

New St. James Presbyterian Church, London, Ontario

Sunday, June 18, 2017

Rev. Andrew Reid

Psalm 116:1-2, 12-19; Matthew 9:35-10:4

“Labourers into the harvest”

Churches are human organizations as much as they are communities of people of faith. And as human organizations, congregations need people of faith to commit to help with the many projects and programs that each congregation presents. They also require leaders who are willing to give their time, talents, and prayers to the well-being of the whole congregation. Without such leaders, a congregation is unable to minister, either to people within the congregation or to people in their community. The fact is that without committed leadership, churches become ineffective and diminish. In the Presbyterian system, we call these congregational leaders elders.

One of the Biblical models that is often referred to when people talk about eldership in the Presbyterian Church in Canada is found in Exodus 18:13-27. There we are told that Moses was close to experiencing what we would now call burn-out. As God’s appointed leader of the Hebrew people, he acted as judge for the people. Whenever they had a dispute or some matter that they needed guidance on, they would bring it to him and he would sort it out for them. But acting as sole judge for all the people was a big task, becoming too big for one person to handle alone. There were too many disputes, too many issues, too many concerns. Deuteronomy 34:7 says that when Moses died, *his sight was unimpaired and his vigour had not abated*. But in Exodus 18, his father-in-law, Jethro, was worried that Moses was wearing himself out.

The solution that Jethro came up with was for Moses to learn to delegate some of his responsibilities to others in the community so that he could devote his energies and attention to the matters that he needed to deal with. Without the help of others, Jethro believed that Moses was

doomed to failure because he was unable to deal with all of the problems and divisions of his people. Moses took Jethro's advice. Exodus 18:25-26: ²⁵*Moses chose able men from all Israel and appointed them as heads over the people, as officers over thousands, hundreds, fifties, and tens.* ²⁶*And they judged the people at all times; hard cases they brought to Moses, but any minor case they decided themselves.*

The burden was shared and the responsibilities widened. The end result was a far more effective system than the one-man-band that Moses had been running up to that point.

That text is often referred to as a model for eldership in the church today. But there is a problem with using it that way. The problem is that it is not really about shared leadership. Rather, it is about Moses, the leader, delegating to other people tasks and responsibilities that were strictly speaking his alone.

I believe that the model we find in the New Testament is a more meaningful model for the eldership today. The model there is the model of the church as a body, and every part of the body having its own unique and distinctive part to play. That's why Paul talks in I Corinthians 12 about varieties of gifts but the same Spirit, varieties of services but the same Lord, and varieties of activities activated by the same God. And that's why he goes on to say that ²⁸*God has appointed in the church first apostles, second prophets, third teachers; then deeds of power, then gifts of healing, forms of assistance, forms of leadership, various kinds of tongues.* ²⁹*Are all apostles? Are all prophets? Are all teachers? Do all work miracles?* ³⁰*Do all possess gifts of healing? Do all speak in tongues? Do all interpret?* I Corinthians 12:28-30.

If you take the Moses model and the Corinthian model, and combine them into one, you end up with something close to the model for eldership in the Presbyterian system in general and in New St James in particular. Leadership modelled on teams is far more effective than solo

leadership. It has been rightly said that there is a reason why God so loved the world that God did not send a committee,

As Presbyterians, we continue this team ministry through the practice of ordaining elders in our congregations. People are called and chosen by God so that the life and mission of our congregation can be sustained and advanced. The women and men whom we elect to be elders are prayerfully nominated and elected on the basis of their commitment to the congregation. And they enter into the role of elders in response to a call from God through the congregation. It is an act on their part of faith and Christian commitment.

Eldership, then, is a direct calling from God to strengthen the faith, ministry, and purpose of the local church, to share the burdens of the people, and to plan for the future ahead. Without strong leadership from its elders, a congregation can lose ground; with strong leadership, a congregation can blossom and grow.

To get round at last to this morning's texts. In Psalm 116, the Psalmist commits himself to lift up the cup of salvation, to call on the name of the Lord, to pay his vows to the Lord, and to offer to the Lord a thanksgiving sacrifice. And to do all that in direct response to what the Lord had done for him: *What shall I return to the Lord for all his bounty to me?* Psalm 116:12.

At the end of Matthew 9 and the start of Matthew 10, Jesus sends his disciples out as labourers into the harvest, for *'The harvest is plentiful, but the labourers are few . . .'* Matthew 9:37. The 12 apostles who are named are summoned, given authority, and sent out to fulfil their God-given task.

Which is exactly what will happen in a few minutes when we ordain and install eight new elders to the Session of New St James. They have been summoned by God and by you, the congregation of New St James. Through their ordination, they will be given authority to serve as elders. And they will then be sent out, along with the elders who currently serve,

to fulfil their God's given task of leadership.

Honour our new elders. Pray for our new elders. And work with them to build God's kingdom of righteousness, peace and joy as together we follow Christ, worship God and serve others.