

## October 2015 – (dot)Stewardship

### Taking a gander at pastor appreciation



Honk! Honk! Honk!

No, it's not the sound of cars on the Los Angeles freeway; it's the sound of geese flying south for the winter. This familiar cacophony had interrupted my peaceful, quiet life near the Maine coast the last 14 years.

I lived near a large pond that the geese used as a rest area on their long journey. Several days each year both mornings and evenings were interrupted by the unmistakable sounds of geese honking as they took flight.

I've been told there are many lessons we can learn from geese and the way in which they fly. By flying in formation in the same direction they create uplift, making the flight easier. By rotating leadership they reduce the stress and fatigue on any one leader. When one drops out of formation, two others drop out to stay with it until it can return to flight.

Maybe you've heard these lessons, too? To be honest, I don't know how much scientific documentation exists for these metaphors, but they are valuable reminders of what it means to be part of a team. We make life easier for each other by working together and going in the same direction. We share in leadership so that burnout and exhaustion can be avoided. We look out for one another, and don't let anyone fall behind or become isolated.

But there's one more lesson to be learned in the honking of the geese. Those who have observed geese tell us that all that honking comes from the geese that are following – the lead goose doesn't honk! This has led scientists to theorize that the honking is a form of encouragement, urging the lead goose forward.

As we near the end of October, maybe you've been the recipient of much "honking" from your parishioners. If you serve a ministry that observes Pastor Appreciation Month, you may have received an abundance of cards, notes, gifts, flowers, dinners, and public recognitions.

But what about the other eleven months out of the year? What about the pastors whose churches don't excel at encouraging their pastor in October (or at any other time)? What practices can we engage in to encourage each other? How can we keep one another from feeling isolated, dropping out of formation, or flying in the wrong direction?

It is incumbent upon us to monitor our own spiritual well-being and to look out for those on our team. Receiving and dispensing encouragement may not happen naturally. It may require intentional effort to be in relationship with those who encourage us and with those who need encouragement.

Here are a few practical ideas:

1. **Private email group:** I'm a member of an email group of about 10 pastors from across the country. This closed group has become my first line of defense against isolation. I distinctly remember traveling to be with the family of someone who had just taken their life and stopping to email my pastors' group, asking them to pray for me. We pray for each other, we share our discouragements and struggles, and we encourage each other.
2. **Regular retreats:** Years ago in Maine, a group of us would get together for semi-annual reading retreats. We'd rent a cabin in the woods, buy some food, and six or eight of us would spend two or three days together. I don't know how much reading took place, but there was lots of fellowship, camaraderie, and encouragement. These retreats formed the foundation for deep relationships which have lasted through many changes and pastoral transitions.
3. **District events:** Yes, there is business to accomplish and sessions to attend. But one of the benefits of district gatherings is a chance to spend time with the family. As pastors are giving their reports, pay careful attention to who might need some encouragement. Listen to see if there's a need that you or your church can meet. Spend some time before or after services building relationships with the rest of the team.
4. **Phone call, note, or dinner:** Just as you hope your congregants look out for each other instead of expecting you to provide all of the pastoral care, remember that your district superintendent can't provide all of the pastoral care for pastors. Take time to pray regularly for the pastors on your district. Ask God to lay a pastor on your heart, then meet up with him or her. I remember calling one pastor that I thought was well connected, and learning that he felt isolated because nobody ever checked in on him.
5. **Attend other churches.** This is most easily done while on vacation, but maybe you can attend an evening, midweek service, or a special event. Having served in a vacation area, I can't express how much I enjoyed having other pastors and their families stop in on a Sunday morning while they were on vacation. Not only did it provide a statistical boost for a small church, it boosted this pastor's morale to know that he wasn't alone, but part of a team.

Who do you know that's discouraged or isolated today? Take a moment and "honk" a little encouragement in their direction!

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## Quotes: Jerry Bridges



*“Thankfulness to God is a recognition that God in His goodness and faithfulness had provided for us and cared for us, both physically and spiritually. It is a recognition that we are totally dependent on Him; that all that we are and have comes from God.”*