

Empowering the Full Body of Christ

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As the Apostle Paul traveled across the Mediterranean region in the first century, he sought to help the communities he encountered understand how Jesus had changed the world as they knew it. Jesus's teaching offered a new way of understanding our relationships with one another. The community that Jesus encouraged was based in collaboration, common purpose, and mutual service to one another. Like all great preachers, Paul knew that teaching Jesus's vision of the church community required a good illustration. Hence, Paul presented the image of the church as the Body of Christ, equipped with a variety of gifts for the good of all. This image, which Paul presents in variations through several of his epistles—most clearly in 1 Corinthians, Romans, and Ephesians—continues to guide the church.

The church finds itself in another time of great transition today. The rise of the internet age and the global commerce and connec-

tion it enables is changing our political and economic reality. Combined with the experience of the COVID-19 pandemic, the need for new models of local church leadership is unavoidable. While many traditions have long operated with part-time clergy—the gifts of that experience are explored elsewhere in this book—for my own primarily White Presbyterian tradition, like many in the US mainline, the move from a full-time to a part-time pastor is frequently seen as a sign of decline for the congregation. It is often accompanied by a sense of loss and shame in the minds of congregants who have previously supported full-time clergy. These are congregations that have long prided themselves on their well-educated, professional clergy. Their emphasis on the education of clergy also leads to a sense of inadequacy for many members, who feel they do not have the training or knowledge to step into leadership roles. This sense of inadequacy is magnified in the current political climate of disinformation and heightened polarization. I see this dynamic particularly in my own context in the United States, though I know we are not alone in facing this challenge.

When leaders feel they do not have sufficient education, training, or support structures, the experience can be detrimental not only to the leader but also to the congregation. Phyllis Tickle, in her 2008 book, *The Great Emergence*, saw this challenge coming long before some of the most polarizing experiences of the last decade.

The computer, opening up—as it does—the whole of humankind’s bank of collective information, enables the priesthood of all believers in ways the Reformation could never have envisioned. It also, however, opens up all that information to anybody, without traditional restraints of vetting or jurying; without the controls of informed, credentialed access; and without the accompaniment or grace of mentoring. It even opens up with equal *élan* the world’s bank of disinformation. To the extent that faith can be formed or dissuaded by the contents of the mind as well as those of the heart, then such license has huge implications for the Great Emergence and for what it will decide to do about factuality in a wiki world (Tickle 2008, 107).

In any work that is done to discern the gifts of, educate, or support new leaders within the Body of Christ, we cannot ignore the challenges of establishing authority and fact in the internet age. Providing broader access to our educational resources, spending time in communal discernment, and working to form greater structures for ongoing support and nurture of all our members may be exactly what is needed to maintain our unity as the Body of Christ while

celebrating our diversity. Just as the image of the Body of Christ supported previous transformations in the church, this image can guide our understanding of the transformation in leadership needed for the current time.

In just the fifteen years since I graduated from seminary, the changing nature of the church is apparent. The COVID-19 pandemic only escalated the transformation that was already underway. I write as a clergyperson who has served twice as a part-time pastor in a congregation previously served by a full-time pastor. In addition to my pastorates in southern Wisconsin, I also served in leadership roles for my regional Presbytery, covering urban and rural settings, and for the state-wide Wisconsin Council of Churches. As I reflect on the congregations and neighbors I served, I see the need to rethink how we structure our local congregational leadership and how we support those leaders.

In this chapter, I explore how Paul's image of the Body of Christ has informed the church through other times of great transition and the opportunity this image offers for empowering the multitude of gifts in our church membership today. I address the ways in which Paul's image of the Body of Christ has guided the church through great technological and societal shifts, not unlike what we are experiencing now, and how we can build on these experiences to meet the challenges of our time. The image of the church as a multi-gifted, interconnected body is a helpful reminder of the need to educate and support the leadership gifts of the full Body of Christ. A transition from full-time to part-time, or bivocational, pastorates offers an opportunity to utilize the educational resources we already have to empower and equip members with specific gifts for ministry. This exploration then leads to a discussion of new models for empowering the full Body of Christ through discernment of gifts, education and training, and ongoing support of those trained.

Unity and Charism in the Body of Christ

Paul's image of Christian community as the Body of Christ, unified through our diverse gifts, has provided structure for Christian community since the first century. Despite the many interpretations and varieties of ways to understand this metaphor, the image of being united through our varieties of gifts continues to speak to the expe-

rience of Christian community. From the first century communities in Corinth, Rome, and Ephesus to current-day international unions and local congregations, we continue to profess that Christ alone is head of the church, that we are connected to one another through our common baptism, and that all who profess faith in Jesus Christ as our Lord and Savior have a calling to serve as his disciples.

In the Body, Christ alone is the head, and all members have gifts to offer. Paul emphasized that every person, every gift, has value, declaring that no part of the body can say to another “I have no need of you” (1 Cor. 12:21, NRSV). He emphasized the dependency of all the various parts of the body on one another:

For as in one body we have many members, and not all the members have the same function, so we, who are many, are one body in Christ, and individually we are members one of another. We have gifts that differ according to the grace given to us: prophecy, in proportion to faith; ministry, in ministering; the teacher, in teaching; the exhorter, in exhortation; the giver, in generosity; the leader, in diligence; the compassionate, in cheerfulness. (Rom. 12:4–8)

In writing to the Ephesians, Paul also described the ways in which we are called to bear with one another in humility, gentleness, and love as part of the one Body of Christ, united in our baptism (Eph. 4:2–4).

This image of the church as the Body of Christ has informed the church through previous transformations. In the Reformation era, the image of the variety of gifts and the interdependent Body of Christ gave rise to the concept of the priesthood of all believers. Martin Luther spoke to this concept in his treatise, “The Babylonian Captivity of the Church”:

If they were forced to grant that as many of us as have been baptised are all priests without distinction, as indeed we are, and that to them was committed the ministry only, yet with our consent, they would presently learn that they have no right to rule over us except in so far as we freely concede it. For thus it is written in 1 Peter 2:9, “Ye are a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, and a priestly kingdom.” (Luther [1520] 2002, para. 7.9)

Luther’s emphasis on baptism as the unifying force that brings the Body of Christ together without any right of one to rule over another echoes Paul’s call for all the baptized to “lead a life worthy of the call-

ing to which you have been called” (Eph. 4:1). Paul’s image of the Body of Christ opened the door wide for Luther’s interpretation of 1 Peter 2, viewing the priesthood as a function of all believers.

For the modern era, we see this understanding of the image of the Body of Christ reflected in the ministry section of the 1982 Lima Text adopted by the World Council of Churches: “Baptism, Eucharist, and Ministry.” This statement declares, “All members are called to discover, with the help of the community, the gifts that they have received and to use them for the building up of the Church and for the service of the world to which the Church is sent” (World Council of Churches 1982, Ministry II.5). The statement goes on to speak to ordained ministry and does not lose sight of the importance of the variety of gifts, or charisms, found in all members. This is clear in the statement on charisms:

The ordained ministry, which is itself a charism, must not become a hindrance for the variety of these charisms. On the contrary, it will help the community to discover the gifts bestowed on it by the Holy Spirit and will equip members of the body to serve in a variety of ways. (World Council of Churches 1982, Ministry III.D.32)

Again, there is an expectation that all members of the church—the full community of the baptized—have gifts to share for the good of the whole community.

The Body of Christ and Technology

It is one thing to recognize that every member of this interconnected body has a gift to share; it is far harder to put this statement into practice. How we live into this image, discern the gifts of our members, equip them for the work they are called to do, and support them in that work are unique to our particular times. We must find the ways to respond with humility, gentleness, patience, and love for one another that will best suit our current situation and technology.

In the Reformation, the priesthood of all believers was directly tied to an emphasis on scripture’s authority (*sola scriptura*). Reformers were aided by the invention of the printing press, enabling them to equip and empower the people to approach and read scripture directly. As it became possible to print Bibles for use in common house-

holds, the importance of increasing the literacy of the people also arose. This technological advance supported and encouraged what was happening in the church and enabled local communities and wider networks to equip and empower their members to develop their gifts in service to the larger mission of the church.

In a similar way, the technological advance of the internet is fueling the current emphasis on developing the gifts of all those who are part of the Body of Christ. We have opportunities to equip, educate, and empower the full Body of Christ that were not available to us before. Once again, the ways in which we communicate and share information are undergoing a rapid change. A new age in the life of the church has accelerated with the COVID-19 pandemic and the sudden shift in development of online worship and new ways of connecting with one another virtually, outdoors, or at greater distance. As a pastor working with a congregation through the first months of the pandemic in 2020, I was impressed with the number of people who had once struggled with email who were quickly able to adapt, using Facebook and YouTube for worship and Zoom for meetings and study groups. There is still a technological gap among our membership, but the comfort levels of the technologically timid have increased dramatically since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic.

This technological development opens doors for more accessible education programs for congregational leaders. As access to and comfort with the internet are increasing, there are more ways to educate and support those in leadership where they currently reside and serve. Online tools create opportunities to provide education to those who cannot travel onsite for theological training. However, the same technological advances also present challenges that can drive us apart.

We should celebrate the reality of the simultaneous diversity and unity in the Body of Christ. We should also celebrate the ways in which the internet and its associated technological advances allow for greater connection. At the same time, we must be aware of the rising wave of disinformation. The rise in polarization and disinformation is a significant concern for the full Body of Christ in our time. When basic facts and authority are routinely questioned, leaders need to seek greater understanding and resourcing to support their work (see Ebertz, chapter 18 in this volume). Anyone who steps forward into leadership roles in congregations today will likely encounter some level of pushback or resistance.

Opportunity for New Growth and Engagement

Today, we have a unique opportunity to engage the gifts of church members in a way that equips and empowers a broader base of leadership in congregations. We can build on the image of the Body of Christ, learn from the ways this image has empowered congregations through history, including other times of great disruption, and meet both the challenge and the opportunity of the current time. Even the smallest congregations and communities have a wide range of skill sets and interests among their members. The role of Christian educators and church leaders across denominations is to identify those gifts and then equip and support those who are called to lead from their various roles.

As a bivocational pastor and leader in the regional Presbytery, I routinely encounter congregational leaders who want to engage in a greater leadership role within the church, according to their gifts and passions. Church members often express interest in taking on greater roles in pastoral care, worship leadership, and the vision and direction work of the congregation but feel they do not have the necessary skills or training. Their own sense of inadequacy, lack of training, or theological understanding stops them from pursuing the work. I know gifted teachers who feel they lack the Biblical knowledge to ever offer a sermon. I know compassionate friends, quick to listen to the concerns of others at any potluck or coffee hour, who are mystified by the idea of visiting a hospital room to offer a prayer and word of comfort. I know committed worship committee leaders who feel they are only qualified to arrange flowers and coordinate volunteers. I know food pantry organizers who are stymied by the idea of engaging in greater advocacy around hunger issues.

At this time, much of the discernment, equipping, and training of church members for specific gifts within the Body of Christ is left to the local pastor, or perhaps a mid-level judicatory. However, it is very difficult as an already-stretched-thin part-time pastor to add the work of training others to lead in specific areas. In the larger body of the church, we have those who are better equipped to provide the needed theological education. Our challenge is to bridge the gap between those with interest at the local level and those with the skills and expertise for training and education.

Traditions that take pride in educated clergy also have the ability to educate and equip the full Body of Christ for a wide range of the

gifts and particular skills needed in ministry. The resources we have long relied on for clergy education and support can be adapted and used for the education and equipping of the Body of Christ. The work of discerning gifts and equipping and training leaders is still best accomplished by those with experience in educating church leaders. Seminaries and theological educators already have the expertise required to meet the challenges of our time. The work that is needed is adapting this expertise for use in what Jeffrey MacDonald (2020, 111) called a “distributed pastorate” model.

New Models for Equipping the Body of Christ

The model of theological education needed in our current time differs from what was helpful in the age when the majority of White, mainline churches could support full-time clergy. However, it is not entirely new. MacDonald’s image of the “distributed pastorate” is in line with Paul’s early emphasis on the variety of gifts present in the Body of Christ. MacDonald argued in his book, *Part-Time Is Plenty*, that we need to use our educational resources to move toward a “distributed pastorate, whereby clergy and laypeople divide up pastoral responsibilities according to the gifts of the Holy Spirit” (2020, 111). We still need people trained for Christian education, liturgy, pastoral care, vision and strategic planning work, mission outreach, ethical reflection, and other areas of ministry. What is changing in our new context is the need for all these skills to be found primarily in one person.

I see an ongoing need for clergy with a full Master of Divinity educational background. Yet, there is a simultaneous need to break out sections of this traditional degree for certification programs or other training opportunities for those with specific gifts. While some individuals within the Body of Christ will be called to full-time ordained ministries, we must also accommodate those who are called to serve with specific gifts for particular ministries. According to Paul, both are equally valued:

But God has so arranged the body, giving the greater honor to the inferior member, that there may be no dissension within the body, but the members may have the same care for one another. If one

member suffers, all suffer together with it; if one member is honored, all rejoice together with it. (1 Cor. 12:24b–26)

It requires work to establish a community of love and respect, where we serve one another and rise and fall together. As we look to build a “distributed pastorate” reflecting the variety of gifts in the full Body of Christ, I see three areas of focus: discernment of gifts, education and training, and ongoing support of those who are trained (see MacDonald 2020, 111–32, for a related discussion).

Discernment of Gifts

As those who have the gifts and experience of theological education work to provide the training and certification needed for particular ministries, we need a transformation in our discernment process. In many denominations, this work is traditionally done at a middle judicatory level. In my tradition, the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), Presbytery committees on preparation for ministry oversee discernment work for those seeking full-time ministry. Just as education of members with specific gifts or skills is best done by those who already have the gift and knowledge of providing theological education, it makes sense that discernment work around the gifts present in any congregation is best supported by those who are already doing this work. Denominational leaders and others already working to identify those with gifts for ministry can adapt to include working with local congregations to discern the gifts of their members.

Discerning and encouraging the gifts of the full Body of Christ takes a willingness to spend time listening for the call of the Holy Spirit, naming where skills and gifts are already present, and identifying areas where training and development are needed. To identify those in need of further education and training, we need church leaders who are able to listen for the Holy Spirit’s presence and guide those considering taking on greater leadership roles.

The work of discernment needs to be done primarily at the local level. While middle judicatory leaders and others can help with the discernment of gifts, the initial recognition and encouragement will most often come from a local pastor. Transforming the local congregation into a place for discernment places a larger burden on local pastors, including those who serve bivocationally. Local pastors must be alert to the varieties of gifts that their members have to offer. This

will require that seminaries include some training in discernment and recognition of gifts for every local pastor—particularly those intending to serve in bivocational ministry.

Education and Training

Identifying church members with specific gifts for leadership is the first step to empowering the full Body of Christ. However, there is a large gap between identifying a gift and empowering someone to use that gift. Education and training are necessary to address the sense of inadequacy and lack of knowledge that many gifted church members feel when called upon to take on a larger leadership role. Education and training are also helpful to meet the challenges of disinformation and polarization that frame our current time.

Models exist for equipping and empowering church members to use specific gifts. Nearly every denomination and many seminaries already have some form of lay pastor training program. There are also existing non-denominational programs with clearly defined training and certification around a particular gift, such as the Stephen Ministry program with training in pastoral care (Stephen Ministries St. Louis, n.d.). Another form of training is found in various models of weekend or week-long training sessions for congregational leaders around a specific issue, like how to lead children's education, discern the mission needs in your neighborhood, or run an effective stewardship campaign. These existing models for education around specific gifts are scattered and usually disconnected from one another and would benefit from greater collaboration and connection on both regional and denominational levels.

Adapting coursework from the Master of Divinity degree to specific certifications in pastoral care, mission engagement and ethics, or non-profit administration presents another opportunity. Seminaries know how to train and equip students for full-time pastorates. As we discern specific gifts among the Body of Christ, how might current seminary coursework be developed into certification programs for specific gifts in ministry? Meeting the needs of the present does not necessarily involve a complete redevelopment of what has served our churches well in the past. With thoughtful consideration, it is possible to build on existing programs and expand access to education and training for those seeking to develop a particular gift.

The opportunity to expand education programs and increase accessibility is due in part to the increase in comfort and familiarity with online education brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic. As broadband access expands into rural areas, the opportunity for online programs will only increase. While programs similar to the existing weekend or one-week training opportunities will continue to be helpful, the best point of access for specialized educational programs will be online. Internet technology allows those with expertise and experience to share with those who have discerned gifts for ministry and provides greater connection with those seeking to step into new leadership roles in their local congregations.

Discerning the gifts of leadership in the Body of Christ and providing the education and training to support leaders in specific ministries are essential to the transformation of the church of the twenty-first century. However, we cannot take these steps forward without also ensuring support and ongoing care for those in leadership.

Ongoing Support

With the image of the Body of Christ, Paul emphasized the ways in which we are connected to one another. Connection as interdependence is particularly prominent in 1 Corinthians 12 as Paul discusses the ways in which ears, eyes, hands, feet, and head all rely on one another. One part cannot say, “I have no need of you” (1 Cor. 12:21). So it is with the work of supporting the gifts present in our local congregations. We must work not only as the Body of Christ at the local level but also in our larger connections of denominations and the universal church. Empowering the gifts of members at the local level requires ongoing support and connection with one another.

We know that our full-time clergy do not function well when they are isolated. There is a need for support circles, continuing education, and other connection points for clergy. How do we provide similar support for members taking on larger roles of ministry within their congregations? Ongoing training sessions and regular study groups could be helpful. A quarterly Zoom check-in with a continuing education component for those already trained in a specific skill could help to keep the sense of connection and the support needed in place. The form of the ongoing support may differ depending on the skill or gift itself. There are many creative ways to keep members of the Body of

Christ connected to one another. What is important is that those who are trained and equipped for specific ministries be supported and nurtured through a commitment by the Body of Christ as they serve.

Ongoing support for those who are serving in leadership also helps to meet the challenge of the disinformation and polarization that has arisen in our technological age. Those serving in leadership at the local level benefit from a group of colleagues and access to those with more information or expertise when faced with difficult situations. No matter how congenial the congregation may be, or how long a leader has counted themselves a member of their community, there will be times when a congregational leader needs outside support or at least a listening ear. Collegial groups of those with similar training and roles in their congregations can help as problems arise. Ongoing educational opportunities and further training resources can support leaders as they continue to grow and come to understand situations differently.

Conclusion

Transforming into churches that discern, equip, and support requires a massive shift in our church culture. A focus on discerning the gifts of members, equipping and empowering members to share those gifts in the community, and offering ongoing support and accountability—this is a lot to ask of members and current leaders. Even as we look to theological educators and denominational leaders for leadership in education and discernment, the role of pastors in local congregations continues to be paramount. A primary role of bivocational pastors is the work of discernment of gifts and the ongoing support of the congregational leaders working alongside them. Bivocational pastors can help congregations identify the gifts of their members, find education and training programs needed to develop those gifts, and make sure that those who are trained for pastoral care, education, mission coordination, worship leadership, and other areas of ministry are connected with persons who can offer support and ongoing training. However, it cannot fall to our bivocational pastors to be the primary resource for any of these areas. As the Body of Christ, we need to maintain the connections that encourage and support each and every member as an essential part of the larger community.

Any form of education program or training established to equip and empower the gifts of our membership must address the reality of our current polarization, equipping leaders to respond in ways that celebrate both the unity and diversity of the Body of Christ. The challenge is significant—that should not be denied. However, we have witnessed ways in which the faithful have responded time and again throughout the history of the church by coming back to the image that Paul kept coming back to in his letters to the various early church communities of the first century. We are part of the great Body of Christ, with Christ alone at the head, our guide and our focus. Greater collaboration, connection, and leadership will give us a church that truly reflects the Body of Christ, a priesthood of all believers. We are in a new time and place, with ways to connect and new gifts to celebrate. As we come through the COVID-19 pandemic and embrace the realities of our technological age, there is an opportunity before us to grow into a church that continues to express Christ’s transforming resurrection as we live into being Christ’s body.

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