

Our Shared Ministry

Acts 6:1-7

First Christian Church (Disciples of Christ)

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Some of you may be aware that in the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) this week is celebrated as Week of the Ministry. While in recent years the Hallmark greeting card company may have helped the connection between October and Clergy Appreciation month became more common, Disciples have, since 1933, set aside the second week in October as a time to “uplift pastors with the goal of keeping them in ministry and encouraging others to choose ministry as their calling” ([Supporting Your Pastor During Week of Ministry – Kansas Disciples of Christ](#)). This is important not only for clergy but for the church. And we, your clergy staff, are grateful for the many ways, all year long, that you show your support and encouragement to us.

Meanwhile, and trust me when I say that those of us in professional ministry often know this best, ministry is not just about the professionals among us. It is about all of us.

In fact, that is affirmed time and time again by people of faith and by faith communities that talk about the priesthood of all believers, the idea that all of us are gifted and called to ministry.

This was certainly affirmed in the Stone-Campbell movement which birthed the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ). As a church born and grown on the American frontier, the reality is that we would not exist today were it not for the ministry of strong and faithful lay people, who alongside trained clergy, made sure that the faith was shared and that people were taken care of.

I often talk about the little church I served while in college. It was a sweet little building that looked like it stepped out of a picture from the past. It sat in the country in an unincorporated community that was more like a wide spot in the road. But there, with a student minister who wasn't even present every Sunday, they made ministry happen. Lucy Belle played the piano Sunday after Sunday and kept the church books, and she was a constant reminder in word and deed of generosity. Kathleen made sure the littles had Sunday School and learned their Bible stories. Kevin, new to the community, was eager to offer his handyman skills and craftsmanship to whatever project was next on the list. Leland and Leona shared a ministry of hospitality, often the first to welcome new folks in. And Audrey, she kept the whole system running like a well-oiled machine.

And while we all might have memories of such faith communities and the people who made them possible...while we might look around this room today and see people

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around us who are so gifted in so many ways...even though we see this lived out in the church of our life and times, it is not an idea unique to us.

Rather, the giftedness and the need for a great variety of folks to share ministry is affirmed time and time again throughout scripture.

- We see it as Moses, who we like to picture as highly confident, first reacts to God's calling with answers about what he is unable to do, answers that result in the enlisting of his brother, Aaron, who is a better speaker. We think of Moses, but his was a shared ministry.
- We see this in Jesus' own ministry as he calls the disciples who aren't just there to witness what he does, but who are there to share in his ministry.
- We hear this idea, that we are not only needed to share the responsibility but that we are gifted for this work, many times over. We hear it in Romans 12 where gifts like prophecy and service, teaching and encouragement are mentioned. We hear it again in 1 Corinthians 12 where we hear those familiar words, "To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good" (Romans 12:7, NRSV). We hear it in the listing of roles we read in Ephesians 4 when the author writes, "He himself granted that some are apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors and teachers to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ" (Ephesians 4:11-12, NRSVUE).

Throughout scripture and throughout the Christian tradition we are reminded that this ministry belongs to all of us, that ministry is meant to be shared.

And sometimes it is in moments of crisis that we are reminded of this.

We heard that in today's scripture. One of the practices of the early church was to take care of those who needed it, particularly in this situation it was the widows who were being cared for. Remember, it wasn't unusual for women to marry men who were older than them, men's mortality rates were also higher and because they were more likely to engage in more dangerous activities their lifespans shorter. Add to this a culture where there were few opportunities for women to support themselves and their households, and suddenly it makes sense why widows were one of the groups who received extra care from the church.

But in this instance there was a point of conflict. The church was made up of people who were locals, born and raised in or near Jerusalem, who spoke Aramaic, those referred to in the scripture as Hebrews. It was also made up of people who had resettled there in Jerusalem, but who had been diaspora Jews, those living in other places, and these, in this passage called Hellenists, most commonly spoke Greek.

So, a number of things were at play. The intention of the church was for the widows to be cared for. Meanwhile, as Luke reminds us, the church was growing, and growing

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quickly, and more people meant more needs. Add to that a church, not divided by belief, but with language and experience as a barrier, and all of the sudden you have a perfect storm where even against the best of intentions, some people are being neglected.

And had it all been left up to the apostles to do all the work, the situation would have continued. After all, no matter how gifted they were, no matter how hard they tried, they were only a finite number of people with a finite supply of hours in the day and days in the week.

So Luke tells us, “the twelve called together the whole community of the disciples and said, “It is not right that we should neglect the word of God in order to wait on tables. Therefore, brothers and sisters, select from among yourselves seven men of good standing, full of the Spirit and of wisdom, whom we may appoint to this task...” (Acts 6:2-3, NRSVUE).

Now, we have to name honestly that sometimes we hear that first sentence and think the apostles are being a little haughty. But, if we can have a little grace, and listen again, we can hear that this isn't about their unwillingness to take care of the widows, but it is about their understanding that they have been gifted for the ministry of the word and it is also important. It is also about their understanding that ministry is meant to be shared, that there are others who are gifted for this leadership, and that it isn't all up to them.

And honestly, the church was better because in this moment of crisis they knew that there were others more well-equipped to do this work. They knew that the widows in question needed to be served. They also knew that among them the gifts were plentiful. Shared ministry didn't only mean more people were engaged in leadership and service, but it also meant that no one had to be neglected.

So, what does this look like for us?

How willing are each of us to ask honest questions about our own giftedness and to say “yes” to serving in ways that use our gifts?

What ministries could the church be doing, or be doing better, if we were tapping into the gifts of everyone?

How can the church, and therefore the world, be better served when we remember that we are all gifted, that ours is a shared ministry, and that among us are just the right people with just the right gifts for everything to which we are called?

Amen.

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