



Spotlight on Crestwood: The Elders “Crestwood, We have your back!”

A few days ago, Lucy Wells and I sat down over a cup of coffee at Panera. Lucy is the Chair of the Crestwood Elders and she was filling me in on the background of their activities. It turns out there was a lot I didn't know, and it took more than one cup of java to catch me up.

I think I must be a slow learner. I've been a Disciples for years. I knew that each congregation in the denomination does things differently, but I didn't know how much practices could differ between congregations. It was an interesting class on Eldership, and Lucy was a great teacher.

At Crestwood, the Elders are a pretty independent entity. The Chair is a voting member of the Board, but they administer themselves in all other ways. They are not a personnel advisory group. They are not a grievance group. They do not direct the church. I saw immediately I had much to learn. But the main point that stood out clearly in our conversation is that they offer valuable spiritual leadership to Crestwood and are “committed to the well-being of the church and congregation.”

Starting from the beginning, I wanted to know who they were as a body. At Crestwood there is not a set number of Elders, but they insure there are enough active members to do the jobs relegated to them. Currently, there are thirty-four listed Elders, of whom thirty are active. Twenty-two serve at the table (more about that later). Not all of them are senior citizens, as is sometimes the stereotype of the position. In addition to members seasoned by years, there are younger, involved church members. Eleven of them are males. It surprised me that there are so many women – quite the opposite from more conservative denominations who deny women the right to be Elders, which, I believe, was a debated practice in the early years of Crestwood.

Before being invited to be an Elder, a person must clearly demonstrate church leadership and a strong knowledge of our congregation. The Elders are people who have developed an institutional knowledge of Crestwood over their years with our congregation, and they are members with deep spiritual involvement. Most have been active in leadership previously. Some churches have youth Elders, but at Crestwood youth are given other areas of leadership.

The Elders select new members themselves. They might consult the pastor(s) or might consider recommendations, but they alone take the responsibility for membership. They take their roles as spiritual leaders quite seriously, and Crestwood ordains our Elders – not a universal Disciples practice.

All that being said, what does this group of experienced, dedicated people do? A lot, I found out. Importantly, before they begin their work, each individual signs a lengthy "*Elder's Covenant*" in which they agree to a personal spiritual life and service, to offer spiritual leadership in the church, to offer care for the congregation, and to support the ministers and one another.

We see and hear of their work all the time but, in some instances, I didn't know it was this group of people. It is the Elders who serve at the table during worship, blessing and accepting the offering. They give the prayer and participate in leading communion – a task to which they give serious devotional consideration. It is named as one of their most important activities.

Each Elder participates on a ministry team. They take communion to home-bound members. They make financial pledges to the church. They do hospital visits when the pastors are unavailable. The Elder's Covenant involves attending funerals for church members and their families. They offer support to the grieving families, which is especially important when there are not a lot of attendees.

Right now, a number of Elders are being assigned as mentors for the upcoming Pastor's class, which is preparing youth for their baptism. As mentors, they will meet one-on-one with their students each week, meeting with them regularly to discuss issues surrounding their decisions about baptism. They will work with their young persons to choose and execute their baptism service project.

No insult intended, but they seem to enjoy eating. They have monthly lunch meetings which often include speakers. They have a bi-yearly luncheon for new members and have recently included regular visitors in that group. Part of their covenant is evangelism, which entails encouraging and welcoming new and perspective members.

The Elders serve as a conduit of information to the ministers as they hear about needs among us. Each Friday, the Elders receive a special email informing them about conditions involving church members. They incorporate the special needs into their prayer lives, and reach out quietly to help with whatever service is required.

Also importantly, the Elders are the ones who approve Crestwood sponsorships of people who are seeking Disciples ordination or commissioning into ministry. The Regional Disciples have a prescribed process, but it requires a home church sponsorship. Recently we sponsored ordination for Kelly Hale. We are now in the process with Steph Wallace and Hiatt Griffin and are also sponsoring the commissioning for Missy Wallace.

The Elders are helping one another, as well. When they accept their position as spiritual leaders at Crestwood, they are given a book to read, "*Your Calling as an Elder*" by Gary Straub. Currently, they are all rereading the book and holding discussions about it. They take their roles seriously.

Lucy's and my conversation flew by and finally it was time to go. Lucy again emphasized the Elders' spiritual commitment to Crestwood.

She summed it all up with my favorite line of the day: The bottom line is, we are saying "We've got your back, Crestwood."

The appearance of jonquils gives promise that spring and summer are on the way. Already my calendar is filling up. So, I've decided to back off for a while from the bi-weekly schedule of the Spotlight. It's not going away, but it will probably appear only once a month or whenever something really interesting pops up.

Help me with fresh ideas. Let's continue to explore together – just not so often for a while. What would you like to know more about? Contact me at gdsouth@bellsouth.net.