

Setting Priorities as a Leader

By Adam J. Copeland

In the United States many of us take pride in telling our children, "You can do anything you put your mind to. When you grow up, you can be a lawyer or a doctor, an engineer or a teacher, even the President of the United States." Behind such statements lies a healthy optimism, but really, they aren't quite true. Or, at least, such statements make life a little too simplistic. Let me explain.

Sure, we want our children to set lofty goals and not to limit their sights, but we really don't mean to imply just anyone can have any job. Take teaching, for example. To succeed as a teacher, one must have a true love of learning and an ability to inspire students. Teachers need to be smart but also have heaps of patience and a welcoming smile. Not everyone possesses these traits. And that's okay. Not everyone is called to be a professional teacher (or coach, or doctor, or name-the-occupation). As children grow older they realize they can't be just anything when they grow up; their interests and skills make them particularly well-suited for certain occupations.

The same basic concept holds true in our congregations. We know instinctively that one congregation can't do everything in a community. But it's amazing how many of our churches—and our leaders in them—find ourselves spread too thin, trying to serve God in just *one more* way. Not even the greatest leader among us can

empower a congregation to do everything. Instead, as a leader, the faithful way to serve God requires discernment of gifts and setting priorities.

A Variety of Gifts

The apostle Paul, in 1 Corinthians 12, addresses a community struggling with its gifts and priorities. Some in the community value certain gifts over others, and this is affecting their ability to live peacefully with one another.

Paul encourages them all, saying, "Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit; and there are varieties of services, but the same Lord; and there are varieties of activities, but it is the same God who activates all of them in everyone. To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good" (1 Cor. 12:4-7). Paul moves the discussion from valuing one gift over another to using the vast variety of God-given gifts and activities to serve God.

In some ways, the understanding that God gives many gifts makes our life in community rather difficult. If God only valued a few gifts—say those of mathematicians and physicists, for example—then our life of faith would be easy. We could just find the math and physics folk and let them lead us in serving God. But Paul says

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it's not that simple. We serve the same Lord with the variety of gifts given by the Spirit.

Leading a Gift-Based Ministry

Instead of looking at everything your congregation *could be* doing and trying always *to do more*, try another perspective. Instead of bemoaning the lack of volunteers for a function or the inability to carry on a certain tradition, we would do better to consider our communities and say, "Look at all these gifts God has given us. How can we serve God in this place with these gifted people?" Approaching would-be leaders then becomes a holy task of engaging the gifts God has given rather than squeezing folks into already-made boxes.

So we can't do everything. But, we can serve God in a variety of faithful ways with the gifts God provides. As your congregation's leaders discern how God might be working in your midst, consider the following:

- *Leading isn't easy.* God made us to be in community, but God didn't promise it would be easy. Leading God's people and discerning the people's gifts is a difficult task that takes effort and dedication.
- *Stop and pray.* It's been said that at the heart of it, every great theologian is a person of prayer. We might say the same of Christian leadership. At the heart of all great leaders—and leadership movements—is prayer. Be sure to take ample time to pray alone and with others.
- *You are not alone.* Well, you may *feel* alone in your leadership. If so, run and find someone else. Even the greatest leaders need support and encouragement from others.

- *Set priorities as a community.* No one person has a complete understanding of the gifts of those in your community. Make decisions in groups, after plenty of prayer and discussion. God's Spirit works on an individual level too, but as Paul writes, the Spirit serves the common good. When seeking to serve the common good, gather several "common folk" to help you discern.
- *Leading to something new.* God's Spirit has a way of surprising us, leading us to unexpected places. When we activate people's God-given gifts, people are liable to get carried away in service. Change can be hard for all of us, but if people see the excitement and energy that comes when people use their gifts, change might not be so scary.

Surely our churches can do many things well, but we can't do everything. Rather, God has led certain people to our congregations and gifted them with a variety of gifts of the Spirit. Asking an extremely shy person to serve as a greeter for worship might fill a needed slot on a volunteer sheet, but it does not honor such a person's gifts. Instead, good leaders get to know one another and discern together how God is working in their lives. With such a gift-based approach to leadership, not everyone can grow up to be President, but each one of us can serve God better with our Spirit-given gifts.

About the Writer

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