

Functional Systems
Natural Church Development Sermon Series #05
May 4th, 2008

Series: Natural Church Development
Scripture: Acts 6:1-6

**A sermon preached by Rev. Dr. Stacey D. Jones on May 4th,
2008 at Northminster Presbyterian Church.**

As we continue our series on what makes for a healthy church, we come to the fourth principle in Christian Schwartz's research: the principle of Functional Systems.

A colleague of mine tells the story of a pastor who had accepted a call to serve a new church, and early in her ministry she requested \$60 per week from the board to pay someone to mow the lawn and care for the flowers on the church's property.

The oldest board member quickly pointed out, "The former pastor did that himself." However, the new young pastor was quick on her feet. "I know," she replied, "but; I already asked him and he doesn't want to do it anymore."

One of the greatest problems in any organization, and especially the church, is to demand so much of our leaders that the burden becomes unbearable. Unless we create functional systems where the responsibility can be shared, our leaders can burn themselves out.

In the sixth chapter of Acts we see one of the early conflicts in first century church. It is comforting for me as a pastor to see that even in those early days the church was a very human institution with its own share of problems. We have a tendency to idealize the New Testament church, as if they didn't face the problems we face, and that just isn't so.

The disciples who had been with Jesus had witnessed growth in their numbers very quickly. On the day of Pentecost, 3,000 people had made commitments to join them. They went from a family-size church of 12 to a pastor-size church of 120 to a mega-size church of over 3,000, and the systems which worked when the church was only 12 or 120 just weren't working. They had to come up with a solution or the church could have easily broken into warring factions.

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This morning I want us to look at their solution as a model for healthy church systems, and I would suggest to you there are three important messages for us:

- 1) Shared Leadership;
- 2) Shared Ministry;
- 3) A Place for Everyone.

The problem that the early disciples faced was one of factions. It surfaced itself around the distribution of the things they held in common and agreed to distribute these things to those in need.

Now we must remember that this was in the days before there was a system of social security or welfare. Women had no access to the economy other than the families of their husbands. If women were widowed and their husband's family chose not to honor their responsibility to them, they were essentially left to their own devices to fend for themselves if they didn't receive the concern of the church.

The problem in our text is one of favoritism. Men had lived in exile because they had been taken away during wars or had to make a living in another country. When they returned to Palestine, they weren't as well-known, and when they died, their widows were being neglected. If you were the widow of a Palestinian Jew, you were taken care of, but if you were the widow of a Hellenist Jew you were poorly treated in the church welfare system.

The Hellenistic Jews complained. It just wasn't fair in their minds that the widows of men like them should be poorly treated, and they were right. Now the Apostles could have responded defensively. They could have defended what they did and told the Hellenists to take a hike. Instead, they saw the potential in the problem. They sought the guidance of the Holy Spirit, and they came up with a solution.

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If the Hellenists were being ignored, share the leadership with the Hellenists. Let them solve the problem. Don't let their problem stifle the ministry of the church. Include them in the solution. Don't draw lines of who is in and who is out. Share the authority to make decisions about who should receive what and when.

This was a turning point in the life of the early church. They responsibility for leadership in the community is shared. One group that could have held all the power recognized that their ministry could be expanded if they would delegate some of that responsibility.

Steve Sample is the president of the University of Southern California. In his book, *The Contrarian's Guide to Leadership*, Sample shares a leadership lesson he learned early in his career. "One of my earliest introductions to real leadership occurred in 1971, when I was named (at the tender age of thirty) to be deputy director for academic affairs of the Illinois Board of Higher Education. There I learned a great deal from the board's chairman, George Clements, who had made a name for himself as the man who built the Chicago-based Jewel Tea Company into a major national grocery chain.

When I first arrived at my post, Mr. Clements said, 'Steve, let me give you some basic advice about leadership. You should spend a small amount of your time hiring your direct reports, evaluating them, exhorting them, setting their compensation, praising them, kicking their butts and, when necessary, firing them. When you add all that up, it should come out to about 10 percent of your time. For the remaining 90 percent of your time you should be doing everything you can to help your direct reports succeed. You should be the first assistant to the people who work for you.'" (Steve Sample, *The Contrarian's Guide to Leadership* Jossey-Bass, 2002), p. 121

Shared Leadership is one of the first signs of the early church becoming a healthy congregation.

However, shared leadership implies a shared ministry. The instruction of scripture to the early church was to choose seven men of good standing who were full of the Spirit of God and of wisdom. These men became the first Deacons of the church who were charged with the care of those who were vulnerable.

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Now there needs to be an apology here to the women of the congregation – shoot, me included! The early church had not reached the enlightenment it later received about the leadership role of women, and yet I find it fascinating how difficult it is now to recruit men for this important role in the life of our church. Today we would say, “Choose people who are full of the Spirit and of wisdom” for this important role.

In the Presbyterian Church (USA) we have two offices which lay people are called to be leaders in the life of the church. Our Elders and Deacons share the same ordination as the pastor but with different functions. Elders are charged with oversight of the spiritual development and the programmatic life of the church. Deacons are charged with caring for those who might otherwise be forgotten. One is the office of discernment and direction, and the other is the office of service.

Here at Northminster Presbyterian Church we have 24 people who are Elders and Deacons. But like the first office holders in the Book of Acts, there is more to the ministry than those 24 people. Those 24 are the leaders of the church, but leaders need someone to lead. There is more than enough to do in fulfilling the vision we have claimed for ourselves and the vision that is emerging. It requires all of us to do our part, however small our part may be. If we do not, what is intended to be a functional system of shared leadership becomes dysfunctional, and the impact of our ministry is undermined.

I read a story about the Michigan Special Olympics. Nearly 3,000 athletes take part in the summer games of Michigan’s Special Olympics. The Special Olympics slogan is “Caring is more important than winning.” This is especially true of those competitors who are mentally impaired.

The events at the Special Olympics are like any other track meet with one major difference. At the finish line is a group of volunteers the Olympic committee calls “huggers.” Their job, in addition to calling out the winners, is to encourage one of the competitors throughout the race and to greet him or her at the finish line with a big hug. (Mart De Haan, Power Up!)

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Wouldn't it be wonderful if the church was as efficient as the Special Olympics? Wouldn't it be wonderful if all of us did our part to support our leaders, even if all we can do is encourage them with our financial support and our prayers? For those of you who cannot be an active part of the ministry of this church because of your health, will you consider being a "Hugger" of your leaders and support them with your giving as well as your prayers?

The result of shared leadership and shared ministry in the life of the early church was growth. People felt the empowering leadership of the apostles. They felt called to use their gifts by their passionate spirituality, and they joined a structure where those gifts could be used to be of service to Christ and to others. It wasn't enough to have empowering leadership or a gift oriented ministry or passionate spirituality. There had to be structures in place so that everyone felt they were part of the ministry and could contribute to it.

There was a great commercial on TV a while back with Lee Iacocca. He is in an elevator with a fan, and the man pays him a compliment. He says, "Mr. Iacocca, I want to tell you how much I enjoy your television commercials advertising Chrysler."

Iacocca replies, "Son, I could care less of what you think of my commercials. What I want to know is what kind of car do you drive?"

The bottom line to our ministry is not about people responding with positive regard to how we say things. The bottom line of our ministry is about people turning to the Christ who summons them as we speak. Are they enjoying the presentation or embracing the Person, and are they empowered to take their place in His body as together we minister to the needs of the world? This is the task of creating functional systems in our life together. May we claim it for our future!