdom’s sake, we must value connectedness to God as the more important qualification for these offices.

That is why the news about fresh approaches to the office of deacon based on making a difference in people's lives, about elders who take seriously their role in the spiritual health of their congregation, and about church revitalization
and new church starts are such a breath of fresh air for us. They give us renewed hope. For we are always in danger in the organized church of developing characteristics of some Jewish leaders in Jesus’ time—concerned about laws and the way we have always done things, and so busy on our way to meetings that we don’t stop to help the injured person by the side of the road.

I’m not saying we don’t need order and office in the church, but I am saying that they should not be the dominant forces at work in our communal life. The church is mission, and order and office exist solely to help fulfill that mission. Yes, our offices are based on a calling by God, but they are very much a creation of the church to provide structure, order, and empowerment to carry on the work of the church. They are necessary, but they ought not to be cast in stone. The church is not static; it is a living, breathing organism, and change is inevitable.

Jim Brownson points out that the offices of the church are not delineated clearly in the New Testament, and he relates that to the fact that the early church was “in a missionary situation and long-term strategies had not been worked out.” I submit to you that we are in a very similar situation today. With the postmodern world indifferent to the place of God in everyday life, and many whose paths we cross every day untouched by any sense of the need to worship and serve God, we are most definitely in a missionary situation, and we may need to adjust accordingly.

How refreshing to hear Betty Voskuil relate the freedom with which the church of Chiapas has responded to the hunger for spiritual leadership in its country. It is raising up indigenous laity to take on roles as spiritual leaders that we in the United States would consider them ill-prepared to do. Yet they are stepping out in faith, learning from the handful of trained pastors available to them, and trusting the Holy Spirit to guide them. They are doing it because if they don’t, no one else will. That’s why the commissioned pastor track is so important. It raises up spiritual leaders to serve in places where no one else will serve. It is an avenue by which hundreds of people can obey the call of God on their lives and prepare themselves for ministry in a much more accessible, achievable, and inviting way.

There is a company in New York City called Hidden People. That’s what we have in the Reformed Church—in every church and in every believer is the potential to be much more than we presently are. If we are to be relevant in the postmodern world, we will need to put our hands on more hidden people of God to go out and be the very presence of God in the world. We need more gifted spiritual leaders—and the tools to identify and train them.

We must make a distinction between the concept of empowering the ministry of the laity, which has to do with acknowledging the gifts and equipping all the saints to be in ministry, and the emerging ministry of commissioned pastors. They are two entirely different ministry concepts. The call to become a commissioned pastor is not simply an extension of the role of elder or deacon—a kind of super-layperson. It is a distinct call in and of itself.
I must commend Jim Brownson for his no-holds-barred approach to the discussion of elders and deacons. He frees us up to think in terms of full-time paid elders and deacons fulfilling key roles in the church. What confuses me is whether his intention is to replace our current concept of ordained elders and deacons as “volunteers from the congregation who take on minimal responsibilities with no pay” with an entirely different approach of all-paid, full-time elders and deacons. If that is not the case, and the idea is to accommodate both types, then the inevitable result would be a two-tiered system that would make the volunteers feel like second-class citizens. Although I agree that we need to give the offices of elder and deacon the honor and respect they deserve, the reality is that until such time as we require that our elders and deacons ratchet up their commitment in terms of time, theological preparation, and spiritual maturity, they will always be seen as the weaker links of those ordained to office.

Therein lies the rub. We currently have four offices in the Reformed Church. Commissioned pastors lie somewhere between the two offices which require substantial education and deep spiritual maturity, minister and General Synod professor, and the two offices which are perceived by most as volunteer and obtained by a simple election process, elder and deacon. Commissioned pastors belong in neither category, but rather should be freely acknowledged and honored for the unique contribution they will make to our denomination.

In the same way that we understand that every person who becomes a minister of Word and sacrament was once a layperson, but by virtue of their office and call by God, we no longer identify them as laypeople, so those who are called by God to become commissioned pastors should not still be viewed as “super-sized” elders or deacons. They are pastors. They are called to serve at a leadership plateau which is not classically schooled or financially rewarded like ordained ministers of Word and sacrament are, but they are most certainly more thoroughly trained theologically and prepared to lead spiritually than the typical elder or deacon of a local congregation.

In fact, our guiding principle has consistently been not to “dumb down” the requirements for commissioned pastor candidates. Our estimate is that the average course of study will take about three years of part-time study to complete. It is absolutely essential that the denomination provide consistent, clear guidelines that assure that these individuals have comprehensive preparation rigorous enough to equip them for faithful, informed preaching, teaching, and equipping of the saints. Because they are preparing for roles as pastors of small congregations, urban, rural, and new church start spiritual leaders, and for church staff positions requiring theological insight, they fall into the category of those who have authority over the church. Therefore, recognition of their office is critical to the effective exercise of their role.

The need for more spiritual leaders for congregations on the fringe of financial and membership viability is so strong that many churches have gone out on their own, finding pastors whose educational background is sketchy at
best. Classes and regional synods have been frustrated because they could not provide a better alternative. With the commissioned pastor track, we as a denomination now will be able to give them a better solution. There should be no person in spiritual leadership of one of our churches who does not have access to the proper theological and pastoral training needed.

There was a reason why the term “commissioned pastor” was chosen. Because their training is less than that required of ministers of Word and sacrament and the position held is accountable to a specific classis, it is "commissioned" rather than “ordained.” Because in most cases the person will be overseeing the spiritual needs of a congregation, we used the word “pastor” rather than “elder” to honor the training, credentials, and call of the individual and to make clear his or her authority and responsibility.

The ministry designation of commissioned pastor is not being established to provide an easy way to be a pastor, nor to give enhanced standing and training to elders and deacons. It is being established because we need uniquely trained individuals to serve in places most ordained ministers of Word and sacrament are unwilling to go, either because they believe they are overqualified or because the location, salary, or type of ministry fail to meet their interests or requirements. It is being established because we don't have enough fully ordained ministers in the pipeline to meet the needs of the church of the twenty-first century. Perhaps most of important of all, it is being created because there are gifted, committed leaders in our churches and in our denomination who want to serve God and are eager to be trained, but—because of family responsibilities, age, financial constraints, or involvement in ministries they cannot abandon—are unable to move to another locale and devote three years to theological study. If God is calling them, then we who so clearly care about the highest standards of preparation for ministry need to do everything within our power to make sure a pathway is provided to train them properly.

But there is one thing about which we need to be abundantly clear. We cannot expect people to work and prepare, to commit time, money, and sacrifice to equip themselves as commissioned pastors without honoring their call and giving them a clearly designated and distinct place within our structure which unequivocally affirms that their ministry matters to God and to us.