

Using Our Gifts for Ministry 25041121
2 Samuel 5:1-5 and Romans 12:1-8
Elon Community Church, UCC, 21 November, 2004

One of the big mistakes dying congregations make is to concentrate their efforts on institutional maintenance. This results in focusing inward rather than focusing on the mission of the church outward into the community. The extent to which a church is concerned about continuing traditions is the extent to which it is neglecting the spreading of the good news to those who need to hear it.

At Elon Community Church, we are in the process of nominating people to fill positions for next year. The nominating committee has been working diligently. We are grateful to those people who have said “yes” and are willing to be nominated as an officer or member of one of the boards.

We must beware, however, of the danger of filling a position rather than helping a person discern what he or she is called to do in the way of ministry. We are not here to maintain ourselves as an institution. We are here to empower and encourage people to do ministry in the name of Jesus Christ. Just because Tony is an electrician does not mean he should be asked to serve on the building maintenance committee. Tony, you see, has discovered that doing electrical work is a drudgery for him. What he really likes is to teach young apprentices how to do electrical work. Tony’s gift is relating to younger adults. They are often rebellious and have a chip on their shoulder. Tony has discovered that he can get through to them and motivate them. He likes to befriend them, and feels fulfilled when they respect his worldly wisdom. Tony is discovering that he has some long-neglected spiritual gifts. He feels called to use those gifts in ministry. His church friends have helped him discern his gifts and are encouraging him to use them. He has learned that God’s spirit has given him the courage and freedom to say “no” to the maintenance committee and “yes” to the young adult group.

This is the point of our fourth calling as a congregation. We are in the process of studying the answers to the question, “What is God calling this church to be and to do. The fourth calling is, “Elon Community Church is called to encourage followers of Jesus Christ to discern and use their individual gifts for ministry in his name.” We need to resist the temptation to recruit people for offices that fulfill the institutional agenda. Instead, we need more emphasis on spiritual gifts discernment. We need to help people discover which gifts give them enthusiasm.

Dying churches make a virtue out of accepting mediocrity. They recruit people whose sense of duty make them willing to serve committees and fill offices that are open, rather than what they feel called to do. The very fact that volunteers are willing to set aside personal enthusiasms and sacrifice personal enjoyment in order to fulfill the institutional agenda, underlines their subordination to the system. They may do their best, but they may not be competent to do really do the job right. Dying churches end up with mediocre work and burned out volunteers.

Churches that are alive strive for excellence. Enthusiasm abounds. When churches encourage members to discover and use their spiritual gifts, their problem isn’t motivation; their problem is reigning in people long enough to get them trained to exercise their gifts with skill.

Each of us has a different set of gifts. Paul said that in his letter to the Romans.¹ Just as a body has different parts with different functions, so the church is made up of many members with different functions. Some of us have the gift of teaching, Others have the gift of

¹Romans 12:6

encouraging. Some have the gift of compassion, while others have the gift of leading. Before she joined the church, one of our new members asked, “Do I have to serve on a board if I join?”

I said, “no, I want you to think and pray about what God wants you to be doing.”

A few months later she came to me excitedly and said, “I have some ideas of things I think God would like me to do.” With enthusiasm and energy she is teaching groups crafts to make gifts to take to some lonely people. She is working with the Town and with businesses to recycle, redistribute and reuse. She is doing ministry in the world in the name of Jesus Christ.

God is calling you to discover and use your gifts for ministry. David was called to be king over Israel. Remember how he started out? He was the youngest child in his family. He was a shepherd, and you couldn't get much lower than a shepherd. But David was encouraged by Samuel who singled him out and helped him hear God's call to be a leader.

David was encouraged by the people around him. In our Hebrew testament reading this morning, it says the people of Israel came to David and asked him to be their king.² His gifts were noticed by the people and they encouraged him to use them.

David was by no means perfect. None of us is. But just as God used David, God can use us if we are willing.

We are on the brink of a season devoted to gifts. On Thanksgiving Day we give grateful thanks to God for all of the gifts we have received. At Christmas we give gifts to one another in recognition of the wonderful gift God gave us in Jesus Christ. During this season devoted to gifts, I urge you to think about what gifts God has given you for ministry. Pray for ways God would like you to use those gifts; and let your ministers and other church members know how we can help you use your gifts for ministry.

God has given you as a gift to this world. Will you allow yourself to be used by God to touch others with healing and compassion?

²2 Samuel 5:1