

THE OFFICE OF DISCIPLES ELDER

By Dick Hamm

The early Church chose persons of very high standing in both church and community to be their leaders. The eldership was an honorable position, and carefully chosen persons were sought out by the church as examples of Christian living. Persons with the same deep level of commitment to the Christian life are needed in today's church as well. You have been asked to serve as an Elder because you are regarded as one who has that commitment. It is a high honor and a solemn responsibility.

The Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) believes strongly in the ministry of lay people. While we set apart certain men and women for ordained ministry, we also recognize that lay members also have a ministry to perform to one another and to the world. Therefore, as an Elder you are expected to set an example of shared ministry.

Before the advent of the functional committee system in the 1950's, Elders were often the heads of all sorts of program groups within the life of the congregation. Now, we have functional committees that fill this need, and while many elders serve on (and in some cases even chair) such committees, the primary role of elder is often described as "spiritual leader". Unfortunately, the phrase "spiritual leader" is as fuzzy in meaning as the role is clear in importance.

Being a spiritual leader includes the following:

--providing an example for other members through regular worship attendance, strong Christian stewardship, an active prayer life, ongoing commitment to the study of the Bible and Christian issues, and personal witness to the Lordship of Jesus Christ.

--enthusiastically supporting the program of the church by personal participation, encouragement of other lay leaders, positive attitudes, and prayer.

--encouraging and supporting the pastors in their work and in their spiritual, emotional, and physical well-being.

--being a good listener within the congregation, thus facilitating good communication between members and leaders and staff.

--confronting rumors, misinformation, and negative attitudes in a loving but direct way.

--demonstrating love and care for all the people of the church, particularly in times of crisis and special need.

--demonstrating warm hospitality to all those who seek faith.

--demonstrating humility, sincerity, trustworthiness, and "love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control" (Galatians 5:22).

All of this amounts to ***being the adults*** for the congregation (*not the only adults, hopefully, but adults*)!

This "job description" constitutes a big order, and it is only by the grace of God that any of us serve with any measure of faithfulness. Yet, by that same grace, we seek to grow in faithfulness to this calling.

If you do not serve with effectiveness, it may not be obvious to other members, and you may not be asked to remove yourself as an Elder. However, the church will suffer. On the other hand, if you serve effectively and with enthusiasm, the church will be immeasurably blessed because of your leadership. Lives will be changed and God's Spirit will fill our congregation.

May God bless your ministry as you serve at the Table, reach out to members and visitors, share your faith with the homebound and grief stricken, counsel with staff and lay leaders, and generally up-build the church.

Suggestions for Elders' Prayers

Elders' prayers should be simple, sincere, and reflect the elder's personal faith. Yet the elder may rely on scriptural passages or the written prayers of others to aid in the preparation of his or her own.

Elements of Communion Prayers

Thanksgiving

In the first decades of the church, this element was the dominant theme of the entire service. In fact, the time came when worship was called "Thanksgiving" (since early Christians spoke Greek, the word they used was "eucharistia", from which we derive "eucharist", a name commonly used for the Lord's Supper. It is appropriate, of course, to thank God for all things good, but shortness of time dictates that the prayer move quickly to thanks for God's redemption of the world through Jesus Christ.

Remembrance

This element recalls Jesus's death. The loaf and the cup are visible substances which Jesus used to establish this memorial. The prayer should make this connection. It is also a time to remember our calling as Christians and our responsibilities as his disciples.

Calling upon the Holy Spirit

This element seeks the power of God in our lives to make us more worthy followers of the Way. If we are to be Christians on the basis of our own strength alone, we are doomed to failure. But through the Holy Spirit working in us, we can become more like Christ.

Rededication

This element leads the people in a rededication of themselves to God and to Christ's church.

It is helpful if these four elements can be tied together through the use of a single theme. This theme may come out of the sermon, out of the season, out of the particular day or occasion, or may be some other relevant theme you choose.

Common Problems with Public Prayers

1. Our prayers are sometimes irrelevant. For example, a communion prayer should focus the worshipper's attention on the Lord's Supper. It is not a time to pray for the sick (prayers for the sick and others in need – prayers of intercession - are offered in the pastoral prayer) or to pray for an upcoming program, etc.
2. We sometimes mistake *length* for *importance*. There is no need for our public prayers to be lengthy. It is usually when we pray too long that we get into trouble (becoming irrelevant or rambling). Let our prayers be *short* and *to the point*. (The pastoral prayer is generally longer, but it too can become overly long.)

3. Some think God prefers “the King’s English” best, perhaps because such language was used by elders in our home congregation when we were growing up. This is fine if you really know how to use such archaic language, but most of don’t know when to use “thee”, thou”, “thy” or “thine”. Most of us do better in modern English, which makes sense to our hearers and sounds more natural.
4. Some feel that a written prayer is insincere, that one should let the “Spirit move”. Well, the Spirit can move us just as powerfully and sincerely a couple of hours or days before the service of worship. Even if you prefer not to *write* your prayer, do think about what you will say and how you will say it *before* coming to the Table. But if you do write your prayer, *pray* it – don’t *read* it!
5. Many public prayers are hard for people to hear. It may be helpful to practice your prayer aloud to become accustomed to the sound of your own voice in prayer. Pray with your head up and facing the microphone.
6. Some elders tend to repeat the same prayer over and over. Though we may certainly reuse good prayers, or perhaps modify them only slightly to fit a particular occasion, an elder may want to have six or eight basic prayers which he or she has written and which can be modified and rotated as desired.

HOMEBOUND and HOSPITAL COMMUNION

(Communion taken to persons confined to their home or facility due to illness or disability)

Homebound communion is an important occasion to everyone who receives it. Every person who receives it is served because he or she has requested it or responded to an invitation to receive it. Hospital patients are frequently in crisis physically and/or emotionally, so that Communion becomes for them a particularly important sacrament of God's love and presence. It is therefore essential that the Lord's Supper be administered in a way which is dignified and personal.

Your mere presence as an Elder or Deacon is, in itself, a sacrament of God's presence and love. Therefore, it is important that you show genuine interest in the individual and that you conduct yourself in a friendly, courteous, and respectful way. You may have several such visits to make, but it is important to make each recipient feel that this visit is important.

Of course, the calling team must budget their time wisely so as to see everyone assigned, and some recipients will want to visit without regard for time, so it is best to begin with a friendly chat, inquiring about their health, and so forth, and then move along in a few minutes to Communion itself, after which you take your leave. While those in their home or in long term care facilities will have specifically requested Communion, you should ask hospital patients if they wish to receive it. If they decline, it may be for a host of reasons. They may simply feel unprepared. In any case, do not be disturbed if they refuse Communion. Do not offer Communion to patients whose bed tags say NPO (or Nil Per Os) which means the patient should take nothing by mouth.

Begin the Communion Service by reading Scripture. You may choose to read any of the following which tell the story of the Supper: Matthew 26:26-28, Mark 14:22-24, Luke 22:17-19, or I Corinthians 11:23-15. As one team member reads the Scripture, another may prepare the bread and cups for distribution.

You may then move on into the service in a way such as this: "One of the important elements of Communion is the offering of thanks to God, for we remember that Jesus himself offered thanks before he ate with his disciples at the Last Supper. If there are those things for which you are especially thankful, and if you would like to name them, then they could become a part of our prayer of thanksgiving."

After a bit of reflection upon their thankfulness, you may offer a prayer of thanksgiving. In addition to lifting up their thanks, you may add such thoughts as:

- thanks for the gift of life
- thanks the gift of Jesus Christ
- thanks for forgiveness
- thanks for God's presence and care
- thanks that nothing can separate us from the love of God.

Then finish the prayer of thanksgiving with a prayer of blessing upon the bread and the cup that they may represent the body and blood of Christ.

Distribute the Bread and the Cup to all present who wish to partake (including any other patients, visitors, relatives, etc.). Simply extend the invitation to all. The Elders and Deacons should partake as well, since Communion is a corporate act, not just an individual act.....even though this may mean you partake several times that day.

Offer the words of institution: "As often as we eat of this Bread and drink of this Cup, let us do so in remembrance of the Lord Jesus Christ."

Partake.

Join together in the Lord's Prayer, preceded if you wish by your own prayer of thanksgiving.

Having completed Communion, you may wish to pronounce a benediction (even if only a simple benediction such as "May God bless you"). Collect the cups. Remind them that if there is any way in which the church or the pastors can serve them, please call. Bid farewell and leave.

There is nothing like human touch to convey compassion and healing, so it is good for the leader of the team to touch the patient by taking their hand, or at the very least, touching their shoulder during prayer (be sure to wash your hands thoroughly before and after visiting a patient or resident). Remember, however, not to squeeze old hands too firmly, nor to touch wounds.

Finally, if there is a notable change in a person's condition, some need communicated, or a complaint, please pass this along to the pastors by writing a full account (a note or an e-mail). The shut-in will assume that anything they pass on to you in the way of needs or complaints will be passed on to the pastors, so please do so.

Additional Considerations

1. Prepare in advance. Some like to prepare a basic prayer (which can be supplemented or altered during the visit). Some like to take devotional material or a simple gift to leave with the person.
2. Knock before entering the room. If there is no answer or a notice that the patient is not to be disturbed, inquire at the nursing station as to whether the person can receive visitors.
3. Introduce yourself to the person and indicate that you are there both as a friend and as a representative of the church (name your church so the person understands you are from their congregation).
4. Limit your call to 10 minutes or less (15 minutes if it includes communion). Take off your hat and coat so your visit does not seem rushed.
5. If invited to sit down and a chair is available, do so – but do not sit on the bed. If you need to stand, position yourself so the patient can see you easily without facing bright light.
6. Remember that you do not need to fill the time with your talking. Wait for the person to speak. Listen both for the words and the feelings they convey. Avoid arguing, giving advice, speculating, or telling your own story of a similar illness.
7. If you ask how you can help, be prepared to run an errand or make a phone call, or to tell a nurse of some kind of need.