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There is power - and responsibility - in electing your own religious leaders

by Bill Tammeus

A small c catholic

Perhaps the only foolproof way of choosing religious leaders is to let God do it. But obviously, God has outsourced that work to us, the faithful of various traditions.

Beyond that, God seldom seems to intervene to stop us from making mistakes.

I've served on two pastor search committees for my congregation. I'm batting .500. The first choice, made in 1987, seemed excellent at the time but proved disastrous for both the church and me personally. The second choice, made in 2010, has been phenomenal from the start.

All of that history came to mind when I read Megan Fincher's recent *NCR* story about Catholic lay groups hoping to offer their ideas on the selection of new bishops.

It's clear that when it comes to picking leaders, Protestants and Catholics approach things in different ways. I'm not sure there's a decidedly right or obviously wrong way to choose leaders, but I think our two traditions might well learn a few things from one another.

For instance, we Presbyterians don't have bishops. Instead, we have presbyteries, which are regular gatherings of equal numbers of lay and clergy members from the various churches in a geographic region. My congregation is part of Heartland Presbytery. Presbyteries in many ways function as bishops. Among their tasks, presbyteries oversee seminary students, approve people for ordination to the gospel ministry and then ordain them. In addition, they must concur in the selection of pastors and associate pastors chosen by member churches.

So it's a good example of representative democracy. But it also can be a slow and cumbersome process. Until a recent speed-up change in our denomination's constitution, replacing a pastor in a particular church often has taken up to two years to accomplish. Thus, interim pastors.

So speed is something Catholics have over Presbyterians in selection of pastors because Catholics place that responsibility on the desk of bishops. But that doesn't mean bishops always get it right.

And with the pope ultimately responsible, in turn, for choosing bishops all over the world, the centralizing of authority does not always lead to the selection of the right person in the right place.

Many, though not all, Catholics in the diocese of Kansas City-St. Joseph, Mo., for instance, would tell you that their former bishop, Raymond Boland, was much more in touch and in tune with their spirit and needs than the current bishop, Robert W. Finn, whose reign has been deeply marred by his having been convicted in court of failure to report to the proper government authorities a priest suspected of child sex abuse (and then by his declining, so far, to resign).

So there are potential flaws in every system of leadership selection. But on the whole, I find it healthier to allow the people who are to be led to have an opportunity to influence the process of choosing their leaders.

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For Catholics, as the Fincher story made clear, having a role in the selection of bishops is something new, and it's not yet clear how far the idea will spread or how much the picked-by-the-pope system will bend to give people in the pews any sort of meaningful voice.

It's not my place as a Protestant to tell the Catholic church how to pick its leaders. But I can say I find there are many advantages to a system in which the people being led feel they are somehow invested in the leadership selection process. For one thing, they have more reasons to support those leaders and to work diligently to repair whatever seems to be broken because they know that in some way, they are responsible for the health of the whole system.

We Presbyterians have trouble enough choosing good leaders and making sure our voices get heard in the process. It's hard for me to imagine how disengaged from all that I might feel if I had no voice at all.

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