

Stewards of talent

All hands on deck

Ephesians 4:4-7, 11-16

"If a man has a talent and cannot use it, he has failed. If he has a talent and uses only half of it, he has partly failed. If he has a talent and learns somehow to use the whole of it, he has gloriously succeeded and won a triumph few men ever know." – Thomas Wolfe

"Experience is not what happens to a man; it is what a man does with what happens to him." – Aldous Huxley

Several years ago while I was still a pastor, our family was preparing to leave for vacation the next morning. That evening I got in the car to take it to a gas station and fill up with gas. When I turned the key in the ignition, a strange sound erupted from the engine. The fan belt chose that moment to stop working. I called around trying to find a place that worked on cars that late in the evening and found none.

A member of the congregation heard about our predicament. Around 9 p.m., this quiet, unassuming member of our church family showed up with a new belt in hand. Within a short amount of time, he had the car repaired and we were on schedule for a morning departure.

I wanted to pay for the belt and his time when the job was done, but he refused to accept anything. Instead he said, "I'm not one to give a talk on a Sunday morning, but something like this, I can do." That night our family was ministered to in a meaningful and caring way.

What floats your boat?

Use your imagination for a moment. Imagine your church building as a boat. What kind of boat would it be if it were to reflect the nature of your congregation? Maybe your church is a hybrid of two or more floating vessels. Consider the following examples and share your reflections:

- A rowboat is powered manually and is limited in the number of passengers it can carry.
- A sailboat is powered by the "wind." When no breeze is present, it may spend time standing still or risk capsizing in high winds.



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- A catamaran is sleek and engineered for speed. It skims across the surface of the water and has little purpose but to bring pleasure to its captain and passengers.
- A canoe is unsteady by design and must stay close to shore and within sight of land.
- A cargo ship requires many workers and travels into deep waters and foreign ports.
- A cruise ship has a specialized crew that caters to feeding and entertaining its paying passengers.
- A fishing boat is a working vessel and has one specific job: to catch fish.
- Other options: houseboat, inflated inner tube, lifeboat, battleship, kayak, etc.

As you reflect on these images consider:

- Are you a passenger or a crew member in your church?
- When you arrived this morning, were you focused on what you would contribute as a member of the crew or what you might receive as a passenger?

Not all can serve at the same time, nor should any one person be served all the time.

On any given Sunday, we may find ourselves more in the role of a crew member or passenger or even a combination of the two. Both have their place. But there needs to be balance. Not all can serve at the same time, nor should any one person be served all the time.

Captain and crew

In Ephesians 4, the Apostle Paul is talking about the body of Christ. In verses 4-6, he writes,

There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to the one hope of your calling, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is above all and through all and in all. (NRSV)

Togetherness and unity of purpose is not of our own doing. Faith, hope, love – these are all God-given gifts. These are not things we do or create ourselves; they are gifts of God. And according to Paul, these are the building blocks of unity.

In verses 11-13 Paul writes,

The gifts [Christ] gave were that some would be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, some pastors and teachers, to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, until all of us come to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to maturity, to the measure of the full stature of Christ. (NRSV)

There was a dear couple from a congregation I served who enjoyed putting together jigsaw puzzles during their free evenings. They were working at putting together a 1,000-piece puzzle and had the goal to each place five pieces each night before going to bed. That's a challenging thing to do with 1,000 little pieces, especially at the beginning stage.

I'm no expert at putting together puzzles, but I have learned that the best way to start a puzzle is to work first on the four corners, piece together the perimeter and then work on the center.

What Paul has done in Ephesians 4:11-13 is describe the work of equipping by beginning with four servant-leader roles (apostles, prophets, evangelists and pastors or teachers) – the four corners of the big picture.

We may not use titles like apostles and prophets in the church today, but I contend that the functions of these roles are still as necessary now as they ever were.

The title of *apostle* refers to more than just the 12 disciples. Barnabas was identified as an apostle in Acts 14:14, as was James the brother of Jesus (1 Corinthians 15:7). Others included Silvanus (1 Thessalonians 1:1) and Andronicus and Junia (Romans 16:7).

Two qualifications were required to be considered an apostle. First, they must have seen Jesus during his time of ministry (1 Corinthians 9:1), and second, they had to have seen and witnessed the risen Lord (Acts 1:21-22). The apostles were important pillars in the early church because they were able to remind the people of what they had seen with their own eyes and heard with their own ears.

In the church of the 21st century, the role of apostle has become a function of the older members of the congregation. These modern-day apostles have observed and witnessed the faithfulness of the Lord during the years. They provide stability and a sense of history and continuity in the midst of changing times. Our older saints serve as reminders that we stand on the shoulders of many who have come before us.

They are the captains of the faith who have weathered the storms of the past and stand before us as witnesses of God's faithfulness. They are able to tell us the stories of old, just like the original apostles passed on what they had seen and heard. The witness of those who are mature in the faith is an important element for equipping the modern church.

The *prophets* did not so much foretell the future as they did forth-tell, or declare, the will and purposes of God in order to keep the community of faith on course. Most of the prophets were wanderers – they had no home. They had a specific passion and function. They often spoke to a certain audience, be it leaders – like Moses speaking to Pharaoh – or to a specific people group, like Jonah going to the Ninevites.

Today the prophetic role continues in various forms. Ephesians 4:14-16 calls for leaders in the church to speak the truth in love and not be like infants “tossed back and forth by the waves.” Prophets work to move the ship back on course. The Bible also talks about mutual accountability, being responsible to and for one another. As we speak truth in love to one another, we are continuing the prophetic function of old and the mandate described by Paul to the church in Ephesus. This prophetic role is an important element of the equipping and sanctifying function of the church. The *evangelists* were the missionaries of the early church. These were the people who felt called by God to bring the good news to others. They may have traveled far, or they may have stayed in their home community.

This role of evangelism and service has not changed during the centuries. In our congregations, we support a number of evangelists, missionaries, and service workers around the world. It's important to say their names in our worship gatherings from time to time so we can keep them in our prayers and thoughts.

These brothers and sisters are serving as our ambassadors for Christ and as extensions of the church body. The sign of an equipping church is to have people going out beyond their comfort zones, leaving the safe harbor for uncharted waters. (Matthew 28:16-20)

Finally, we have the *pastors*. The pastors of the early church were not wanderers. Evangelists cover territory a mile wide and a foot deep, whereas pastors cover territory a foot wide and a mile deep. They serve as teachers and counselors and shepherds. Pastors are called to care for the body and encourage its members, one person at a time. And that continues to be the goal today. (1 Timothy 4:11-16)

Apostles, prophets, evangelists and pastors – these were the cornerstones of the early church and the ministry roles from which equipping believers took place.

Having identified the four corners of the big picture, the work of filling in the center now begins. Putting the pieces together is as challenging as it is exciting.

Discussion questions for reflection and sharing

- Do you find these descriptions helpful for the purpose of transferring the roles described in Scripture to functions that continue today?
- Who do you see in your congregation that has the gifts to serve in these areas of ministry?
- What gaps does your church have in these areas? How can a church work to call forth and nurture these gifts that may be waiting to be tapped within the body?

All hands on deck

I am reminded of a country parson who was preaching a pointed sermon to his congregation one Sunday. He was trying to reinforce a vision for ministry within his church family, and he started out by saying,

“Now the church needs to get up and walk.”
And deacon Jones in the back shouted out, “Let it walk.”
The preacher said, “Now the church needs to get up and run.”
And deacon Jones said, “Amen, let it run.”
“Now the church needs to get up and fly,” said the pastor.
“Amen, brother, let it fly,” said deacon Jones.
“Now, it’s going to take a lot of time and effort to make the church fly,” said the pastor.
And deacon Jones shouted back, “Let it walk, brother, let it walk!”

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That’s the thing about “equipping the saints for ministry” – it takes time, effort and commitment. It requires a willingness to set aside the luxury of being a passenger and embrace the necessity of enlisting as a crew member.

Discussion questions for reflection and sharing

- As you think about your congregation, are the four leadership functions currently active in your church in formal or informal ways?
- In what ways does leadership discernment and development take place within your congregation? What improvements might be needed?
- Are the functions of the crew members honored and appreciated?
- Are people willing to use their gifts when called upon by the church? If not, what might be the reasons they hesitate to get involved?

Priming the pump

An old cowboy was in the desert dying of thirst. He came upon an old ghost town, and in the center of town was a rusty old crank water pump. There was a cup of water next to the pump with a note attached. It said, “Do not drink this water. This is to be used to prime the pump, which will then supply you with all the water you want. When you are satisfied, refill the cup for the next person who passes this way.” The cowboy had a decision to make. He could either drink what little water was in the cup or take the risk and pour that water down the pipe to prime the pump and receive all he would want or need.

It’s kind of like that for us as well. So many churches are stuck in ruts of doing church the way it has always been done. It may seem safest to leave well enough alone. Why stir the waters and risk losing what little energy and availability people are already willing to share with the body?

God has supplied our congregations with all that is needed to do things far beyond what we could hope or imagine. (Ephesians 3:20-21) What are you going to do with your cup of water as a church? What would it look like to pour out the old, dried-up structures in faith that God will supply you with a new infilling of dreams and possibilities? (Philippians 2:17) As we open ourselves to new ideas from new leadership and new initiatives, we unleash a renewed vision reminiscent of the book of Acts. Who are those crew members in your congregation that have been sitting on the sidelines just waiting for someone to come and invite them forward so they can use their gifts in new ways?

Discussion questions for reflection and sharing

- Who are the new people in your midst who might be asked to become involved in the church's ministry?
- What gifts are most needed to bring revitalization in your body?
- When was the last time your congregation made an intentional effort to pray to the Lord of the harvest to bring forth workers? (Luke 10:2)

Empowering the crew

Glenn McDonald, a Presbyterian minister, wrote an article in *The Christian Century* entitled "Imagining a New Church." In it, he identifies six marks of Discipleship. McDonald suggests that as we take on these marks of discipleship, we will more fully understand our specific calls to ministry and service within the body of Christ and within the world. These marks of discipleship include:

1. A heart for Christ alone

All other loyalties and priorities must yield themselves to the place God should hold in our life. The Lord is a jealous God and does not tolerate any competition. (Exodus 20:4-6)

2. A mind transformed by the Word

As a church, we have maintained a high regard for the Scriptures, but at the same time we are becoming a biblically illiterate people. Faithfulness for the future church requires a commitment to the authority of Scripture in our life together. We need to recapture an emphasis for being biblically literate. Only then can we transform ourselves, let alone hope to transform our world. (2 Timothy 3:13-14)

3. Arms of love

This creates an image for me of reaching out our hands in service to others, regardless of their race, creed or nationality. We are called to meet felt needs as they become known to us. (1 John 4:7-8)

4. Knees for prayer

Increasingly I am hearing a call to prayer throughout the church, and I applaud it. To be a praying people, we must first become a humble people. Prayer at its core is recognition of our inability to do the work of the church on our own, as well as an acknowledgement of our total dependency on God. (2 Chronicles 7:14)

5. A voice to speak the Good News

Proclamation of the story of salvation is what sets us apart from service-oriented civic organizations. To be faithful is to say that Jesus has saved us so that we will in turn share the good news of salvation in word and deed. (Romans 10:9-10)

6. A spirit of sacrifice

The call to sacrifice and take up our cross may not be a great marketing concept, but it is at the heart of the gospel. We have tended to concentrate on the benefits of discipleship and downplay the call to commitment. Paul knew

better than most what saying yes to Jesus really meant. The writer of Acts quotes what the Lord said to Ananias about Saul, who was being given a special call to serve among the Gentiles: "I will show him how much he must suffer for my name." (Acts 9:16) In case we think we are off the hook, we have the words of Jesus in Mark 8:34 addressed to all who decide to follow him when he says, "If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me."

Discussion questions for reflection and sharing

- As you consider McDonald's six marks of discipleship, which do you see most evident in your life and in the life of your congregation?
- Which area is the one in need of greatest attention?
- What is the relationship between immersing ourselves in the spiritual disciplines and discerning our calling in life?

Conclusion

Take what time remains to gather in groups of 2-3 and:

- Share what gifts you see at work in others in your circle.
- Share which mark of discipleship you want to focus on during the next week.

Additional reading and small group discussion resources

Bugbee, Bruce and Don Cousins. *Network*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2005.

Lichty, Bob. *Talent Show: Your Faith in Full Color*. Goshen, IN: Mennonite Mutual Aid, 2005.



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Getting started

- What stories do you have of someone ministering to you with gifts you do not possess?

- What examples are there in your church of people who provide a valuable service behind the scenes and call little attention to themselves?

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Reflection and sharing

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- A spirit of sacrifice

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