

When we need the Spirit's help

By [Brant S. Copeland](#)

September 24, 2012

*For more commentary on this week's readings, see the [Reflections on the Lectionary](#) page, which includes Copeland's current Living by the Word column as well as past magazine and blog content. For full-text access to all articles, [subscribe](#) to the Century.*

My Dad was a pastor. He began his ministry in the early 50's, when mainline churches were growing like weeds and a clerical collar would elicit a discount at the local department store and a complementary membership in the country club.

Not so for my son, who has also worked a pastor. He paid full price for his coffee at Starbucks, where he led discussions with Millennials who wouldn't dream of darkening the door of his grandfather's church.

The perks of ministry were never very reliable. Just ask Moses, whose flock grows quickly tired of manna and demands meat instead. Escape from Egypt was nice and all that, but what has he done for them lately?

Moses complains that his call has become too much to bear. He feels like a single parent who carries the suckling child alone: "I am not able to carry all this people alone, for they are too heavy for me" (Numbers 11:14).

The Lord supplies relief. Moses chooses 70 elders, and the Lord allots each a portion of his spirit. However, Eldad and Medad, who missed the training seminar, also get a portion of the Lord's spirit. Joshua complains that this plays havoc with his flow charts, but Moses welcomes the help: "Are you jealous for my sake? Would that all the Lord's people were prophets, and that the Lord would put his spirit them!" (11:29).

The problem with giving the Spirit free rein is that you have to live with the Spirit's choices. Suppose Eldad and Medad know nothing about parliamentary procedure. Suppose they propose ideas that were tried ten years ago and failed. They might

help, but will the help be welcomed?

It has been said that 80 percent of what a pastor does is unknown to 80 percent of the congregation 80 percent of the time. I get the feeling that many of us pastors like it that way. Like Moses, we might complain that we are overworked, but unlike Moses, we aren't so eager to let the Spirit dispel the illusion of indispensability.

Moses doesn't have much choice. He's drowning and he knows it. He'll never get this bunch of bellyachers to the promise land without the Spirit's help. We pastors are a long way from the promise land, too. If we're willing to welcome the help the Spirit provides, we might get there after all.