

Transforming Consistory Leadership for a Missional Church

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“By ourselves, it is all too easy for us to mistake our own desires for signs of God’s will. We interpret our experience in ways that serve our own purposes and hardly know that we are doing it. Thus we need the church, the companionship of other Christians, and personal relationships in which we can be mutually accountable and receive guidance from one another” (Howard Rice, *Reformed Spirituality*, p. 21).

The Central Idea

Christ is the head of his body, the church.

When deacons, elders, and ministers of Word and sacrament sit as the consistory, they act under the authority of Christ and they serve as representatives of Christ—in both the world Christ loves and the mission Christ assigned to the church.

The consistory ministers primarily to the community of faith—not to give people what they want, but rather to discern the unique dimensions of the mission to which their congregation is called by God, sent by Jesus, and empowered by the Holy Spirit; and to equip and empower the baptized people of God to represent God’s grace, justice, and mercy in their lives and ministry, to participate fully in God’s mission in the world, and to carry the hurts and hopes of the world back to the community of faith.

Consistory Leadership in the Reformed Tradition

The Reformed understanding of governance is fundamentally representative, a point clearly made in the denomination’s *Book of Church Order*. The key question: of whom is it representative? The Reformed doctrine of church governance is not democratic (the rule of the people through representatives)—instead, it might be termed “Christocratic” (the rule of Christ through representatives). Deacons, elders, and ministers of Word and sacrament don’t represent any group, interest, tradition, or history—they represent Christ and the people and world Christ loves.

The installed officers of the church minister as Christ’s representatives, each according to the provisions of the office held. When those in office come together as a consistory to oversee and empower the life of the congregation, they seek to carry out Christ’s governance, not oversight that arises from their own wisdom. If we think of the congregation as “the people,” then we may say that in the Reformed view the offices represent Christ *to the people* as well as *through the people*.

The liturgical orders for the ordination and installation of ministers of Word and sacrament, elders, and deacons give expression to this reality. Eloquent liturgical declarations proclaim that Jesus Christ is the true officeholder and the source for all ministry. In the liturgy, the relationship of the offices when they come together as the consistory is affirmed as complementary; the parity of the offices is announced and their spiritual nature is proclaimed. The liturgies of the church sum up its theology of office and, at the same time, give that theology expression in the ongoing life of the congregation.

By the Spirit, God calls women and men, gives them gifts for their office, and provides opportunities for the cultivation of their gifts. The offices themselves are understood to be initiated by the Lord of the church and activated by the Holy Spirit in service of God's mission.

Women and men, forgiven and sanctified by Christ—called, ordained, and installed in office—become partners with God to engage the divine mission through the church and in the world. When they come together as the consistory, the three offices work together in a complementary fashion to guide and build up the church.

Those who minister through the consistorial offices minister primarily to the community of faith they serve in order that the ministry of the baptized people of God can extend through the church into the world and then carry the hurts and hopes of the world back to the church as the scattered people of God return to the community of faith.

The church, the baptized people of God, is sent by Christ in the power of the Holy Spirit to embody and represent the reign of God. The consistory gives itself to the spiritual leadership of the congregation with the aim that Christ will transform his people in order to help them be agents of his mission in the world—a people who enact and proclaim his kingdom in word and deed.

The Call of Jesus Christ

The only proper basis for ordination and installation into an office of the church is the call of Jesus Christ. The call of Christ is a call from the church confirmed by an inner call. The recognition of gifts and abilities are of great importance, but they are not the basis for the conferring of an office; rather, they serve as a confirmation of the Lord's call. Thus, the selection of those for nomination to one of the offices is a matter of spiritual discernment and prayer.

The Authority of Christ

The authority of the three offices derives from Christ and is communicated by the Holy Spirit. The *Book of Church Order* states, "Christ, according to the New Testament, has appointed officers to govern the church under himself. Their authority to govern derives from him even though they are elected by the people" (Preamble, p. 3). Office bearers must be men and women of deep spirituality, and the consistory must be a community of scriptural reflection, worship, and prayer so those in leadership discern the mind of Christ. Those who are not constantly engaging Christ cannot engage Christ's mission.

A Missional Understanding of the Offices

The offices are missional instruments through which Christ transforms the people of God (by regeneration and sanctification) and equips them for the ministry of the kingdom in the world (witness in word and deed). Each office individually—and even more importantly, when they are united as the consistory—represents Christ in the community of faith so that the community can more fully participate in and bear witness to the reign of God.

1. What is the Missional Church?

The missional church is made up of the covenant people of the God of mission. These people participate in God's mission and bear witness to the reign of God as disciples and as a congregation.

This understanding of the church is liberating because God's people don't have to manufacture the work of God. God is the one doing the heavy lifting. This means they can quit trying to create inspiration through frenetic church activity and instead hoist their sails to catch the wind of the Holy Spirit that's already blowing.

At the same time, this understanding of who believers are as the church carries immense responsibility. Their job is not to do church well, but to be the people of God in an unmistakable way in the world. Christians are to be the aroma of Jesus. They are light in the world, yeast leavening everything around them, and salt seasoning life with the very life of God. They are different in the hope they offer, in the grace they exhibit, in their obvious loving sacrifices, and in the blessings they pour out for others.

The missional church is primarily people.

Wherever missional followers of Jesus are, the church is present—at home, at work, at school, in the neighborhood, at the ballpark, at the dance studio, at the homeless shelter—wherever followers of Jesus take their identity as the people of God seriously.

The missional church is a covenant community.

The Bible insists that God's work is to be done in and through the covenant community that God forms, calls, and sends through Jesus, by the Holy Spirit. This covenant community reflects the nature of God, who exists in perfect community as a Trinity. The mystery of God as Trinity is that God exists in a community of intimacy, equality, collaboration, and self-giving love. The oneness of God isn't the oneness of a distinct, self-contained individual. It is the unity of a community of persons who love one another and live and work together in harmony.

Missional followers of Jesus can't conceive of their spiritual identity outside of being in accountable and encouraging relationships with other baptized people of God and followers of Jesus. The church is not a part of life for missional followers of Jesus; it is a way of life with others who are on a similar journey.

This is what it means to be on mission with God. It is not a mission that is pursued as something extra to daily life—something outside the normal range of activity—a request to do something beyond one's life assignments. It is a way of seeing oneself as partnering with God in daily life, doing the mundane as well as the sublime, intentionally blessing people and sharing the life of God with them.

Characteristics of a Missional Church

Kim Hammond, John Mark Ministries (<http://jmm.aaa.net.au/articles/567.htm>):

The missional church goes back to the life of Jesus. It submerges itself into the culture it is reaching. He did not construct a building or start a service. Rather he walked among the poor and hurt and lost. He incarnated himself. He became flesh; God came down from heaven and lived among us. He was born poor and grew up in a despised town called Nazareth. He had a questionable birth and in all likelihood lost his earthly father at an early age. He became close friends of sinners and was accused of being a glutton and a drunkard (Luke 8:34).

This was the only model the early church knew. Those that had been his disciples saw how he pulled away from the crowd and wanted no fame or fortune for his ability to lead and heal. His purpose was to build into the lives of a small group of people so that his mission to bring the kingdom would be carried on their shoulders.

The missional church understands that it is primarily a missional community of people being trained and equipped to live among the world as missionaries. The same principle as overseas missions is applied in the first world. We speak the language, wear the clothes and submerge into the culture we want to reach.

From “Missional Church,” an article published on the *Christianity Today* website (www.christiantoday.com/article/missional.church/22760.htm):

A person that goes missional does not measure how well they are doing spiritually by how often they attend church, and missional churches don't judge their spiritual health by how many people fill the pews on Sunday. Instead, missional individuals think about God and the world and arrange their whole life—every aspect of their life—around their faith convictions and put their faith into every day actions...

The three major shifts in thinking and behaviour seen in a person or church that goes missional are: from internal to external in terms of ministry focus; from programme development to people development in terms of core activity; and from church-based to kingdom-based in terms of leadership agenda...

[Reggie McNeal, author of *Missional Renaissance: Changing the Scorecard for the Church*, said in an interview,] “We are going to have to figure out how to be the church where people already are as opposed to setting up a separate church domain in our culture and expecting people to identify with it.”

Four Areas of Focus for the Missional Church

Adapted from the RCA's Fresh Wind Letter, 2008

- 1. We look at the world with Christ's eyes and let his Spirit within us lead our feet to join him in mission.**
 - a. How are you moving from your comfortable pews to not only see and hear the needs of our world but to be active participants in mission?
 - b. How are you using your educational, financial, and human resources to join Jesus in mission?
 - c. How are you building intentional, sustainable relationships with other churches, educational institutions, and community-based organizations in order to understand and meet the needs and challenges of your community in order to be missionaries in your own backyard?

- 2. We lead our congregations and the denomination to become welcoming and diverse.**
 - a. How are you helping to transform congregations already in diverse neighborhoods?
 - b. How are you actively seeking partnerships with churches and organizations that reflect the diversity of North American society?
 - c. How are you helping people learn, individually and collectively, about other cultures and the history of race relations?

- 3. We equip and empower all disciples to serve in areas where God has best gifted them.**
 - a. How and when did you discover or discern your own spiritual gifts?
 - b. How has this knowledge impacted your call to be a faithful disciple?
 - c. How are you equipping and empowering all disciples to serve in areas where God has best gifted them?

- 4. We nurture vibrant leaders who put God's interests before any and all personal interests.**
 - a. How are you building a well-articulated vision, shared by leadership and the congregation, to live in union with God and one another?
 - b. How are you claiming Christ's call for pastors, elders, deacons, and non-ordained leaders to serve as equal partners in ministry with separate roles while pursuing a common mission for the church?
 - c. When have you identified and resolved an issue before it became a conflict so that the world sees your unity in following Christ?

How is your church selecting, equipping, empowering, encouraging, and nurturing growth in (non-clergy) leaders?

From “Developing Lay Leaders in the Church,” by William T. McConnell, ministry associate with The Columbia Partnership

Some of the “unteachable” things we are looking for in leaders are:

- A deep abiding love for God
- An unquenchable desire for people to come to know and love God
- A love for people
- Willingness to give much while receiving little in return
- To be spiritually growing
- A pleasant personality (plays well with others)
- Willingness to take chances (will run with scissors)
- Is a self starter and doesn't need a lot of supervision
- Mature social skills
- Fully supports the mission and vision of the church
- Biblically literate
- Seminary education—gee, that would be nice

The Key Reality

Your personal renewal as a disciple of Jesus Christ is a necessary first step to the faithful exercise of your office as a deacon, elder, or minister of Word and sacrament because you are called to represent Christ within the community of faith in order that the baptized people of God may more fully participate in and bear witness to God's reign of grace, mercy, reconciliation, justice, and compassion in the world.

The Key Question

What needs to happen in your life personally and in your consistory in order for your church to place participation in God's mission at the center of your life and ministry?

Appendix

Evaluating Our Ministry Questions for Pastors and Consistories

KERYGMA (Proclamation): The Office of Minister of Word and Sacrament

Through the preaching of the Word, the celebration of the sacraments, and the leading of the congregation in liturgical worship, the congregation is called to and prepared for the work of representing Christ and his kingdom in the world.

How well do we in the congregation proclaim the good news of Jesus Christ? Is this a “good news” place?

To what degree do those who come to this church experience faith, hope, and love here?

To what extent are members available to each other?

Are people helped to share the deeper dimensions of their lives openly with one another?

What opportunities are made available through the church for people to articulate what their faith means to them?

Does the vision that the pastor and consistory have for the church agree with what the other members see as ideal? What are the differences?

Are the children of the congregation being taught the basics of the Christian faith?

Do adults have opportunity here to learn and grow in faith?

KOINONIA (Fellowship—Sense of Belonging to One Another): The Office of Elder
Koinonia refers to a community woven together by Jesus Christ through the Holy Spirit, a communion with Christ and fellow believers, that points to the fellowship of the kingdom.

What is the quality of our life together as a church community?

Do people who come here feel accepted as they are?

Are some members valued more highly than others?

Do newcomers experience a sense of care as soon as they arrive?

Are people learning here how to be more compassionate and affectionate toward each other?

What conflicts have been resolved in the past year with openness and honesty, yet in ways that permitted persons who disagree to maintain their integrity and self-respect?

What conflicts remain that have not been resolved?

What opportunities have there been for the congregation to experience their oneness in Christ?

DIAKONIA (Caring for Others—The Servant Community): The Office of Deacon

The deacon represents the most fundamental quality of Christian life and, when leading the congregation into diaconal ministry, teaches the meaning of the gospel no less than the minister of Word and sacrament and the elder.

To what extent are we satisfied with the way we are involved in our community?

Where have we been involved as “instruments of peace” and “bringers of wholeness” in our community and in the world?

To what extent do our members feel supported in their daily ministry at home and in their places of work? How have we done this?

Visioning Process—Westdale Reformed Church Based on Appreciative Inquiry and Strategic Planning Models

Discovering

(Appreciating that which gives life) *Consistory and Congregation*

The core task of this phase is to appreciate *what is* and *what has been* by focusing on times of excellence when people have experienced the church as most alive and effective. Let go of analyzing your deficits and carefully inquire into and learn from even the smallest examples of high performance, success, satisfaction, and accomplishment. Tell your stories of inspirational worship, relationships, leadership, planning, bonding, mentoring, helping, learning, loving, witnessing, seeing the Spirit at work in people's lives, seeing people come to Christ, and seeing the church for what it was meant to be.

Why was that a high point for you and what did you learn from it?

Dreaming

(Envisioning impact) *Consistory Retreat with Congregational Involvement*

What passions are evident in the people of Westdale Reformed Church?

What stories do you want people to tell about Westdale Reformed Church?

The dream phase involves challenging the status quo and long-standing traditions by envisioning a preferred future. The task is to engage in possibility conversations about the church's situation, its potential, its calling, and the unique contributions it can make to Christ's kingdom using the discovery phase as a catalyst for what could be.

Designing

(Co-constructing the future) *Consistory and other church leaders*

What are the core values of Westdale Reformed Church?

What is meant by "simple church" and how could it apply to us?

Both the dream and design phases involve the collective construction of positive images of the future. The design phase requires careful consideration and widespread dialogue about what the structure and processes of the church will be in order to fulfill the dream in a realistic way. What is the best kind of leadership structure? What is the preferred behavior of the leaders as they do their work? What is the church's strategy and how is it formulated and carried out? What are all the structural elements needed (ministries, committees, groups, training sessions, etc.)?

Delivering

(Sustaining the change)

The final phase creates ways to deliver on the new images of the future. It is a time of continuous learning, adjustment, and improvisation. It is full of ongoing dialogue, revisited and updated

discussions, and propositions. Setting aside regular times to monitor and update your dreams and designs is very important. A yearly retreat or similar venue for new leaders is necessary for buy-in and involvement in the process.

Resources for Consistory Members

Unless otherwise noted, all materials may be ordered from Faith Alive Christian Resources, the distributor for Reformed Church Press. Faith Alive publishes material in the areas of discipleship, leadership, worship, prayer and evangelism, and special needs. To order, contact www.FaithAliveResources.org or (800) 333-8300.

General Interest

Consistory Center (www.rca.org/consistory)

This special section of the RCA website contains many resources for church leaders, including devotions for consistory meetings, case studies, and more. It also contains resources submitted by elders and deacons from around the RCA.

Deacons and Elders: Called to Serve (Reformed Church Press)

This RCA consistory orientation resource provides pastors and consistory leaders with materials to adapt for a workshop or retreat. Its purpose is to orient new members of consistory, to provide training for all consistory members regarding the biblical roles of deacons and elders, and to give the consistory a sense of cohesion, group mission, and vision.

The resource includes the following materials:

- Combined leader and participant booklet
- “A Three-Minute Tour of the Reformed Church in America” pamphlet
- DVD with three segments entitled “Leadership,” “What’s a Deacon to Do?,” and “What’s an Elder to Be?”

The Ministry of the Elder and *The Ministry of the Deacon* (Reformed Church Press)

These two booklets clarify the unique roles of elders and deacons in the Reformed Church in America.

The Elder’s Handbook, by Louis M. Tamminga (Faith Alive Christian Resources)

This book is filled with useful information for new or prospective elders; it is also a great reference work and group study for current elders.

The Deacon’s Handbook, by Lori Wiersma and Connie Kuiper VanDyke (Faith Alive Christian Resources)

This book is a practical guide for those called to serve as deacons. It includes many how-to suggestions and resources on various issues deacons may encounter.

Every Christian—Called by God, Gifted for Ministry

This resource offers details about spiritual gifts and as well as an online gift assessment tool and is useful for discovering your gifts. Available through the RCA website (www.rca.org/consistory; under “Gifts and Growth,” choose “Assessing Spiritual Gifts”).

Called to Serve (Reformed Church Press)

This annual newsletter is sent directly to pastors, elders, and deacons and features relevant issues of interest to consistories. Also available on the Consistory Center page of the RCA website.

The Compassionate Congregation: A Handbook for People Who Care, by Karen Mulder and Ginger Jurries (Faith Alive Christian Resources and Reformed Church Press)

An indispensable guide for elders and deacons, this book covers a wide range of concerns—abuse, Alzheimer’s disease, depression, helping children deal with trauma, caring for a loved one in a nursing home, and much more. It offers stories, advice, help lines, and additional resources. Also included is a four-session outline for small groups desiring to be better caregivers.

So You’ve Been Asked to Lead in Prayer, by Timothy J. Mulder (Faith Alive Christian Resources)

Whether you’re providing the congregational prayer or the offertory prayer, this booklet is a helpful reference. The *So You’ve Been Asked to* series also contains *Greet or Usher*, *Chair a Committee*, *Read Scripture*, *Share Your Faith*, and more, each by a different author.

Worship the Lord: The Liturgy of the Reformed Church in America

This collection of Reformed Church in America liturgies includes the Order for Ordination and Installation of Elders and Deacons, which contains a description of their roles and questions to be responded to before the congregation. It also contains a treasury of prayers that are useful for many ministry situations. The liturgies are also available on the RCA website (www.rca.org/worship).

Sacraments

Christian Baptism, by Gregg Mast (Reformed Church Press)

In the form of a personal letter from the church to the parent(s) or guardian(s) of the child to be baptized, it describes what the sacrament of baptism has come to mean for many members and congregations of the Reformed Church in America.

The Meaning of Mystery: Baptism and Communion (Reformed Church Press)

This two-part DVD introduces, explains, and demonstrates the administration of the sacraments of baptism and the Lord’s Supper from a Reformed perspective.

Visitation

The Empty Pew: Caring for Those Who Leave, by Louis Tamminga (CRC Publications)

This book offers a three-stage model for visiting those who leave the church. It includes case study visits and discussion questions. Order from Amazon.

So You've Been Asked to Make Visits, by Louis M. Tamminga (Faith Alive Christian Resources)

This handy reference booklet from the *So You've Been Asked to* series is a great resource for learning how to structure a visit, what to say and do (or avoid doing), and how to comfort others with the love of God.

Helpful Resources from the Alban Institute (www.alban.org)

Pathway to Renewal: Practical Steps for Congregations, by Daniel Smith and Mary Sellon

This book carefully distinguishes three phases of the wilderness journey: building the readiness of leaders to lead, developing a vision, and aligning the congregation's life with the vision it has discerned. In their descriptions of these phases, the authors integrate wisdom from many sources into a coherent stream of guidance.

Leadership in Congregations, by Richard Bass

This book, part of Alban's *Harvesting the Learnings* series, gathers the collected wisdom of more than 10 years of Alban research and reflection on what it means to be a leader in a congregation, how our perceptions of leadership are changing, and new directions for leadership in the future.

www.congregationalresources.org: a guide to resources for building congregational vitality, by Richard Bass

As a companion to the groundbreaking *Congregational Resource Guide*, an online resource produced by the Alban Institute and the Indianapolis Center for Congregations, this book is an invaluable resource for congregational leaders. It puts the rich array of important congregational resources into context by examining the key books, organizations, websites, and people that will help leaders gain an understanding of important issues facing their faith communities.

Shaping Spiritual Leaders: Supervision and Formation in Congregations, by Abigail Johnson

This book supports leaders of congregations who want to develop or enhance healthy leadership practices. The author's extensive experience supervising student ministers lead her to a collaborative supervision method that invites congregational leaders to accountable learning covenants.

The Power of Asset Mapping: How Your Congregation Can Act on Its Gifts, by Luther K. Snow

Both a how-to manual and a journey of faith, this book includes step-by-step directions. The asset-mapping process is simple: it starts with our interests and moves us into action. We recognize our gifts and interests, connect the dots, and vote with our feet. Asset mapping works with any group, and almost anyone can facilitate it.

Traveling Together: A Guide for Disciple-Forming Congregations, by Jeffrey D. Jones

“The biblical and ancient roots of disciple-making churches—the goals, the process, the crucial tactics, and the mission rationale—they’re all here! Any church leader designing a continuing education path should read this book first.” Tom Bandy, president, www.easumbandy.com

The Practicing Congregation: Imagining a New Old Church, by Diana Butler Bass

Diana Butler Bass offers a compelling alternative to the flat and one-sided depictions of mainline Protestant decline to which we have become accustomed. Drawing on insights from recent studies of tradition, practice, narrative, and congregational history, she is able to identify emerging forms of congregational life that display an unexpected vitality, adaptability, and faithfulness.