A Response to “www.God.net” and “Tale of Two Churches”

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Renee and Allan have painted for us landscapes of the future of “office” where the leadership guru Warren Bennis and the Belgic Confession dance together on the horizon. If that doesn’t give one pause, the images of www.God.net and the community of the Trinity finding themselves in the same landscape gives one a hint of the music to which they are swaying. Rather than offering comments on each of these two papers, I want to suggest that we draw out from each some common threads with which to weave a response.

I have four observations about the papers that I believe will lead us to reflect more seriously about the role of office in the church.

First, as Allan reminds us, it is impossible to reflect on the role of office without considering seriously our understanding of the church. It is true that American cultural values have given rise to a deep sense that the church is a voluntary association in which we need to recruit both members and leaders for our future. As we hold this portrait in one hand, we hold in the other a picture of the church that is quite different. In this other hand we see a covenantal community chosen by God. Although this covenantal portrait may seem irrelevant, indeed irritating to our modern ears and hearts, there is still something in our self-understanding that continues to look to God’s choice of us rather than to our election of God. A voluntary association depends on recruitment to fill its pews and pulpits. A covenantal community depends on a gracious, providential God who calls us and will not let us go. When this is the case, then it is the responsibility of the church not to recruit people but to help people discern God’s claim and call on their lives. It is also the responsibility of the church not to recruit people to fill a predetermined number of offices, but rather to discern God’s call and to build our ministries and consistories accordingly. Contrary to popular opinion and custom, there is nothing in our church order that requires an equal number of elders and deacons. Rather our order acknowledges that we need to respond to God’s call and to the world’s needs.

Before leaving this first point, allow me to remind us of the well-known and loved story of old Eli and young Samuel. Samuel was called by God into service, not recruited by Eli. It was Eli’s role, as it is the role of the church, first to assist our people in discerning God’s voice and then to help form them for ministry.

Second, when the role of the church is understood in such a way, it quickly becomes evident that we need to nurture our ability to discern the way and will of God. Here we depend on what has come to be known as the priesthood of all
believers. Allan mentioned to me the other day that the phrase “priesthood of all believers” does not appear anywhere in our confessional history. That is not to say that our core commitment to the accessibility of God to the whole church is not in the DNA of the Reformed tradition, but it does give us pause to reflect carefully on its role in our ecclesiology. I observe that American cultural values have again done some violence to this belief. It is clear that often when we speak the phrase, “the priesthood of all believers,” there are many who hear the words, “the priesthood of each believer.” Such an understanding leads to a radically individualistic perspective. Subjective experiences with the Word and/or the Spirit lead each person to do what is right in his or her own eyes. God has called and claimed a people, a nation, and a priesthood that serves to mediate and confirm God’s voice. As Luke writes in the fifteenth chapter of Acts about the first Council of Jerusalem, “It seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us . . .” (v. 28, emphasis added). Individuals are priests only as they share in the priesthood of all believers.

What this means for our discussion regarding office is that God calls and claims us to serve, and the priesthood of all believers confirms the call and leads us to be formed for ministry. Some are fond of saying that if a leader turns around and discovers there is no one following, then he or she needs to wonder. A mark of leadership in the Reformed tradition is equally important. If the leader looks to his or her side and discovers that he or she is alone, then we have failed to fulfill our deep commitment to a collegial leadership in which we are mutually supportive and accountable. Just as the community reflects the priesthood of all believers, the offices also can only function together in their role as leader.

Third, to this point the conversation has not swerved far from our roots. I now want us to turn to Allan’s words regarding the office of elder: “The office of elder need not be thought of only as supervisory. It can also be understood as an office that has a role in the lives of members in their vocational tasks, thus having a ministry that extends beyond the bounds of the church.” I want to move even further down this road. At the ordination to all three offices, the gathered community is reminded, “Together they enable the whole mission of the church.” That mission clearly calls each of the offices to function outside the bounds of a local congregation. Both the office of minister and that of elder provide leadership at a classis, regional synod, and General Synod level, communicating clearly that people ordained to these two offices are called to serve the whole church. With the creation of classis-wide diaconal conferences, the call of deacons to serve beyond the local congregation is also confirmed. This understanding of office is understood most clearly when we recognize that a person is ordained to office only once. While an office holder may move from church to church, and perhaps from denomination to denomination, one ordination to office is all that is required. The time is long overdue for us to use the offices more readily beyond local congregations in service of the whole church in pursuit of the church’s whole mission.
I would like to offer a suggestion here that may flesh out this third section. What would it mean for the new ministry designation of commissioned pastor approved by the 2002 General Synod to be conceived within our church order as a classis-ordained elder? Such an act, a classis ordaining not only a minister of Word and sacrament but also an elder being called to specialized ministry, would communicate clearly the responsibilities an elder could assume beyond a local congregation. It would also provide an accountable and supportive place within our order for commissioned pastors to find a home. If such a plan would be considered, it would need to respect the unique call of each office while providing more flexibility in how each office could serve both the church and the world.

Fourth, Renee reminds us that our conversation should not conclude, however, when we touch the walls of the church, no matter how broadly we conceive it. She writes:

If the church is understood as a public through which the Holy Spirit publicizes the mystery of God once hidden and now revealed in Jesus Christ, then the offices of minister, elder, and deacon must be understood as public offices to which persons are called publicly and ordained publicly according to the church’s quite public order. Through these public offices, “the age to come, the kingdom of God, makes its claim known in this age, to the powers that be,” and within the congregation. The Reformers understood that persons holding the office of minister are responsible to “make public proclamation of and public argument for the Word of God, to administer the sacraments as public acts, to call the public and its magistrates to judgment before divine law.” Elders are responsible to make public God’s intention for human community, and deacons to make public God’s compassion and desire for justice and peace. Faithfulness in these public offices assumes an understanding of and accountability to the church’s public theology.

This understanding moves us to a completely new vantage point when it comes to office. It is consistent with the biblical foundations and the intentions of the Reformers in a world where the church and its offices were to touch every part of society. How can our offices serve the world? The minister as proclaimer of the Word and the deacon as the servant of mercy and justice in the world need to be imagined in new ways. It is the office of elder, however, parochially conceived and internally focused, which presents us with the greatest challenge. If the church is to serve a world hungry for hope and thirsty for grace, then our offices must turn their eyes and hearts from nurturing only a chosen few toward a world created and loved by One who will not ignore its cries.