

Spiritual Fitness

[The following article by Kristine A. Haig appeared in the March 2008 issue of Presbyterians Today.]

A Quaker friend tells how someone told him how much he admired the Quaker faith, saying, "I really like how you abolished the clergy." My friend replied, "We did not abolish the clergy... we abolished the laity."

What he meant, of course, was that the lack of hierarchy in the Quaker form of religious life was not about diminishing the role of priests, but of elevating the regular membership. All members of the Religious Society of Friends share in the responsibilities and roles that in other religious traditions are reserved for specially trained and set-apart leaders such as priests, ministers, and pastors.

I like to think our Reformed tradition also has "done away with clergy." We do not divide ourselves into "clergy" and "laity." According to our form of government, Presbyterians do not have "clergy" but rather have "members" and "officers." The latter category includes elders and deacons, as well as ministers of the Word and Sacrament – all at the same "level" of leadership, differing only in the specific functions.

When I explain this "high calling" in training classes for newly elected elders, and tell them they are the spiritual leaders of the congregation, I sometimes see a look of near-panic on their faces. They had thought of the Session as a managerial board, not a community of spiritual leaders!

Yet that is how we Presbyterians understand the governance of our congregations. The vows of ordination for elders and ministers are virtually identical, except for a few brief phrases related to the unique functions of each office. Both elders and ministers promise to share in government and discipline, to serve in governing bodies of the church, and to try to show the love and justice of Jesus.

Ministers promise to be faithful in "proclaiming the good news in Word and Sacrament, teaching faith, and caring for people." Elders promise to be faithful in "watching over the people, providing for their worship, nurture, and service."

Elders are clearly more than managers of a social institution. Indeed, they are at the very heart of God's plans, purposes, and dreams for congregations. They are entrusted with the ministry of discernment and the upbuilding of the people of God through worship, service, and ministries of care.

May all of us have a proper appreciation of the holy responsibilities of our elders. Pray for each of them by name regularly, and let them know you are praying for them. Encourage the congregation to nurture the spiritual growth of its elders through opportunities for study and reflection together.

And pray for the Session each time it meets that our elders may be the instruments God uses to enable each congregation to become "alive together with Christ" and a "dwelling place for God."