

Presbytery of Boston

E-Connection

August 11, 2010

The Awesome Task of Elders

By Cindy Bolbach

Parity between Ministers and Elders

I was baptized and raised Lutheran. When I joined a Presbyterian church as an adult I gradually became aware of Presbyterian polity and the way we structure our life together. I was especially taken by the insistence on an equal division of responsibility in the governance of the church between elders and ministers of the Word and Sacrament. That parity is reflected in the proposed new Form of Government (often called “nFOG”) that has been submitted for approval to the upcoming 219th General Assembly. The nFOG uses the terms “ruling elder” (rather than simply “elder”) and “teaching elder” (rather than “minister of the Word and Sacrament”) to underscore the fact that, although ruling and teaching elders perform different functions, they share equally in the leadership and spiritual direction of the faith community. “Ruling” elders are so named not because we “rule,” but because we are chosen by the congregation to discern and measure its fidelity to the Word of God. Teaching elders are committed to teaching the faith and equipping the saints for the work of ministry. Together, ruling and teaching elders lead the community of faith as it seeks to proclaim the gospel with passion and integrity.

Privilege and Responsibility

For those of us who are ruling elders, this parity of leadership is a privilege and a responsibility. It is a privilege because we are entrusted with the matchless opportunity to step out in faith—trembling as we go—to give nurture and direction to God’s people, to help them on their journeys of faith. No task set before us as Christians is more important. It is also a responsibility—a somewhat daunting responsibility—because stepping out to lead is not easy. Discerning and measuring our faith community’s “fidelity to the Word of God” is an awesome task. Every person who gets a call from a nominating committee needs to confront some essential questions: Am I suited to this task? Can I do it? Do I really want to do it? Let’s be honest: all who profess Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior are called to ministry, but not all of us are called to be ruling elders, just as not all of us are called to be teaching elders or deacons.

Challenges for Ruling Elders

A critical problem in the church today is that we have allowed the role of ruling elder to be diminished. It has changed from the awesome task of measuring a congregation’s fidelity to the Word of God into the mundane task of serving on just another nonprofit board of directors, receiving reports and approving budgets. The session is *not* just another board of directors. Every nominating committee needs to make that clear to potential ruling elders. The

problem is that a nominating committee all too often feels pressure to fill a certain number of slots, so it glosses over what it really means to be a ruling elder in order to persuade someone to serve. We need to be crystal clear with candidates about the commitments that comes with being a ruling elder: a time commitment, a leadership commitment, and a spiritual commitment. Being a ruling elder means much more than attending a meeting on the day of the month the session meets. Ruling elders need to be willing to take risks, to accept the fact that we will sometimes make decisions with which others disagree. Ruling elders need to be willing to confront dysfunction and dysfunctional people and need to be willing to accept that some dysfunction, to a greater or lesser degree, lurks in every congregation.

Ruling elders need to be able to set aside their own predilections and preferences and instead ask, “What is best for this community of faith, even if I might not like it?” Ruling elders need to be spiritual leaders in their congregation. This is our high calling. We need to be able to provide pastoral sustenance to the members of our community, to lead worship, and to preach as needed. We need to be confident enough about all of this so that we don’t fall back on the easy assumption that the pastor—the teaching elder—does all the “spiritual” stuff; because we ruling elders are as responsible for our congregation as are teaching elders.

Ruling elders also are called to be leaders not only in our congregations but throughout our connectional system: at presbytery, synod, and GA. Ruling elders often view presbytery as a somewhat mysterious “them.” The active involvement and leadership of ruling elders in presbytery can transform the amorphous “them” into a dynamic “us”—an “us” that will enable our strengths and resources to be shared imaginatively and creatively across all our congregations. Our presbyteries, synods, and GA function at their best when *all* ruling elders, not just so called presbytery “geeks” or GA “junkies,” bring their insights and experience to the table.

Following Jesus is lifechanging. But following Jesus is not easy, and it can’t be done alone: one person can’t do it alone; one congregation can’t do it alone. We follow Jesus together as a community of faith, coming together with all our strengths and weaknesses. Those of us who have accepted the privilege and responsibility of serving as ruling elders walk alongside every person who makes that life-changing commitment. We say to them, “I will be there with you every step of the way.” And we find ourselves given strength for the journey. Thanks be to God.

About the Writer

Cindy Bolbach is an attorney in Arlington, Virginia, and an elder at the First Presbyterian Church, Arlington. She currently serves as Co-Moderator of the Form of Government Task Force and has been endorsed by National Capital Presbytery as a candidate for Moderator of the 219th General Assembly (2010).

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One of A Kind

Lakes and Prairies Synod School sets record enrollment, Nishioka keynotes

by Duane Sweep
Special to the Presbyterian News Service

STORM LAKE, Iowa — As host for a multitude of participants, from infants to adults — some over 80 — Synod School 2010 here lived up to its promotion as "a learning and personal enrichment experience for people of all ages."

Sponsored by the Synod of Lakes and Prairies, Synod School drew 627 participants — a record for the event — when it ran July 25-30 at Buena Vista University. Enrollment typically runs in the high 500s.

This year's event, running under the theme, "Grace Notes," featured 67 scheduled classes, daily convocation addresses, morning and evening worship, mini-courses, coffee-house music, movies and more.

In the early afternoon, in what the school's catalog calls "Art Share," everyone gets an "opportunity to create a special Synod School memory" through a variety of crafts, including silk screening, basket weaving and other arts and crafts. In the evening, the school's "Saints-a-Playin'" takes place after worship, offering a time for everyone "to work off some excess energy" in games on the lawn outside the chapel.

QuickTime™ and a
decompressor
are needed to see this picture.

But now, the story goes back to a morning at Synod School.

At convocation ...

Rodger Nishioka, associate professor of Christian education at Columbia Theological Seminary in Decatur, Ga., delivered morning convocation addresses, focusing on the theme of Synod School, the history of reformed theology and his own five tenets of reformed theology.

Nishioka's morning addresses, part lecture, part humor and part personal experiences, delighted the audience and his evening discussions — part of the mini-course offerings — drew standing-room only crowds.

When he spoke about "nearness" and "directness" as elements of youths' faith decision, he used his own father as an example. His father, a minister, prayed before eating in restaurants and Nishioka, then a teen-ager, said, "I just felt humiliated by my parents."

Now, when he gets his small bag of peanuts on a commercial flight, he said, "What do I do? I pray."

That story showed the impact of "nearness," the effect being near someone of faith. Another story demonstrated "directness."

Nishioka told of a teen who attended church every Sunday, but left immediately after worship. An elderly woman in the small congregation began to corner the teen every Sunday, keeping him from leaving. She would hug him and tell him she prayed daily for him. The teen would say "all right" and then leave.

Months later, when the woman was hospitalized, Nishioka continued, the teen visited her, hugged her, and told her everything would be all right. Doubting, the woman asked, "How do you know?" The teen said, "Because I've been praying for you every day."

When the woman finally returned to church, using a walker to move down the aisle, the teen escorted her.

In the office ...

Just like a typical school, there's an office.

During daytime hours, the office is home of Diana Barber, synod associate executive for leadership development and staff for Synod School, and other members of the leadership team.

Barber provides technical and administrative support during the event and keeps everything on track year-to-year, maintaining the drive that keeps this Synod School on its successful track — it's the only Synod School remaining within the denomination.

In a 30-minute period last week, sitting at the desk just inside the office door, Barber answered lost-and-found and worship questions, made change and directed one instructor to the photocopier.

This year, the Rev. Bob EnTin, a retired pastor in the Presbytery of North Central Iowa, served as dean of Synod School this year, and the Rev. Tammy Rider, stated supply pastor for First Presbyterian Church, Rushford, Minn., served as associate dean.

Rider will be dean next year, and planning for Synod School 2011 begins only a few weeks after the evaluations are reviewed and the books close on this year's event.

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are needed to see this picture.

Duane Sweep, a frequent contributor to Presbyterian News Service, is associate for communications for the Synod of Lakes and Prairies

The Lakes and Prairies Synod School is a special place for Burns Stanfield, who led worship there last year. His niece is pictured on page 3. He told Wayne Parrish that "It's been a home for me for a long time."

Prayer Concerns & Celebrations

Tom Little, a long-time friend of John and Beverly Shank, and of the First United Presbyterian Church in Cambridge, was shot, along with 9 others, by the Taliban, as they were returning from a medical mission trip to Nooristan in Afganistan. Please pray for Tom's wife, Libby, his family, and friends, and for the families and friends of the 9 other victims. *From Ed Trembly, of FUPC*: "Tom and Libby worked in Afghanistan for forty years. They provided eye and medical care for Afghans in Kabul and far off the beaten path. Their medical trips would take a couple weeks on foot with pack animals, since they were beyond roads. They were there to demonstrate God's love through service." *From Cary Young*: "I remember sharing a service with Tom at the Cambridge Presbyterian Church. Even speaking in a pulpit, he spent far more time on the ways the medical work he was involved with was helping people and how we could each do more to help than he ever spent 'converting' anyone. He was truly called to his work and an enormous gift to the people of Afghanistan." Articles appeared in the *Sunday Boston Globe* (8/8) and also in the *New York Times*.

From Wayne Parrish: "Carole and I appreciate your prayers and support. We have used this vacation time to finish most of the packing, and are excited about moving into our new condo in Sudbury on Tuesday, August 17. Please continue to contact me by cell phone and email, which have *not* changed (617-939-6006; wayneparrish@comcast.net). I will return to a more regular schedule after Labor Day. We'll use the rest of summer vacation to move in; then I have a week of executive training on the Cape, and finally some time for R & R." Wayne and Carole's new home contact information is:

35 Maple Avenue #203, Sudbury, MA 01776, Ph: 978-443-1931

Transforming Divisive Conversation: A Workshop for Clergy and Lay Leaders

Are you a rabbi, imam, or minister? A lay leader in your religious community? While communities of faith typically value diversity, it's not uncommon for conflict to arise around differences in theology, worship, and transition (just to name a few.)

The Public Conversations Project is offering a new one-day workshop, "Transforming Divisive Conversation," which will explore ways that congregational leaders can deal with divisive issues, covering topics such as preparing for conflict, preventing corrosive interaction, and helping members have constructive conversation. Drawing on the experience of the Public Conversations Project and Rev. Michael Duda in helping faith communities and other organizations, this workshop will benefit any religious leader who wants to transform destructive conflict into constructive conversation.

Tuesday, October 5, 2010
51 Kondazian Street, Watertown, MA

Space is limited. Register now! The cost is \$125-250 (sliding scale). <http://www.publicconversations.org/workshops/transforming>

Events

August 6-29 – "Little Critters." A group show of pet-inspired art at the Nave Gallery, Clarendon Hill Presbyterian Church. Opening reception Friday, August 6, 6-8 pm. Gallery hours: Friday 6-8 pm; Sat & Sun 1-5 pm. 155 Powderhouse Blvd, **Somerville**. For more details and directions, go to: www.navegallery.org.

August 11-14 – "Church Unbound," Montreat Conference Center, NC. Keynote speaker, preacher, and workshop leader Brian McLaren. See www.covnetpres.org or www.montreat.org.

August 14 – *Gospel Concert*, Fourth Presbyterian Church, **South Boston**, 7:15 pm. Tickets \$10; children free. To benefit programs in the community.

September 10 – "Thy Will Be Done" documentary film begins showing at the Museum of Fine Arts, **Boston**. Contact the MFA for film dates and times.

September 18 – "All in the Family" seminar, at the Presbyterian Church in **Burlington**, 9:00 to 4:00. \$15 per person; \$30 per church. This seminar will take a look at family systems theory and how it relates to church life, boundaries, assessing the health of our congregations and much more. The Rev. Dr. John Mokkaosian and the Rev. Dr. Dayl

Hufford will conduct the program. As psychotherapists, clergy, and Clinical and Executive Directors of the New England Pastoral Institute who are continually providing consultation to congregations facing difficult circumstances, they are aptly qualified to address these issues for us. Please save the date and bring as many from your congregation as possible! Sponsored by CS&D.

October 1-2 - 34th Annual Racial Ethnic Convocation at the Stony Point Conference Ctr.

October 2 – *Gospel Fest* at Hyde Park Presbyterian Church, 7 pm. All proceeds from this event go to support HPPC’s After-School Tutoring Program in its efforts to add a second day of tutoring. HPPC is located at 1109 River Street, **Hyde Park**. For more information, please contact Beth Wieman at: bethwieman@hotmail.com

October 18-22 – 2010 “*Transformation Conference*,” sponsored by Grace Presbytery and the PC(USA) Office of Church Growth, at First Presbyterian Church in Fort Worth, TX. Online registration is available at: <http://gamc.pcusa.org/ministries/church-growth/church-transformation/>

October 23 – Presbyterian Partnership Group (PPG) Presbyterian Women’s meeting at First Presbyterian Church in **Worcester**. The program will include Fair Trade Shopping – Displays – Mission Trip Reports – Greetings from PW Synod guests – Music – Lunch – Worship with Communion – and will close with a special passing of the peace. Registration is \$12.00. For further information, contact Beth Denier at 781-231-9247 or a.denier@verizon.net.

November 4-7 - “*The Changing Contours of World Mission and Christianity*,” sponsored by the Boston Theological Institute. For more information about this **Boston** event, see page 1 of this newsletter.

****Scholarships for seminars and conferences are available through the East Boston Leadership and Education Fund; please contact CS&D (chair-person Martha Spear) or Wayne Parrish for further information.**