

**"COMFORTERS, EVERYWHERE!"**

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The people of Israel are at an awkward, in-between stage. Delivered from slavery in Egypt with memories of recent miracles--the parting of a sea, a cloud to follow by day, a pillar of fire by night—they're stalled in the desert, not yet arrived at the Promised Land.

So they're demoralized, wondering if leaving Egypt was big mistake. They groan to Moses about the manna Yahweh sent them in their hunger. It was now day-old manna. How do you like leftovers? They pine for the good old days of slavery when at least they ate pretty well. Someone said, those who long for the good old days were likely the few back then who had air conditioning. Well, Moses enjoyed no cooling breezes in that desert. Fed up, he commissions 70 elders to assist him with the burden of leadership. "I can't do this by myself," he reasons, "not with so many carping, 'What've you done for *me* lately, Lord?'"

As our story opens, God's Spirit has descended on these 70 elders. God has empowered them to lead with Moses. Sure enough, the designated elders start speaking their minds, asserting their gifts, and lifting their voices. But when two men, Eldad and Medad, begin prophesying in their own right, without having been duly appointed, someone got his nose bent out of joint. This disgruntled tattletale sidles up to Moses, reporting that Eldad and Medad had taken on themselves the mantle of prophecy. It seems once Moses started sharing leadership roles once reserved strictly for him, there was no stopping this spirit.

When Joshua, one of the inner circle, hears about Eldad and Medad, and he is outraged. "Lord Moses," he says, "stop them! We can't have uncredentialed and uncertified people representing God. This is getting out of hand. Your work should be reserved for properly constituted ministers. Today it's these two, tomorrow it could be just anybody!" Joshua requested a prophetic restraining order on Eldad and Medad. How does Moses respond to Joshua? Moses, if you remember, was himself not so eager to step forward and mastermind this massive exodus. He knew he needed help for a job was bigger than he was.

So Moses is not stingy with this Spirit of God that had already brought them so far. "Are you jealous for my sake?" Moses asks Joshua. "*Would that all of the Lord's people were prophets and the Lord would put his spirit on them.*" In a word, God never has enough prophets. God's work is always understaffed. Would that all God's people were prophets! Moses exclaims. You could say that this was when the Congregational church was born. We are horizontal in power, not vertical, as last week's Congregational Meeting illustrated. On the front of our order of worship, I am the pastor, but every church member is listed as a minister of First Congregational, Darien. Shades of Eldad and Medad, I am telling you.

Moses said, "Would that all of the Lord's people were prophets!" By that he meant, would that all God's people unflinchingly speak God's truth, helping us remember who we are. But Moses could have equally well said, "Would that all of the Lord's people were preachers!" That is, would that all God's people learn how to speak of their faith, and feel

comfortable doing so, declaring the reign of God to others who have not yet heard of it. Or maybe, “would that all of God’s people were comforters!” referring to the church’s pastoral ministry of offering God’s healing to the struggling, the troubled, and the broken.

This latter notion of our shared ministry of care and comfort is where I want to go today, before we rededicate our Care Circle. Three months ago, I was at the Care, Connect, and Communicate meeting in the Morehouse Room. We were rating our strengths and weaknesses as a congregation. One facet of our life rated as a weakness was our pastoral care. That surprised me, but I said nothing, wanting to hear it all first, not wanting to sound defensive. We clergy, speaking so very much, must master the art of listening.

At the second meeting of Care, Connect, and Communicate, when asked directly how I felt about the first, I quietly disagreed with assessing our pastoral care as a weakness. They hadn’t meant that to criticize me, but to reflect our reality of only having one pastor.

I began asking them questions. Do you know that I meet monthly with a team of men and women who bring to our attention those among us facing struggles, even those who only appear to be hurting? Then we make assignments to follow up, often with both laity and clergy making the calls. Do you have any idea how much better that is--working as a Care Circle, in touch with diverse strata of FCC--rather than just sitting down with another clergyperson and saying, “What are you hearing out there?” Now we have all of these eyes, ears and hands of care and comfort rather than just four. Beyond our Care Circle, we have friends taking care of friends, neighbors looking after neighboring Congregation- alists. We have Karen Brennan coordinating meals for those with their back to the wall.

Generally, they were aware of the Care Circle. But because the Care Circle observes confidentiality, and because they don’t like to draw a lot of attention to themselves, the quiet work they do month in and month out had become out of sight and out of mind. The scope of our many efforts to touch the aching or support the grieving were being missed.

I pressed on with my questions. Do you know how much more potent the message of care is when laypeople—not just the guy getting paid to be religious—makes the contact? Never mind expertise, experience or technique--though each in our pastoral Care Circle has gifts that I do not--and that is kind of the point. When people from this community dedicate themselves like this to be present unto others, to walk along side of them in the hard times, it sends a big message about our integrity and authenticity as a congregation.

They asked me, “But what if they want a call from *you*, pastor of the church, and not from a layperson?” My response was: we need to educate. And this is what we need to say. I can call on everyone in this church who needs a pastoral visit. But I cannot be the sole caregiver as their hardship spreads over months. There are many of you and one of me. I must stay on the move to make all of the stops where the senior pastor should be. But making too much of one at the expense of the impact the many can make is just wrong.

The church is not about one person, the pastor. The church is about the people of God. I am not a super-Christian sent by God to be religious on your behalf. Some pastors like being set-up like that, having their opinions, charisma, and preferences exalted. Some laypeople like that because it gets them off the hook of standing eye to eye before God.

We have heard of the priesthood of all believers, a rally cry of Protestantism. We do not believe that the church is completely vested in or all about the clergy. Jesus didn't even believe that about himself, recruiting and commissioning his own 70 healers. Our Care Circle puts an exclamation point on who we are and how we work as Congregationalists. When we evaluate our pastoral care or any of our ministries, it is not all about Dale, not all about the ability of one clergy to be everything for hundreds. It is about what *all* of us do.

And guess what? Our Care Circle brings quiet, effective Christlike presence. Let's bring them forward now and celebrate their ministry, resolving to support them in their charge. Amen.