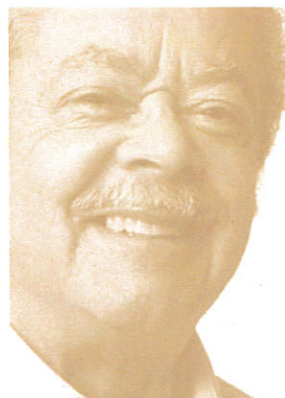


You are

AN ELDER



Welcome to your church's ministry team

Your congregation has recognized in you some gifts and graces that both represent the congregation well and also give it a promise of leadership. So it has called you to one of the Disciples' historic ministries. Along with pastors and deacons, you are part of a ministry team intended to build up your congregation and strengthen it for its work in the larger world.

The Design of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) describes your ministry thus:

A person elected elder is authorized to exercise within the congregation which elects him or her the ministerial functions which it assigns for periods of time which it specifies, such as: sharing in the ministration of baptism and the Lord's Supper and the conduct of worship, and sharing in the pastoral care and spiritual leadership of the congregation.

As "constitutional" as it sounds, this description reflects biblical definitions (see references below) and historic Disciples practices. It also acknowledges that different congregations expect somewhat different things from their elders. So it is a good idea to consult your congregation's own operating documents.

A key word in the description is "sharing." You share leadership responsibilities in the congregation. Consequently, as in sports, it is important to pay some attention to "team chemistry"—to how you work with pastors, deacons, and other church leaders.

Three functions of ministry

There are many different ways to describe the support your congregation receives from its leaders. Several New Testament passages (see references) suggest that the term "ministry" includes all activities that build up the body of Christ.

For Disciples elders, ministry has traditionally involved three main activities: teaching, care-giving, and oversight. Of these, teaching and care-giving can be translated into some fairly specific hands-on activities; oversight is a bit more expansive.

Elders teach when they teach a church school class, sponsor a youth group, lead a Bible study, or mentor candidates for baptism. They teach more generally when they give leadership in worship, particularly at the Lord's Table. They teach by example with their recognition of and participation in the wider church, and their personal relationships with others. Elders teach when they continue to learn, pressing the questions of new generations or new circumstances. In a sense, eldership is not only a ministry; it is a lifestyle.

Elders give care when they welcome newcomers to the congregation, listen to the concerns of a member, or visit someone who is confined at home or in a hospital room. They give care when they keep members in their prayers or call the next person on a prayer chain. They give care when they take communion to the homebound or ask after the well-being of members who have been absent. In some cases, the social caseworker is a good model for the elders' care-giving: elders may marshal a variety of resources to help people through a crisis or to resolve a cluster of problems persons in the congregation may face.

Elders give oversight to the congregation when they participate in the congregation's formal decision-making processes, whether on the church board or on one or more of its program or policy committees. They give oversight when they reflect on the health and spirit of the congregation and are sensitive to the distribution—or concentration—of the church's ministry load. They give oversight when they keep an eye out for fluctuations of worship attendance, or signs of burnout, as well as when they explore new avenues for ministry and mission in the community.

If you look up your congregation's job description for elders, you may find something like this:

[Elders] shall give spiritual oversight to the members with respect to regular attendance at the Lord's Supper, visiting the sick and being concerned with any morally delinquent and spiritually indifferent member.

That statement has been around a long time, and the archaic language of several of its phases stands out. Few Disciples churches now speak in these terms—except in their constitutions or bylaws—and probably even fewer elders believe that it is their business to deal with the morals of church members. The plethora of denominations today has made such strictness untenable for all but the most sect- or cult-like churches. The three responsibilities given to elders, however, corresponds to the three ministries listed in the previous section, and reflect three values crucial to congregational life: regular attendance in worship, a sense of care among members, and a standard of behavior (and enthusiasm) that testifies to the positive value of the congregation in its community. Those three values are at the core of your ministry.

Ministry in a spiritual body

Both the description and the paragraph from the Design speak about the elder's spiritual leadership. Such language can be intimidating. Some may identify *spiritual* with particular activities or disciplines, some of which you may or may not practice. Others may use the term to put

you on a pedestal. And pedestals can be lonely and isolating.

You may find it helpful to remember that you are entrusted with leadership in a spiritual body, all of whose members are spiritual. So your place in the congregation turns on a matter of degree, not of kind, on those things that make you a leader of others.

Eldership is certainly more than being a hall monitor. You are a leader in a spiritual body whose vocation is to continue the ministry of Jesus Christ in the world. It is his spirit that enlivens and inspires the church. Consequently, perhaps your greatest gift—a key to your leadership—is not your boldness or imagination in decision-making, or your people skills in groups or one-to-one. It is not your loyal attendance in worship, or the clarity of voice at the Table or in prayer. These are all important. But perhaps your greatest leadership gift is twofold: 1) your serious, mature understanding of who Jesus is, and what he is about in the world; and 2) your knowledge of and experience in the community or communities in which the church lives today. It is the clarity of your vision of these, your sense of the church's purpose and mission. That's why the people in your congregation chose you. They simply expect you to bring your understanding together with that of the other elders with whom you serve, as well as your pastor(s) and other church leaders, to make real the continuing ministry of Christ.

What does that mean? It means constantly asking questions like these: What is the church's mission? How is the congregation fulfilling its ministry? Where are we strong? Where do we need more work? Where should the congregation be in the community? What issues or needs should concern it? What distinguishes us (my congregation, my denomination) among others? What is our witness? Where does the Spirit of Christ call us today? These are matters for your attention, for the ministry you share with other leaders in the church.

Finally, conditioning

I offer a final word of caution and encouragement. In your service as an elder, as in your physical exercise, it is good to stretch before you exercise. As most Disciples know, being a

Christian means being a learner, a student. Before you accepted the call to be an elder, you no doubt took time to reflect on your sense of yourself, of your gifts, and of the call that Christ was extending to you through your congregation. With both humility, no doubt, and self-confidence, you said “yes” to the call.

The process of reflection, discernment and learning is a necessary, continuing thing. So as you do some of the specific things you are called upon to do, be sure to take some time to stretch yourself. Revisit the biblical writings. Study Disciples history. Read even more widely, in religious texts or in those which focus on challenges in the contemporary world. Strengthen your skills—whether listening or speaking, managing conflict or solving social problems, understanding different generations or relating to people of other faiths—by seeking out resources and inviting your fellow elders to explore them with you. That’s part of what elders’ meetings are for. Your pastor(s) can help with this process. Some resources are listed below. But be realistic and take your time: stretching cannot be rushed.

Scripture references

1 Corinthians 12:4–7, 27–28
Romans 12:3–8
Acts 20:17–38
Ephesians 4:11–12
1 Timothy 3:1–7; 5:17–22
Titus 1:5–9
James 5:15
1 Peter 2:25; 5:1–11

Resources

Peter Morgan, *Disciples Eldership: A Quest for Identity and Ministry*, (2nd edition; Saint Louis: Chalice, 2003)
Elders’ Resource Series (Claremont: Disciples Seminary Foundation, 1990–2002)
Edwin Linberg and Rod Parrott, *The Ministry of Elders*
Ruth Fletcher, *The Teaching Ministry of Elders*
Joseph Driskill, *Spiritually-Informed Pastoral Care*
Ron Greene, *The Spiritual Leadership of Disciple Elders*
Keith Watkins, *A Service of Installation*
Rod Parrott (ed.) *The Call and Nurture of Ministers* (2nd edition)
Gary Straub, *Your Calling as an Elder* (Saint Louis: Chalice, 2003)

Written by Rodney Parrott, Retired Ordained Minister, Hood River, Oregon



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