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# The Ministry System: Learning to Ride the Congregational Tidal Wave

By Mark Love

In both of the congregations I have served as a minister I have had the challenge of riding that congregational tidal wave commonly called a "Ministry System." The ride has been exciting, productive, fraught with fear, and more than a little intimidating. As I converse with other ministers, scan the bulletins that cross my desk, and visit other congregations, I am impressed by the number those riding the same wave. The "ministry system" is rapidly changing the organizational landscape of the Churches of Christ.

What is a ministry system? A ministry system enhances member involvement in the congregation by assigning particular ministries or activities to a ministry leader or "deacon-type" figure. The ministry leader is assigned to his/her ministry on the basis of abilities, aptitudes, and/or "spiritual gifts." The onus for creativity and organization within particular ministries is removed from the

elders which frees them to function more pastorally as "shepherds." Congregational vision becomes more grass roots, thereby increasing ownership of programs by the members. Ministry leaders actively recruit members to staff their ministries, the goal being total congregational involvement. At least, this is the way it was explained to me. Different forms and permeations of this phenomena can be found from congregation to congregation.

The benefits of a ministry system are apparent early in its formation and implementation. There are many things which immediately recommend this type of congregational organization. It is my experience, however, that the ministry system also presents problems — both organizational and theological. It must be noted here that both of the congregations I have served are in the 150-200 member range. Some of the problems encountered might be endemic to congregations this size. Since the ministry system seems to have originated in larger churches (large churches have been the models emulated by the congregations I have been associated with) a voice from below might provide a helpful critique for the vast number of churches who fall into these smaller categories.

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## Theological Benefits

There appears to be a theological method to the ministry system madness, much of which is healthy and needed. Passages such as 1 Corinthians 12, Romans 12, and Ephesians 4 are taken seriously by the ministry system. The church is seen more as an organism than an organization, and the body metaphor of 1 Cor. 12 provides ample theological justification for such a distinction. A ministry system takes seriously the notions that God is equipping the body, every member has a function, and spiritual gifts correspond to defined ministries.

Ministry system congregations learn to emphasize the leading and prompting of the Spirit. Motivation for ministry, therefore, comes less from obligation and guilt and more from a sense of calling and participation with God. The residual benefits of this type of thinking can be immense. Prayer, sharing, and fellowship in service increase which provides spiritual growth for the congregation.

All of this changes the traditional role that elders have played within the Churches of Christ. No longer primarily "decision makers" or "members of the board," elders are now allowed to pursue neglected aspects of pastoral care. This change certainly highlights aspects of the biblical role of an elder that have been slighted from time to time.

Some would suggest that the ministry system allows congregations to realize more fully the theological notion of the priesthood of believers. Given the grass roots or democratic nature of the ministry system, an individual's participation in ministry is no longer inhibited by a layering of church organization. In other words, the laity is energized, no longer totally dependent on ministers, or even elders, for the function of the church. This claim appeals to our democratic sensibilities and may have a ring of truth to it, but fails to fully understand the full implications of the priesthood of believers. This will be addressed more fully below.

## Organizational Benefits

The most obvious benefit of the ministry system is that it spreads the planning and responsibility for ministry over a wider circle of members. A church which once had two ministers, five elders, and a handful of deacons now has three ministers (an involvement minister is almost always added, or the education minister becomes the involvement minister), five elders, and twenty ministry leaders. This results in more goals, more planning, more attention to detail, and hopefully more ministry.

As noted above, since planning comes more from the grass roots, congregational ownership of activities is increased. This results, at least initially,

in a more motivated congregation. Indeed, the early days of a ministry system are heady due to the marked difference in congregational attitude toward the work of the church. Ministry leaders are encouraged to be aggressive and church leaders are counseled to allow for some failures. In the long run, this freedom will pay dividends in involvement.

Theoretically, all of these benefits will increase the percentage of the membership involved in ministry. This is no doubt generally true, but I have often thought that it resulted primarily in more activity for those already involved. Still, the organizational benefits listed here are not insignificant. They constitute a great tidal wave of activity.

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Yet, despite all of this there are problems, especially for smaller churches. Some problems are organizational, a few theological. Often the problems are both.

## On the Other Hand . . .

A ministry system creates a new jargon and a pocketful of new definitions. In fact, defining terms can be one of the most challenging aspects of instituting a ministry system. Lost in the shuffle are the deacons. Most churches I am aware of call those responsible for the identified activities "ministry leaders" or "servant ministry leaders." In a few places the cast of deacons are actually expanded to carry out these responsibilities. And in some cases "ministry leader" consciously becomes a translation for the Greek word "diakonos" or "deacon." But for most the question still remains — are ministry leaders and deacons the same thing? This is a thorny problem. I have visited churches with newly instituted ministry systems that have both. "What do the deacons do?" I asked. "We're not sure, but we didn't want to take their titles away," was the reply.

The fact is, many churches simply have not thought this issue through. There can be advantages to thoughtlessness. For some this has become an



opportunity to involve women in ministry without fully facing the issues involved. For others it has become a way to circumvent an uncooperative deacon or group of deacons. Obviously, both of these tendencies are ultimately unproductive and need to be dealt with up front.

Often, ministry leaders are not held to the

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same “qualifications” as deacons. (In one church I am aware of deacons are merely “qualified” ministry leaders). Ministry leaders are chosen primarily because of particular gifts or abilities. “Who can do the job?” is a far different question than “who embodies the aspirations of the community of faith?” It is at this point that I would bring a theological critique to the ministry system.

It is true that the church is like an organism. But this is a limited metaphor and does not describe the church in its totality. An equally important, if not more pervasive description of the church is that of community. While not specifically mentioned often in the biblical narrative, the notion of community lies behind such prominent images as the priesthood of believers, the *koinonia*, the household of God, and the temple of the Holy Spirit. While the emphasis in organism is on function, the emphasis in community is on being. In other words, in an organism you recognize members by their function, in a community members are recognized more by their virtue. While God equips the body with spiritual gifts, he sustains the body through the practice of Christian virtue. The seven set aside for waiting on tables in Acts 6 are chosen because they embody the spiritual aspirations of the community, not because they are particularly suited for waiting on tables. Whatever the function of “deacons” in 1 Tim. 3, they are called forth because they personify certain qualities.

A correlate to this distinction between organism and community is that of the distinction between a gifts theology and a servant theology. A

practical problem for the ministry system is that no one seems to have the “gift” of sitting in the nursery or teaching the Jr. High class. Motivation for ministry needs to be produced as much by strong notions of servanthood as it does spiritual giftedness. In fact, it is at this point that I Cor. 12 and 13 need to be read together. Faith, hope, and love (the greatest of these) may constitute the “spiritual” in the term spiritual gifts. A desire to wash the feet of the church may produce more ministry than a desire to bask in giftedness. At the very least, these motivations must be held together.

Finally, along the lines of the virtuous community, I am concerned with the limits the ministry system sometimes places on elderships. I have heard involvement ministers boast of how little involvement elders have with the functioning of the ministries. One minister proudly pointed to the fact that each of the congregation’s ministry leaders had their own check book and were completely independent in how they spent their monies. I applaud the desire to give ministry leaders room to roam and the intent of freeing elders from the mundane for matters of pastoral care. But I am concerned with the naivete of some concerning issues of money, power, and authority in the church. While it is true that one cannot serve both God and mammon, it is not true that money and spirituality are mutually exclusive. While not calling for approval on every expenditure or decision (far from it), those who bear the virtues of an elder need to have a shepherding interest in those areas that deal with congregational authority and power.

### Organizational Perils

From my experience, it is very hard to keep any sense of shape and priority to the work of the church in the ministry system. Once a leader is assigned to a particular congregational function it takes on a life of its own that competes for the resources and allegiances of the congregation’s members. In the ministry system there is a sense in which all ministries are created equal. Sound and tape, missions, benevolence, and the church library are all on equal footing when it comes to appropriating the life-blood of the congregation — its members. Now certainly budgeting gives some sense of priority to congregational ministries, but planning, staffing, and publicizing are great equalizers. I have seen a sound and tape ministry that was the model of the entire ministry system. The leader of the ministry was a great motivator, planner, and executor. Community service, on the other hand, floundered. This was due in part to the fact that the



ministries were competing for the same resources on an even field. Even if there is a clear articulation of purpose by the leaders of the church, a congregation's vision can become compartmentalized by ministries who have a life of their own. This is especially true for smaller churches.

Large churches may have the resource capacity to handle the enormous drain the ministry system places on a church, and, therefore, to maintain the shape of their congregational priorities. Smaller churches, on the other hand, have many of the same institutional needs of a larger church, yet, with fewer resources. For instance, a church of 200 is likely to have the same number of Bible classes as a church of 400. Lyle Schaller, in his book **Looking in the Mirror** (Abingdon, 1984), describes congregations in the 175-225 range as awkward in size for this very reason. They are large enough to require a lot, but too small to provide adequately for their needs. A ministry system for a congregation of this size can provide a short-term shot in the arm, but over the long haul can run it into the ground.

I once took a group of ministry leaders to a "church growth" seminar at a nearby "mega-church" (what Schaller refers to as a mini-denomination). While the trip promised to inspire our limping ministry system to new heights, what it delivered was a blow to the mid-section of our congregational psyche. It was clear that we would be unable to reproduce the wonderful things we witnessed — not just from a size and scope perspective, but also from a purely structural perspective. This is especially true if the professional staff of the church is small. Many 150-200 member congregations have only one full-time staff member. The truth is, even highly motivated ministry leaders are volunteers. The help and support required to assist twenty or more volunteer leaders is immense and beyond the scope of one minister and a part-time secretary.

Obviously, these last reflections characterize only a mid-sized congregation. Yet, it is my sense that the same might be true for different sized churches to varying degrees, with the possible exception of the mini-denomination.

### Some Suggestions

Despite the misgivings listed above, I am not willing to assign the ministry system to the Joy Bus scrap heap. It has value that extends beyond the status of passing fad. I would caution churches, however, to be thoughtful in using a "ministry system," and especially to avoid simply parroting a system from a larger church. Here are a few suggestions for consideration.

#### 1. Honor virtue as well as giftedness. Do

not feel the need to publicly recognize every ability displayed by a member as a ministry of the church. It is nice when giftedness and character come in the same package, and even nicer when that conforms to a particular congregational activity. But when it comes to recognizing leaders the church should honor the faith aspirations of the community. Choose virtue and character over giftedness. You might not be as functional, but your children are more likely to keep their values straight. This pertains to elders as well. Men of character should not be shielded from the concerns of the ministries to "save them" for shepherding. Ministry systems generate a lot of power and wise shepherds are crucial to the community's proper use of money and influence.

**2. Motivate through servanthood as well as giftedness.** Gift discovery should certainly be a prerequisite to ministry sign-up. But members should be motivated by serving love and ultimate congregational objectives as well. Encourage members to sign-up for at least one "towel and basin" ministry for every "gift" ministry they choose. Encourage members to focus on those tasks that form the "prime directives" of the church, e.g. evangelism and community outreach.

**3. Identify fewer ministries.** Again, once a ministry is identified it takes on a life of its own

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and, therefore, competes for the vision of the congregation. By focusing on fewer ministries the sheer number of congregational goals is reduced. This may seem undesirable, but for smaller churches it is a concession to sanity. Moreover, it helps the congregation keep its focus. Our congregation has decided to identify only six ministries with various activities within those ministry areas. Tasks within the ministries are given priority in terms of staffing, publicity, etc. in relation to the global goals of the ministry area. The sound and tape guy now has

more to think about than who operates the sound room. He is willing to use fewer persons because he is aware of the big picture. His ministry fits into a greater whole.

**4. Be clear with your definitions.** Know the relationship between a deacon and a ministry leader. Use the time of clarification to honestly study the biblical and theological ramifications of the participation of women. At our congregation, the

definitions are not what we anticipated. Our Bible study surprised us in many ways and made us thankful that we had reexamined traditional interpretations of certain passages.

These suggestions might help as you ride the tidal wave of the ministry system. Hopefully, our structures will reflect who God is and the belief that he is active in our churches.

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*You are not to be called "rabbi," for you have only one master and you are all brothers. And do not call anyone on earth "father," for you have one Father, and he is in heaven. Nor are you to be called "teacher," for you have one Teacher, the Messiah. The greatest among you will be your servant. For whoever exalts himself will be humbled, and whoever humbles himself will be exalted.*

*Matthew 23:8-12*

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