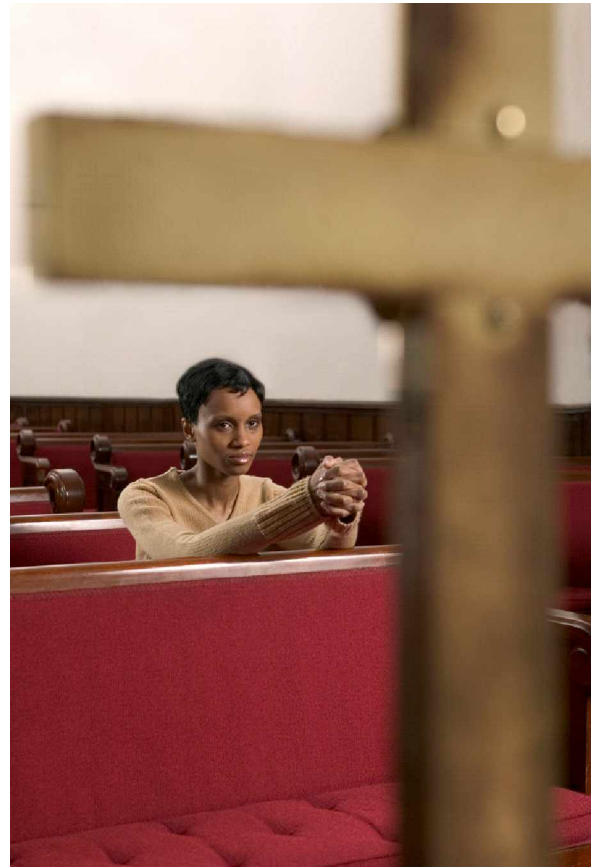


Evangelical Congregational Church

So You're A... Class Leader



DISCOVERING YOUR HERITAGE

The year was 1790. The setting was the farm home of Isaac Davies in Lancaster County, Pennsylvania. It was evening and a small crowd of devout Christians were gathering into the Davies home. Among them was a young man named Jacob Albright. A tile maker by trade, Jacob lived just a short distance from the Davies' home. Only weeks earlier, Jacob and his wife lost several children to death by dysentery. Yearning for peace and comfort, Jacob discussed his need with Adam Reigel, a United Brethren neighbor. Through Reigel's influence, Jacob became a Christian. It was then he heard about Isaac Davies and his gathering. He heard these people were called Methodists, that they formed a Methodist class and Davies was their class leader. Jacob was spiritually hungry. He wanted to learn how to pray and study the Bible. He heard the class meeting was the place he could learn. So he went and grew and matured as a Christian. Eventually God called him to preach. Out of his preaching ministry a church was born.

What precedes is a true account of Albright's growth in Christian faith—a growth greatly influenced by one of your spiritual forbearers—a class leader named Isaac Davies.

All too often we overtook this detail in Jacob Albright's life. We forget his early growth in the Christian faith came about through the influence of a class leader and his class meeting. In the same way, all too often we overlook you and your position within the local church. We talk much concerning the responsibility of the trustees or the stewards but what about the class leader. Where do you fit in? what is your identity in the 20th century Evangelical Congregational Church?

DEFINING YOUR DUTIES

The most logical place to turn for information regarding the class leader is the DISCIPLINE of the Evangelical Congregational Church. In paragraph 314 are listed five duties of the class leader. Three duties are of a general nature. Two are more specific.

GENERAL DUTIES—

RELATING TO YOUR PERSONAL PREPARATION

Of the general duties, the first is found in 314.5.1. As a class leader, you are “to be diligent students of the Word of God, so as to be able to instruct properly [your] classes.” Your first duty focuses upon your commitment to God's Word. Are you a student of the Word? Do you read and study it daily? Do you apply its teaching to your life? A class leader is to be likened to the Bereans who received the message of Paul “...with great eagerness and examined the Scriptures every day to see if what Paul said was true” (Acts 17:11). In today's church, one of the primary responsibilities of a class leader is to lead a mid-week prayer meeting and/or Bible study. If this is true of your church, then you readily understand why your commitment to God's

Word is of utmost importance.

Your second general duty is found in 314.5.2. You are “to be circumspect in [your] own deportment so as to set a proper example to the classes entrusted to [you].” In his letters to Timothy and Titus, Paul stresses the importance of personal example. It is true your actions often speak louder than words. If one of your responsibilities as a class leader is leading a Bible study, you must seek to model a godly response to the truths you study. Show by example the material you study is not merely a body of facts, but life-transforming truth. As a leader in the larger church body, set an example by faithfully attending the services of the church, speaking well of your pastor and people, and supporting the ministry of the church with your time, talents and treasure. In all these ways, you set a proper example.

Your third general duty is found in 314.5.5. You are “to familiarize [yourselves] with the doctrines and rules of the Evangelical Congregational Church, to read and explain them to [your] classes, and to call attention to the passages of Scripture on which they are based.” It is important that you know what we believe (our theology) and how what we believe influences how we live (our ethics). The DISCIPLINE will help you as it contains the truth of Scripture set down in a systematic manner (PART 1). But what are you to do with such knowledge? Spread it around! If you lead a more traditional mid-week prayer meeting and/or Bible study, allow the Articles of Faith to guide your weekly study. Perhaps you may choose to do a series on our spiritual, moral or social standards. If you serve with a number of other class leaders, devise a plan whereby these theological truths will be taught over a specific period of time. This is your privilege and responsibility.

Seize it, thereby helping to build a strong Evangelical Congregational Church which will bring glory to Christ.

SPECIFIC DUTIES—

RELATING TO YOUR CORPORATE RESPONSIBILITY

Clearly the above duties fit well into the more traditional and commonly accepted role of the class leader, i.e. the leader of a mid-week meeting. But there are two additional duties which the DISCIPLINE assigns you. They have sometimes been overlooked or too infrequently applied. These duties allow for broader interpretation of the class leader’s role in the local church and imply the class leader may need to be more flexible in this role—going beyond leadership of a weekly meeting to giving spiritual leadership and pastoral care to the congregation.

The first of these duties is found in 314.5.3. You are “to take charge of the meetings of the class and to conduct them in such a manner as to contribute most effectually to the spiritual edification and upbuilding of the members.” These words have a strange yet familiar sound. They set basic guidelines for conduct of the prayer meeting and/or Bible study, but go deeper

than that! Historically, the class leader did more than organize and conduct a mid-week meeting. He was responsible for the spiritual lives of his people. Like a pastor, he was to be concerned for their spiritual growth. He was to help them overcome temptation, hold them accountable for unconfessed sin, establish them in the spiritual disciplines, and encourage them to become involved in the ministry of the local church. He did all of these things, not by himself, but in the context of the class meeting.

Paragraph 314.2 tells us the purpose of a class leader is to: (1) ascertain the spiritual condition of individual members, and (2) train and develop members in spirituality, public religious exercises and general Christian activity. In a very real sense, the class meeting is a means of corporate discipleship. Class leaders should involve themselves in the lives of men and women entrusted to their care. These men and women should be accountable to one another—confessing sin, sharing testimonies, praying together, and in all ways, bearing one another's burdens (Galatians 6:2).

This purpose of the class leaders may manifest itself in several ways.

1. Through your mid-week meeting. If you have a prayer meeting and/or Bible study, re-evaluate it to determine how involved the attenders are. Provide opportunities for participation, e.g. testimony time (Be specific when you call for testimonies. Ask for testimonies of God's grace in your life this week or God's answer to a specific prayer, or a testimony concerning a new insight into the Word), sharing of prayer requests, spontaneous choruses, altar prayer time, conversational prayer time, etc.
2. Through small group ministry. We like to think the small group involvement is a new trend in ministry. John Wesley discovered their value in the 18th century and employed them in his ministry. The phenomenal growth of the early Methodists is largely attributed to small groups.

Indeed, small group ministry more closely approximates the Methodist class leader structure. This is true for several reasons. Small groups can provide a more open atmosphere. Such an atmosphere encourages accountability. People often allow themselves to be more vulnerable in a small group of people whom they have learned to know. Small groups can focus on Bible study, prayer and personal spiritual growth without the inhibition of a large crowd in a large sanctuary.

As small group ministries develop in your church, your responsibility as a class leader may be that of coordinating the groups and selecting and training their leaders.

3. Through prayer ministries. The prayer ministry of the church is much broader than the mid-week prayer meeting. Prayer chains, prayer partners and prayer corps are just a few of the other types of prayer ministries a church may have. These ministries may involve

any and all age groups of the church. Your responsibility may be to organize and oversee these ministries. You must make certain that your church is a “praying force” for the extension of God’s Kingdom in the world.

The second more specific duty is found in 314.5.4. You are “to be ready to assist the pastor, as he may request, in giving spiritual oversight to the members of the classes.” This duty may manifest itself in any number of ways. You may be called upon to undertake the pastoral care of the congregation in your pastor’s absence. That will mean visitation of the sick and shut-ins. It may also mean follow-up of visitors and/or prospective members. You may be consulted regarding spiritual needs or problems. If so, you have an opportunity to help your pastor think through the means of meeting these needs and solving problems.

Some churches broaden the scope of this duty, having made pastoral care a major item in the class leader’s job description. Class leaders are given charge over a certain segment of the church membership. They are responsible for visiting sick and shut-ins, contacting inactive members, helping new members find their niche, and regularly praying for their members assigned them. They keep their eyes open for those who have been irregular in attendance. They discern the practical needs of the ill and home-bound, and mobilize others to meet those needs. They do not replace the pastor in providing care to the congregation, but supplement his pastoral care while, at the same time, employing their gifts for ministry.

To implement this ministry, the membership should be divided equally among the class leaders. In a church of 120 members and three class leaders, each class leader would be assigned approximately 40 persons for whom they would be responsible. As new members are received, they would be assigned to a class leader, thus facilitating their assimilation into the church family. Class leaders in churches with large memberships may want to appoint assistants. The assistants would not hold an Official Board position, as does the class leader, but would minister under the “senior” class leader’s direction. This is really a form of lay ministry that may already be employed in your church through other means and persons.

DETERMINING YOUR ROLE

It should be clear by now the role of the class leader in the local church can be broadly interpreted. If you haven’t done so, you should meet with your fellow class leaders and your pastor to discuss the role of the class leader(s) in your local church. If your only duty at present is to lead a mid-week meeting, map out a strategy whereby you will undertake the other duties

entrusted to you. Remember, as a class leader you are more than a meeting leader. You are an example. You are a caregiver. You are a disciple. God has placed you in a position where you can greatly influence the lives of men and women for Jesus Christ.

It is significant that God chose a class leader named Isaac Davies to impact the life of a tile maker named Jacob Albright. May this fact of history challenge you to rediscover the vital work of a class leader and to do that work for the honor and glory of our Master and Lord, Jesus Christ.

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