

SIX-FOLD TEST FOR MULTIETHNIC MINISTRY

SERMON SERIES: POPULATION | PARTICIPATION | POWER | PACE-SETTING | PURPOSEFUL NARRATIVE | PRACTICING SOLIDARITY

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Power

#3. Are the positions and structures of influence (boards, committees, and positions at both the conference and denominational level) influenced by the perspective and gifts of diverse populations?

Acts 6:1-7, NIV

THE CHOOSING OF THE SEVEN

In those days when the number of disciples was increasing, the Hellenistic Jews among them complained against the Hebraic Jews because their widows were being overlooked in the daily distribution of food. So the Twelve gathered all the disciples together and said, “It would not be right for us to neglect the ministry of the word of God in order to wait on tables. Brothers and sisters, choose seven men from among you who are known to be full of the Spirit and wisdom. We will turn this responsibility over to them and will give our attention to prayer and the ministry of the word.”

This proposal pleased the whole group. They chose Stephen, a man full of faith and of the Holy Spirit; also Philip, Procorus, Nicanor, Timon, Parmenas, and Nicolas from Antioch, a convert to Judaism. They presented these men to the apostles, who prayed and laid their hands on them.

So the word of God spread. The number of disciples in Jerusalem increased rapidly, and a large number of priests became obedient to the faith.

My name is Susan Cosio, and I am a Covenant pastor serving in full-time ministry as a hospital chaplain in Sacramento, California.

I have to laugh when I hear myself saying that. I feel like a contestant on *What’s My Line?* or *To Tell the Truth*. If you were in the audience, you might be wondering, “Is she really a chaplain? Is that what a chaplain looks like? Or is she just impersonating a pastor?”

But, yes, I am the real thing.

To be honest, the past year has been unreal. This has been the most difficult and stressful in all my years of ministry. I’ve faced first-hand the devastating impact of Covid on patients, families, and healthcare staff. I’ve been exposed to the virus myself. And working in a large urban medical center in the capitol city of Sacramento has been like being in the maelstrom—the center of a political storm and social unrest.

As a pastor serving in an unconventional context, I know ministry can be challenging and a bit lonely and isolating. So my connection to the Covenant denomination is a lifeline. If there is a denominational event or conference gathering, I am there! I especially look forward to the Midwinter Conference each year, even though going to a place like Chicago in January is a bit of a challenge for me as a Californian. But I’m so motivated to see my colleagues from around the country that I put on my gloves, scarf, and hat and pack the winter coat I hardly ever use in California, and board the flight to the “Windy City.”

A couple of years ago, after arriving at the Chicago Hilton, I got on the hotel elevator to head upstairs. I stepped to the back of the elevator when the doors opened, and several tall men stepped in, with their heavy suitcases, with a little snow still on them. I am tall for a woman at 5’ 8”, but these men towered over me like a group of professional basketball players. But I could see by their nametags they were another type of superstar—Covenant pastors who had just checked in for Midwinter.

I didn’t know them personally, but I smiled and nodded hello in recognition of our shared role in ministry in the denomination. But none of them seemed to notice me. When the elevator dinged our arrival on the next floor, however, they quickly (and quite enthusiastically) introduced themselves to the two men who joined us with matching nametags. Hmmmm...

Feeling overlooked is still an ongoing experience for women in ministry—even in 2021. My husband, Gib, often attends denominational events with me, and it is not unusual for others to ask him where he serves. He is quick to redirect them. “Oh, I’m just a civil engineer,” he says. “My wife is the pastor.”



My personal experience with feeling overlooked may be painful, but it has taught me some important lessons. It has sensitized me to the experiences of others who may feel unseen or unheard, those whose concerns may be overlooked. In my work as a hospital chaplain, in fact, I often advocate for the needs of patients and families.

Sacramento is one of the most diverse cities in the United States today. Our patients speak over 40 languages and represent numerous cultures and faith traditions. On the same day, I may visit a Catholic Latino patient who speaks only Spanish, an African American Baptist, a Jewish patient, an Hmong family who may have converted to Christianity, an East Indian Hindu, and a Pakistani Muslim.

Unfortunately, not everyone on our hospital staff is culturally sensitive, so sometimes our patients' concerns can be misinterpreted or overlooked. Staff may not realize, for instance:

- That a patient may need space for private prayer;
- That it isn't always the patient who makes decisions about his or her care. In some cultures, that responsibility falls to the family, or to the larger community, such as the elders.
- Sometimes there are very important dietary needs that are not about food sensitivity or preference, but about a person's beliefs and culture.

Because of language barriers, and their unfamiliarity with hospital protocol (which is a culture in itself) patients are not always comfortable or able to speak up for themselves. They may need an advocate. So at interdisciplinary rounds, I share with doctors, nurses, and other team members about the beliefs, values, family dynamics—even the housing or financial stressors—a patient and family may be facing. I identify language barriers, cultural misconceptions, or lack of access to resources.

My primary ministry as a chaplain and a pastor is to focus on spiritual needs. But these can sometimes be hard to separate from other concerns. A healthcare crisis is often a financial crisis, a relational stressor, and a crisis of faith.

The passage I've been asked to speak on centers on what happens when the needs of some of the people in a growing church are overlooked. When these needs are identified, it creates a critical juncture for the church.

In Acts 6, the early church is growing after the Holy

Spirit descended at Pentecost. The church has incorporated a group of Greek-speaking, Hellenistic congregants who have a different cultural background than the Hebrew Jews who form the basis of the church. They apparently speak only Greek—and not Hebrew or Aramaic, which would have been the dominant languages of the apostles and most of the congregation.

These Greek newcomers may have grouped together because of their similar backgrounds and common language, isolating them from the core group. It's also possible there were biases or prejudices against them, even if unintentional.

In the passage, some among the congregation are complaining that the Greek widows are not getting the resources that the Hebrew widows get. We know the church was committed to caring for widows and orphans, so this is a legitimate concern. The exclusion of the Greek widows may have been an oversight. Or, it may have been symptomatic of a larger or growing tension between the two groups.

This is a familiar story, not only because we may have heard it or read before, but because this type of thing happens fairly regularly in growing churches. Even today.

Over time, the demographics of a congregation may begin to shift, and new needs and concerns arise. Perhaps an immigrant or refugee community has grown. Or there are people who've joined the church who speak primarily Spanish, Korean, Tagalog, or Russian. Maybe the church has built a new building on the other side of town. Or there has been a shift in the neighborhood population, which changes the makeup of the congregation. This can lead to tension and turmoil as leaders struggle to know how best to prioritize and allocate time and resources.

Acts 6 can be an example for us, both because of what happens, and because of what doesn't happen when they face these circumstances.

To start with, the apostles don't ignore the complaints being made. Maybe that seems like a no-brainer, but honestly, isn't it tempting to look past a problem, hoping it will simply go away? Especially when we have other priorities and demands on our time. The apostles are focused on prayer and preaching the gospel. And yet they acknowledge the validity of the expressed concerns. Perhaps they realize that a person's material needs can be critical to meeting their spiritual needs.



They may also recognize that undercurrents of tension are best addressed before they lead to discord and dissension that can divide—even destroy—the church. The bottom line is, they recognize something needs to be done.

But they choose not to do it themselves. I think this is significant. Some may say they are “passing the buck,” but I think they realize their plates are full, and they don’t need to be the ones to address the problem. Instead, the apostles ask the congregation to choose a team to address the unmet needs of the Greek-speaking widows.

And they get right on it.

They select seven representatives who are full of the Spirit and of wisdom (qualities that are so necessary in Christian service). I think this reveals that the care for the widows is seen as an ongoing ministry, not just an administrative task or short-term project. The disciples want this new ministry to be led by those who are wise and faithful, and guided by the Holy Spirit.

The apostles approve the seven to be responsible for the daily distribution of food. They even lay hands on them. In doing this, they relinquish control, confer their blessing, and pray for the Spirit’s guidance to be upon the new leaders. This is an important act of faith and empowerment.

I recently sat on an ordination interview committee for the Covenant. We prayed and laid hands on the candidates (virtually via Zoom) in affirmation of their calling and our commitment to stand beside them.

In the Acts passage, I notice the names of the seven men who are commissioned are listed, which makes me think their identities are important: Stephen, Philip, Procorus, Nicanor, Timon, Parmenas, and Nicolas. These are all Greek names, which suggests that the seven were part of the Hellenistic or Greek group within the church who voiced concern. They may have been familiar with the situation and the widows involved, so they may have been best equipped to address their concerns.

I’m also impressed by what doesn’t happen in this story, knowing what I do about church administration, organizational roadblocks, and responses to power shifts.

First, there is no apparent resistance. No pushback on the part of leadership. No minimizing or denial that there have been some overlooked needs. No setting it aside until next year’s budget process, or next month’s elder

meeting.

There also seems to be no defensiveness on the part of the apostles. They could have assumed the complaints were undermining their authority or questioning their intentions as leaders. But they don’t.

They don’t try to defend their behavior or deny any possible discrimination. They may be aware that even perceived bias can lead to tensions that create disunity and distrust.

The disciples know discord can impede their ministry and the spread of the gospel. But their response isn’t just about squelching a rumor or a problem. The needs of the Greek widows are seen as legitimate. They are taken seriously, and a plan is put in place to address the need.

I’m also impressed that the disciples don’t try to maintain control of every decision and ministry. They pass on the responsibility by laying hands on the seven. They delegate their authority to the seven Greek men selected by the church.

Through their actions and attitude, they address the issue in a way that is empowering, rather than patronizing, paternalistic, or personally depleting.

And what happens?

Verse 7 tells us God’s message continues to spread. The number of believers greatly increases.

The decision to care for the Greek widows doesn’t sidetrack the efforts to preach the gospel. There is continuity of ministry in the midst of diversity and development. In fact, this ministry of care may have helped expand the gospel in a way that a sermon could not.

The passage tells us that some unlikely people come to Christ. Even some priests convert. These would have been Jewish priests who joined the Christian church despite their leadership role in the Jewish community. This sounds like evidence of the Spirit at work.

In January our country was talking a lot about “the peaceful transfer of power.” Unfortunately, we’ve seen a lot of poor behavior and bad examples in our nation. Fortunately, we’ve also seen some good. But I see lessons in this passage for us today, whether our ministry is in the church, a hospital, a community-based organization, or a business.

One of the primary lessons in Acts 6 is about the faithful sharing of power:

1. The equitable and caring distribution of resources



2. The delegation of leadership

3. And the dynamic multiplication of spiritual power

While the apostles stress the importance of prayer and the proclamation of the Word, it is not at the exclusion of helping the poor and correcting injustices. They take those concerns seriously too. And they respond through empowering acts. While the church divides internal responsibilities and assigns different tasks to different people, the early believers see these as varying aspects of one united ministry.

Today, in our current context, in the midst of a pandemic, with the loss of life and jobs and the financial instability that have come with Covid-19, the distribution of food and other resources has become a very important ministry. Those who are ill or elderly and living alone (like the widows in the early church), those who lack income or housing are at particular risk of food insecurity and isolation.

I am proud of the efforts of many Christian churches—including my own—to try to address these needs. Our church is partnering with local food banks to distribute food to families in our parking lot. What a wonderful witness!

In the Acts 6 passage, the early church is prepared to adjust its procedures, alter its organizational structure, and develop new posts of responsibility in response to emerging needs. To use a popular word these days, they pivot. They adapt their methods and structures to meet expanding needs, for the welfare of everyone in the church, and for the expanse of the gospel to others.

I mentioned earlier my love for the Covenant denomination. I appreciate that we aspire to be a church that advances the gospel and responds with integrity to the world around us. I resonate with our continued efforts to intentionally pursue ethnic ministry and diversity, even—perhaps especially—now, in the midst of a pandemic and racial tension. While the world—and the Christian church—is fractured in many ways, we are motivated by our commitment to the unity of Christ’s church and our belief that Jesus breaks down dividing walls.

The Six-Fold Test is a tool we use as a denomination to evaluate our goals and intentions, to see how they line up with God’s purposes. One of the questions this tool asks is: “Are the positions and structures of influence (referring to governing bodies such as boards and committees) influenced by the perspective and gifts of

diverse populations?”

In Acts 6, the church can answer, “YES” to this important question. The congregation is expanding and growing more diverse. In response, the leadership sets up new structures and identifies new leaders.

I’ll confess that as a woman in ministry, I cringe at the fact that “seven men” are chosen to serve. But I understand the context of the times and culture of that day. Today, we would likely choose a team of women and men.

But I am impressed by their other criteria for leadership. They want leaders who are full of the Spirit and godly wisdom. They also choose leaders who reflect their congregation. All of the seven are Greek, from the Hellenist subgroup in the church expressing the problem.

This makes sense to me. After all, they:

- Speak the language;
- Understand the culture;
- May best understand the need;
- Can build on pre-existing relationships and connections.

It must have also been affirming to the widows and others in the Greek community to see their own people in positions of leadership. There is power in seeing someone who looks like you being given responsibility and respect. It affirms their value and assures them they have been seen, when they may have made the assumption that they didn’t matter to the church. Or to God.

Many Americans were encouraged by the diversity of voices, faces, and genders at the 2021 presidential inauguration ceremony. The same thing is true in the church, when a woman or person of color is up front.

The people in need in this passage are not only Greek; they are also female, and they are widows—so perhaps elderly, clearly without resources—without husbands to give them standing or protection in their patriarchal culture. The actions taken by the church to address their needs validates them as people who otherwise have little status or power.

At the hospital where I work, we have a diverse team of chaplain residents in training—Filipino, Korean, African American, and Latino—some who speak multiple languages. Despite the fact that I have seniority as a seasoned staff chaplain, there are times when I ask one of these chaplains to see a patient who may benefit



from connecting with someone in their own culture and language. I may have more experience, but they may be better equipped to meet the need.

Just an aside: I don't think there is a hierarchy of ministries in this passage. We may assume that distributing food is somehow less important than preaching. Preaching was the priority for the apostles because that was the assignment they were given in the Great Commission. But it is not necessarily the only important ministry.

First Corinthians 12:4-6 says: "There are different kinds of spiritual gifts, but the same Spirit is the source of them all. There are different kinds of service, but we serve the same Lord. God works in different ways, but it is the same God who does the work in all of us" (NLT).

There are lead pastors who preach and teach to thousands, and have a vital ministry. Those ministries are important. They have power and potential for impact. But we cannot begin to satisfy the spiritual hunger of those with empty stomachs.

As I mentioned, I recently had the honor of laying hands on those being ordained to ministry. They (we) are "set apart" for full-time ministry. But in the Covenant, we see the church as a "congregation of ministers," each of us called to serve in some way.

I have the joy of mentoring a group of young women in ministry who are all youth pastors. Their roles may not be recognized as quite as prominent in their churches as the lead pastor. We sometimes refer to such roles as "second chair." But their ministry could not be more important. They impact not only the teens with whom they work, but also their parents and siblings, their schools and athletic teams, and their neighborhoods. With distance learning and the rising depression and anxiety we are seeing among teens, the ministry of youth pastors and lay leaders has never been more crucial.

When our daughter was about 12, everyone in the church was invited to write a letter to the pastor who had most influenced them. Our daughter sent a card of thanks to the teen choir director. She still talks about Mrs. Meyer to this day.

As a chaplain, I've sometimes felt that others may see me as a "second-rate" pastor (or not a pastor at all) despite my seminary education and ordination. But my doubts have been erased during Covid, as I've had greater access to people than most pastors serving in

congregational ministry. I've had an opportunity to minister to some "unlikely" people, just as the early church did, including politicians, the successful and wealthy, the disenfranchised and poor.

I'll never forget the prominent attorney who asked me to pray with him. He had graduated from Harvard Law School after competing as a Division 1 college athlete. He was very successful and quite wealthy. He told me he had never needed or asked for help in his life, but when faced with a cancer diagnosis, he turned to God.

I'll also never forget the petite Hmong grandmother who came to me for a hug after her granddaughter died in our Pediatric ICU. She pounded on her chest, then practically fell into my arms. She communicated her sadness and grief to me, despite the language barrier and cultural differences between us.

I think what we learn about power from the Acts 6 passage is that:

- Power in ministry leadership is to be shared, not withheld.
- The disciples don't just tolerate the seven, they bless and commission them.
- As leaders, they act to empower and equip others.
- They also share their resources, for the common good.
- Power is not to be grasped or held tightly, but relinquished and released. Even Jesus, the Son of God, models this.

Philippians 2:5-8 says: "You must have the same attitude that Christ Jesus had. Though he was God, he did not think of equality with God as something to cling to. Instead, he gave up his divine privileges he took the humble position of a servant and was born as a human being. When he appeared in human form, he humbled himself in obedience to God and died a criminal's death on a cross" (NLT).

To be a person of power is to be a servant.

Ultimately, true power comes from God and the Holy Spirit, not from us. In his final words to the disciples, the resurrected Jesus tells them to wait for the Holy Spirit.

In Acts 1:8 he says, "But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes upon you. And you will be my witnesses, telling people about me everywhere—in Jerusalem, throughout Judea, in Samaria, and to the ends of



the earth” (NLT).

Some say the book of Acts should be titled the Acts of the Holy Spirit, rather than the Acts of the Apostles, as it is sometimes called. But spiritual leadership does take an embodied human form. Acts 6 illustrates the value of leadership that reflects and represents the church body. Race, ethnicity, gender, language, culture, and age are all important. And so is every member and every need.

This passage also illustrates the importance of relying on the Holy Spirit in all our ministry efforts, whether we are pastors or congregants. The impact of the body of Christ increases exponentially when everyone depends on the Holy Spirit and uses our gifts and callings as God intends. When we release control, and follow the Spirit, the Spirit is unleashed. This transfer of power has potential to transform lives, expand the church, and change the world.