

When I was voiceless: How laypeople stepped in

by [Joyce B. Duerr](#) in the [June 10, 2015](#) issue



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When doctors recommended radiation treatment for my thyroid cancer, they explained the treatment's side effects. I'd have a very sore throat and lose my voice for about six weeks. I was astounded. What? Lose my voice for six weeks? I'm a pastor! How would I cope?

Challenging days were ahead, not only for me, but also for my congregation. We trust in God, but truly did not know how God would meet our needs during this time. Our little church could not afford to pay for pulpit supply—the members had already paid for three weeks of pastors when I had surgery.

I shared my story with the board of deacons. After time for prayer and discernment, the deacons decided that they would be the pastor's voice during this time. Six weeks—six deacons—yes, we could do it. The six weeks would cover the season of Advent through Epiphany. We traditionally light the candle on the Advent wreath each Sunday during this season, so we developed themes of hope, love, joy, and peace to go with the candle of the week. The deacons, and sometimes their spouses, signed up for the week of their choice.

I continued to prepare the order of worship. Family groups led the opening worship liturgy and lit each week's Advent candle. Sunday school teachers assumed responsibility for the children's time. Since those teachers are all women, we made a point of adding men other than the deacons as leaders. Other laypeople volunteered to lead the prayer time, and I provided prayer guidelines.

The deacons assumed responsibility for the morning message or sermon. Some wanted me to prepare a complete sermon manuscript for them. This was a challenge for me, as I don't usually write my sermon down. Some asked for an outline, while others took the topic and text and did their own preparation. Two couples talked back and forth in a dialogue of prayer. We printed the benediction in the worship bulletin for all to read. Members were stretched outside their comfort zones, but many of them agreed to lead.

I had hoped to lead one last communion service before losing my voice. Alas, when I got up to speak I couldn't make a single sound. Over the years the deacons who were assisting with communion had learned to lead the prayers of thanksgiving, so I was able to give a nod and alert the designated deacon to begin praying. I mimed the presentations of the bread and the cup. I nodded again a few minutes later, and a choir member started singing "Blest Be the Tie That Binds."

During my voiceless season, my primary means of communication was by e-mail or via Facebook. I sent personal notes by snail mail to homebound members who are not connected with electronic media. As my speaking voice gradually returned, I resumed preaching but still depended on lay leaders for all other speaking roles. It was a time of rejoicing when individuals responsible for leading prayer asked if they could prepare the prayers on their own—and sometimes asked for a copy of the worship bulletin in advance.

Later the deacons and I reflected on the experience. We discerned how God had used the time to nurture, grow, and stretch the faith of the congregation. Two years later, laypeople continue to participate often in our worship services. I lead the children's time each week, but the content of the children's message is coordinated with the Sunday school curriculum, which creates opportunities for adults to participate and to interact with the children.

Laypeople continue to lead us in our prayer time, and our worship bulletin calls this not "pastoral prayer" but "God's people at prayer." The people who had shared concerns from the pews now lead prayer from the pulpit. It's been some time since anyone has asked for a written guide, but prayer leaders sometimes ask me about the theme or focus of an upcoming worship service. The format of that prayer time varies, and parishioners are becoming more creative with it.

I invited the deacons to share some of their experiences. One deacon said, “I was very aware of the different perspective of being on the other side of the lectern and seeing the pastor in the congregation. It was humbling and allowed me to understand all that the pastor does.” Other deacons shared:

“I learned to overcome my discomfort in standing up as a representative of our church.”

“I’ve gained confidence and a deeper knowledge of God’s Word. I have sensed the Holy Spirit at work.”

“It was a joy to see people participate in ways they’d never done before.”

One worshiper noted that the congregation was amazed by the realization that it had gifts to share. He heard people commenting frequently on signs of spiritual growth in those who were participating. As for the pastor’s absence, he said, the people didn’t feel abandoned. The pastor was present, and that was comforting. “We weren’t just going through motions in a void—there was a spiritual presence beyond words.”

As for me, I can affirm that God has a sense of humor. For one who enjoys talking as much as I do, this season was the perfect irony. When I had no voice, I learned to rest in God and let God’s voice speak to me. Even now, with my voice returned to me, I lean on the psalmist’s words: “Be still and know that I am God.”