

Resources for the Elder

(For more information visit www.rca.org/consistory)

What are elders called to be?

"Through the offices of the church (minister of Word and Sacrament, elders, deacons, and professors of theology), Christ is represented to the community of faith." That's how the "Faithful Consistories" document begins its summary of the mission of the church.

Elders attend to sound teaching and discipline within the church, and to the spiritual well-being of the congregation, ensuring that members are nurtured through Scripture, worship, the sacraments, and prayer.

How can elders help new members prepare for baptism and discipleship?

"Catechumenate" is a theological word for a process for bringing adults into faith in Christ and preparing them for baptism and discipleship. This ancient practice is revitalizing congregations around the world, including RCA churches.

The Greek root of the word "catechumenate" means "to sound in the ear." Thus the term suggests that the catechumenate uses human relationships of speaking and hearing, telling and listening, and conversation and reflection to bring people into faith.

Another effective model for bringing adults to faith is called "Alpha." Alpha meetings provide a safe setting where people can explore Christianity. A shared meal and small groups build a warm community that bonds people together; the talk addresses basic questions like, "Who is Jesus?" "Why did he die?" "What about the Bible?" and "What about prayer?" The retreat creates a setting where people invite God to change their lives through the power of the Holy Spirit. The small groups create an open place to be honest about doubts, questions, faith, and struggles, which get wrapped in prayer. Alpha can be conducted with the use of videotapes in small churches, or with videotapes and speakers in larger churches.

How can elders provide better pastoral care for their congregations?

The place to begin is with elders themselves. How in touch are they with their own spiritual journeys? How often do they ask each other where God is in their lives? How committed are they to a regular discipline of prayer and study? It is very difficult to extend to others what one does not possess. The well from which we draw must be deep enough to draw from again and again.

At the same time, many ministers and elders have learned that extending pastoral care to others enriches their own spiritual lives. However, it's important to keep in mind that when we care for others only to feed ourselves, the one served knows he or she is not the subject of our love but rather the object of our need. The words of Jesus call us to empty ourselves in service and love so we may be filled.

Pastoral care requires good listening skills, intentional visits, and empathetic care. Busy people often do not pause to ask deeply spiritual questions. Elders can help people reflect on deeper matters by engaging them in quiet moments of

conversation, practicing a disciplined life of prayer for others, and leading small groups that reflect on God's presence and grace. Elders can also visit those who are in the hospital, homebound, and in nursing homes and those who seek the counsel of a trusted friend. These are the same suggestions for pastoral care that were offered to the early church two thousand years ago. Putting them into practice may require some creative planning, but people and their pastoral care needs have changed little over the centuries.

How does a board of elders provide discipleship in the 21st century?

An entire chapter in the *Book of Church Order (BCO)* is entitled "The Disciplinary and Judicial Procedures." Circumstances that require church discipline usually do not necessitate the church taking formal action. But when formal action is required, it is important to follow carefully the process described in the *BCO* so that both ecclesiastical and legal concerns are respected.

The words "discipline" and "disciple" are derived from the same root word. To be disciplined is to become a good disciple of Jesus Christ. Disciples need support and encouragement. The church, through the work of the board of elders, should encourage people to be faithful disciples. The modern church sometimes also utilizes pastoral or professional counseling as an avenue to discipleship. When people fail to live together with grace, those who have been trained to help understand and change people's behavior can be an extension of the church's care and its call to faithful discipleship.

What happens when support and encouragement through personal, pastoral, or professional intervention does not help? That's when the board of elders needs to remember its call to care for the whole body of Christ and turn to the process outlined in the *Book of Church Order*. While people often bristle at the word "discipline," it simply points to the call for all of us to walk and work together as a community of disciples. Failure in that walk can do tremendous harm and cause great suffering for an individual and the congregation to which the individual has pledged his or her love and loyalty.

How can elders minister to the pastors?

In a Reformed Church the ministry of elders involves ministry to the ministers and involves both oversight and care. The *RCA Liturgy* and *Book of Church Order* specify that the elders' oversight includes the conduct of the minister, especially in preaching and teaching.

Most elders have neither studied the Bible in its original languages nor attended seminary. You expect your pastor to know more about the Scriptures than you do, and rightly so. But effective preaching and teaching always connects the truth of God's Word to human lives, needs, and challenges here and now. Elders can apply the test of relevance. If preaching falls short, the constructive counsel of elders may help a pastor move from what the Bible said to what it says as a living Word for today.

The minister's conduct is also the elders' concern. Most pastors are highly dedicated, hard-working people. Their sincere desire is to preach powerfully and helpfully, to serve the people gracefully, and to lead the church in mission effectively.

People rely on their pastor in times of crisis and stress. Many confidences must be kept. The burdens are often heavy, and the ministry can be a lonely calling. Pastors are also people with families, personal emergencies, and human frailties.

Pastors need the same care and spiritual nurture we all do. Elders, who work closely with the pastor in the ministry of the church, are in a good position to provide that nurture. At least one elders' meeting each year should be devoted solely to the counsel, encouragement, and care of the pastor. A kind word, a listening ear, or a pat on the back are both welcome and needed.

When elders care for their pastor, good ministers grow to be even better preachers, teachers, shepherds, and leaders. The best caregivers are pastors who are cared for in their own inevitable moments of crisis and vulnerability. At these times, let the elders take care!

- Reprinted from *The Ministry of the Elder*, by Robert White.

How can elders minister to people who are sick or dying?

When visiting those who are sick or dying, the important thing is how you listen, rather than what you say. If we are truly to be Christ's presence, then it is important for you to make the needs and suffering of the hospitalized person your focus, rather than your own needs and agendas. Therefore, it is crucial to allow those who are sick to establish the tone and theme of any visit. If a person is not yet ready to struggle with his or her illness and what it may mean to that individual and his or her family, probing questions will alienate rather than comfort.

However, you will discover that more often you will be far less ready to struggle with issues of illness, dying, and death than the person you have gone to visit. It is easier to ignore tough questions or to try to comfort people with spiritual platitudes or a quick prayer. What people who lie in hospital beds want is what all of us need: not easy answers to difficult questions but someone willing to share the pain of the struggle.

There are simple ways to help you listen to and love those who are sick. Long before you enter a hospital room, remember in prayer those who are sick, both in the public prayers of the church and your personal prayers. Before you enter a hospital room, try to pause for a moment to clear your mind and spirit so you can be as open as possible to the mood and concerns of the one who is sick. Try to sit with, rather than stand over, the person, and remember that the warmth of a held hand often speaks far more eloquently of our love and caring presence than our feeble attempts to answer impossible questions.

Finally, work hard at listening closely to what is being said. Often the big questions regarding dying and death are glimpsed through comments or questions that seem almost innocuous, like, "The pain seems a little worse today" or, "I wonder what I'll be doing at this time next year." A perceptive visitor will encourage the one who is sick to open up these comments to the questions and struggles that may lie hidden within them. It is a listening ear and a loving heart, rather than a nimble tongue, that can turn a hospital visit into a pastoral call.