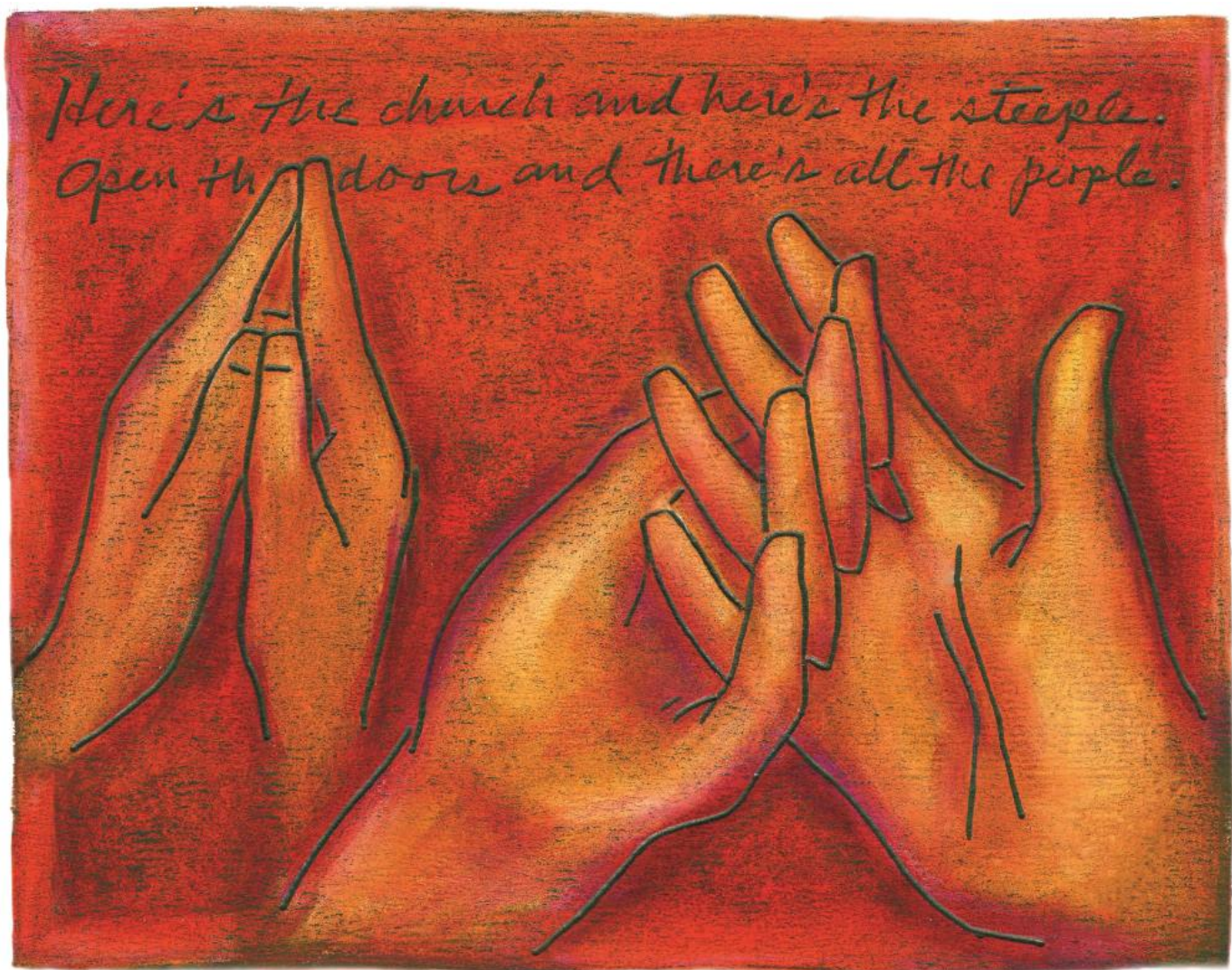


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(Julie Lonneman)



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Boldly they proclaimed the mighty acts of God. They urged repentance and the forgiveness of sins. They promised the gifts of the Spirit. They preached despite persecutions. They prayed and broke bread. They lived together and owned everything in common. They shared according to what each one needed. They healed the sick and lame. They shared their food generously and gladly. They called a full meeting of disciples and asked the assembly for approval. The believers were united in heart and soul. None of their members was ever in want. The numbers of men and women who came to believe in the Lord increased steadily.

Amazing stories

What amazing stories we find in the Acts of the Apostles. Here are accounts of disciples living out the incredible and disturbing experience of Pentecost. Acts provides the earliest description of a community of believers, a prototype of today's parish community.

The first Apostles, accustomed to meeting underground or in homes, might not recognize the steeples and doors of today's church structures. But like the children's finger game, the disciples would have known those marvelous, wonderful, wiggling appendages with a life of their own, as the community of people they were called to serve.

The Lectionary readings tell the dramatic story of our church — how the early disciples locked themselves in an upper room out of fear of arrest and persecution. We can hear the bolts and double locks sliding into place. We imagine peering out a peephole to see who is knocking at the door, or we ask for a secret password. Even Jesus himself, now risen from the dead, is apparently not admitted through the door. He appears inside the locked room, stands before his astonished disciples and calms their terror with the offer of peace. After a series of appearances to instruct and encourage them, Jesus promises that his own Spirit will enter their hearts and empower them to go out to the whole world making other disciples.

Their encounter with the risen Christ and his instructions to them inspired remarkable stories, and each successive generation has extended the life of the church. This is our own spiritual history. The critical question for us is how do today's pastors and parish staffs and the committees and teams that work with them bring this same encounter with the risen Christ and the promised Spirit into the practical realm of running a parish, developing programs, planning events and being a pastoral presence to the community?

When I was growing up in the 1950s and 60s in a large suburban parish, the ordained guided most of the core activities and programs offered by the parish. Parishioners were involved in organizations — scouts, sodalities, societies, service groups, sports programs, and committees that planned festivals and fund raisers. But it was the priests, often a pastor and several assistants, who were primarily responsible for the pastoral, liturgical and sacramental welfare of the parish.

In the 1970s, when I was first hired as a staff member in a city parish, there were fewer priests staffing parishes, while a growing number of people, mostly women religious and lay persons, began to serve on parish staffs. What I remember about those years was the constant sorting out of roles and functions as we tried to deal with whatever needs we were identifying in the community. As these areas were defined, we began to develop job titles and descriptions, responsibilities and organizational charts, especially as parishes grew and multiple ministries required larger staffs of 10, 15 or 20 persons. We experienced the same demands evident in the early church as it grew, with the Apostles reserving their time and energy for prayer and preaching by naming others for the ministries of caring for the widows and orphans, managing finances and feeding the poor.

Not surprisingly, parish staffs often organized themselves into professional structures imitating other leadership models found in successful organizations or businesses and influenced by our own culture and environment. But as a structure we have also struggled to understand and emulate the organic and spiritual beliefs, development, and practices of the early church.

Along with the descriptions in Acts, the letters of St. Paul invite and ignite our imaginations and hearts on how to be church. In 1 Cor 12:3-13, the second reading for the Solemnity of Pentecost, Paul gives us a powerful image of how a community functions. There are different kinds of gifts but the same Spirit. There are different

forms of service, different workings, but the same God. It is God who produces all gifts and the power of the Spirit is manifested for some benefit. A body has many parts but it is all one body. These passages breathe life and inspiration into our understanding that many charisms are given for building up the church, the body of Christ. All of them are necessary and important.

Many things have changed over the years since I first began ministry in a parish. Parish staffs have deepened their spiritual development with days of reflection and retreats. Staff hiring has focused on finding people with the skills and tools necessary in any organization, with emphasis on the capacity to work together as people giving witness to the vocational call in their lives. Staffs have deepened their relationships with one another as co-workers. Women especially have brought fresh metaphors and meaning to pastoral ministry and to St. Paul's words about the long, hard labor required to give birth to communities of faith.

But the challenge of building up the body of Christ and acting as disciples does not come easily or without effort simply because of good will on the part of pastoral ministers. I have often thought the idyllic picture of the early church from Acts left out the parts describing the day-to-day, nitty gritty, hard work it took to fashion and maintain such a community. Ministry in a parish, even when inspired by the Holy Spirit, still requires dedicated, hard work, real skills, professional practices and good process to help staffs successfully administer a local church, both the buildings and the people.

Not every parish staff grapples with the same issues. Ask any staff and they will offer a wide-ranging list: communication, conflict resolution, decision making, accountability, task and relationship work, teamwork, evaluations, supervision, problem solving, mission clarification, visioning, collaboration, leadership development. The issues vary by community and staff size, but all staffs must determine how to employ everyone's gifts to serve the parish community effectively.

Toward that goal, here are some areas for staff reflection.

Work at communication

I worked with a wonderful staff who met weekly for faith sharing and prayer. We participated in retreats and in-service times together and worked hard to be a team. Yet that did not exempt us from struggling with ordinary issues such as how we

communicated or disagreed with one another. We had to work patiently and lovingly when we felt strong emotions or even when we wounded one another. What is appropriate behavior toward one another when we have different views or feelings? How do people who don't always see eye to eye care for one another? What are healthy steps for conflict resolution and how do staffs engage in them? When communication breaks down or conflict erupts how are disciples called to act?

Today's world of fast growing technology offers ever new opportunities for communication with one another. Yet it is often in face-to-face encounters either individually or in meetings where staffs confront their own styles and patterns of communication. Staff development time and workshops can offer opportunities for a staff to grow and develop together. How do staff members come to know one another? How do we explore and appreciate each person's different personality style and background especially when they are radically different from our own? How do we study together and engage one another as life-long-learners?

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Give witness in daily work

A parish staff is under a microscope. They are observed by many, praised by some and criticized by others. Every day they have the opportunity to act as that body of Christ with many members and many gifts. How do we support and honor the gifts of each member? How do we raise concerns and solve problems together? What introspection and discernment do each of us need to do? How do we seek pardon when necessary and offer forgiveness when needed?

Explore management issues together

If we have learned one thing about good management practices over the years, it is that pastors were not given adequate opportunity in seminary training to learn about the multifaceted issues surrounding them as supervisors. Today's pastors were often not prepared in areas of shared decision making, collaboration, or supervision, staff assessment and evaluation. Areas of responsibility and accountability are often sorted out on the run. Priests spend less time being mentored by older pastors before they become pastors themselves. What worked in the past or in one setting may not always work in another. Whatever issues arise,

parish staff members can offer a wealth of experience and insight when they tackle them together. There are different gifts, different tasks, but the same Spirit at work in everyone for the common good.

As manager of a staff, I found that when I involved staff members in the financial aspects of our work, we were all more invested in how we used limited financial resources. That was new territory; previously only one person had reviewed resources and costs. Being more transparent, where possible, can build trust and divide the burdens once carried by just the manager, pastor, or administrator. Serious discussion about budgets, available resources and decisions about spending become the responsibility of all staff members, inviting everyone to be good stewards and faithful servants of the parish.

Questions about good management practices abound. What are clear office procedures for our daily work? How should budgets reflect who we are and what is important to our community? How do we design structures, such as staff meetings, to manage time well and move from problems to solutions to action? How do we set goals and assess them? How are we accountable to one another? How is a pastor or administrator accountable to a staff?

Reflect on the mission

When our staff spent time reflecting on our mission we found ourselves on new and holy ground. New dimensions of our work and the gospel message presented themselves for us to explore. Framing and posting our mission statement in our offices and meeting rooms enabled us all to see, contemplate and stay focused on common values and a shared vision for the future.

It is a privilege to be present with and walk the faith journey with people in both times of birth and death; staffs serve during times of both celebration and loss. By constant reflection on their pastoral experience, staffs deepen their understanding of the mission of the church. It is precisely this care for the people of their communities that compels them to care about the future. What is our mission and hope for the future life of our parish? What is our mission here in this particular time and place? What does our own past history tell us? What do future demographic studies say about who we are becoming? How do we welcome new members, greater ethnic or class diversity?

Pentecost will both disturb and compel parish staffs to grow. To adapt to new challenges, to the voice of the Holy Spirit, we are called to continually break out of our locked and safe rooms, our familiar patterns and comfort zones. Openness to the risen Christ will always breathe new life into our structures and organizational charts. The Spirit will empower us to act toward one another as disciples. We are, as Paul told us, a body with many parts, gifted and empowered by the same Spirit. We are the church, opening the doors so that God's People — those marvelous, wonderful, wiggling fingers of life and purpose — will know and celebrate themselves as God's presence and activity in the world we serve.

Editor's note: *This reflection was originally published in the May 2007 issue of [Celebration](#). Sign up to receive [daily Easter reflections](#).*

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