



## Healthy Congregations thrive with healthy leadership

*“Who knows but that you have come to royal position for such a time as this?” Esther 4:14 (NIV)*

The Book of Esther tells the compelling story of a Jewish woman, Esther (4<sup>th</sup> century, B.C.), who used her position in the harem of the king of Persia to prevent the genocide of her people. To do this, Esther had to risk her very life!

Esther is unique in that it’s the only book of the Bible that doesn’t explicitly mention God. And yet it’s impossible to read Esther without perceiving the guiding hand of God at work, raising up a powerful leader at the right moment, “for such a time as this.”

God is always doing that—calling forth leaders in the right place, at the right time, with the right gifts. Over the past year I have witnessed this a number of times in congregations of our synod. I recall, in particular, a couple of congregational presidents who, simply by virtue of the who they were and how they conducted themselves, helped keep parish crises from spinning out of control.

What makes for such healthy leadership? It’s tempting to think that leaders have special knowledge, extraordinary skills or magnetic personalities. But as Dr. Peter Steinke points out in his *Healthy Congregations* training materials, leaders promote health in congregations primarily through their **presence and functioning**.

Steinke lists 26 attributes of such leaders. Let me highlight four of these attributes:

1. **Healthy leaders know who they are.** They are comfortable in their own skins and don’t hesitate to define themselves for others. They are anything but chameleons or “shape-shifters.” They resist being squeezed into other persons’ molds or preconceived notions of what a leader should be.

2. **Healthy leaders take responsibility for their own actions.** They know they can’t be responsible for how others function. They are self-aware, able to take criticism, willing to accept the consequences of their decisions

This is the seventh of an 11-part series on the marks of healthy congregations. Bishop Larry encourages congregation councils or other parish leadership groups to use these articles for their opening devotions.

3. **Healthy leaders regulate their own anxieties.** They can move calmly, patiently, deliberately within an anxious church environment. They resist picking up the “virus” of worry or desperation. God graces them with the ability to weigh alternatives, think clearly, and act responsibly.

4. **Healthy leaders stay connected with others**—including those absorbed by anxiety or those stirring up mischief in the congregation. Such leaders listen to others, creating space and time for respectful conversations. But they do not allow the mission to be thwarted or the congregation to be hijacked by persons with narrow agendas.

We’ve all seen how highly reactive persons can spread anxiety throughout a congregation—almost as if anxiety were a virus. But the same holds true for health in the congregation. Healthy leaders “spread” health throughout the system as they influence others to take responsible stands, keep focused on God’s mission, remain calm in adversity and stay connected with each other through thick and thin. Thank God for such servants in our midst!

*Bishop Larry Wohlrabe*

### Questions for reflection and discussion:

- Recall effective church leaders you have known. How did they contribute to the health of the congregation through their **presence and functioning**?
- What leadership gifts has God given to you? What are your “growing edges” as a leader?
- How does your congregation identify, call forth and nurture healthy leaders?

**Connections** is a publication of the Northwestern Minnesota Synod, ELCA designed for congregational use. For more information, contact the synod office:

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Northwestern Minnesota Synod  
**Connections**  
Connecting the Congregational, Synodical, and Churchwide  
Expressions of the ELCA



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