

Stages of Ministry

January 17, 2018

For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven... (Ecclesiastes 3:1)

In a single week, I had the pleasure of celebrating with two Deborahs, each at a different stage of ministry. The first was Rev. Dr. Deborah Block's anniversary of 40 years of ministry, and the second was the ordination of Rev. Deb Swets, now beginning her ministry. What a joy to see how the members of this Presbytery have surrounded, encouraged, and affirmed both pastors!

It is a reminder that all our pastors and our congregations move along a spectrum of ministry – one based not just on chronology, but also energy and vision. Serving God is not a static endeavor. We grow; we change; we rest; we reverse course; and we leap forward. At each stage, we are called to reflect on whether our service pleases God and whether we are being called to move in a different direction.

Taking the time for intentional reflection serves us well, but it requires discipline. It is helpful to structure our reflection and to learn from what others have done. With companions to guide us in this reflection, we often see more clearly.

Several of the Presbytery's congregations and the Presbytery itself have decided to undertake this reflection, so they might gauge where they are going with their ministry. Using the Holy Cow! Church Assessment Tool (CAT), they are surveying members on topics important to the life and health of the congregation. Just as we ordain people in the church to serve with energy, imagination, intelligence, and love, the CAT helps us to evaluate where we stand in some of these categories, through the lens of satisfaction, belonging, and harmony. Congregations across the denomination have found this tool for assessing the vitality of congregations useful and insightful.

The CAT is not designed only for congregations at one place on the spectrum of ministry. In the Presbytery of Milwaukee, the CAT has been used by some of our largest and smallest congregations. It has been used by those with high energy and those with low energy, by those with an imaginative vision of God's call and those seeking understanding. No stigma attaches by a congregation's decision to go through the Holy Cow! process. Rather, we hope all our congregations will employ this or another tool to assess congregational vitality. Thankfully we have budgeted presbytery funds and General Assembly grants to assist congregations with the cost of the assessment.

A possible misconception of the Holy Cow! process is that it dictates the direction that congregations must take as they envision their future. Some might fear that it would tell a congregation to close, or sell its building, or start a program in which it has no interest. To the contrary, the CAT does not tell congregations what to do. Instead it provides information to help a congregation make an informed decision about what *the congregation* wants to do. The data empowers congregations, rather than stripping them of power.

No matter at what stage of ministry your congregation might be, you have the opportunity to reflect, dream, and affirm God's call. Just as we celebrate the ministries of our pastors at every stage – from 40 years to 40 minutes, together we rejoice with the certainty that God welcomes us all into service at every stage.