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Living up to our name

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A recent article by the *New York Times News Service* describes a new phenomenon: people going online to meet other people who have their same name. In a book called *Finding Angela Shelton*, the author described her meetings with 40 other Angela Sheltons. Web sites such as SameNameAsMe and Facebook include nearly 200 people named Ritz, and 1,224 people named Mohammed Hassan. The unanswered question is why do so many people feel a connection with utter strangers, just because they share the same name? Social science says that we are unconsciously drawn to people that remind us of ourselves.

A psychological theory called the name-letter effect maintains that people like the letters in their own names (especially their initials) better than other letters in the alphabet. During the 2000 presidential election, people whose surnames began with “B” were more likely to vote for Bush, and those whose names began with “G” were more likely to vote for Gore. It’s called implicit egotism. Researchers have shown time and time again that people are attracted to people, places and things that resemble their names.

In studies that make believers in free will squirm, scientists have found that names and the letters in them are surprisingly influential in people’s lives. Similarity is really one of the largest driving forces of behavior. Studies have shown that we give people special privileges when they are similar to us, such as buying something for them or voting for them.

Take me, for example. My name is Clark. Clark comes from

the Old English word for cleric, which means clergyman. Guess what? I am a clergyman! I am an ordained pastor. How did that happen? I didn't go into that field because that was what I was named, but how did that happen? Was it predestined?

Take the name Presbyterian. Many of us have been told that the word Presbyterian means "governed by elders." This isn't really accurate. When we think of "governed by elders," we think of the corporate/regulatory style of government that the denomination has utilized over the last 80 years. But, what we forget is that this isn't the style of government the church has used for most of history. We know that in the United States, the main role of elders from the early 1700s to the early 1900s was to visit church members in their homes to test their theology and morality. They were the spiritual leaders of the church. They were the shepherds of the flock. They were mentors to the younger members. When the New Testament uses the word *presbuteros* to describe the church elders, it wasn't talking about our recent style of being a board of directors, functioning by rules and regulations. They were talking about the spiritual leaders of the church. These were people who would preach, teach, visit, serve the sacraments and be the church in the community.

As we try to discover how we can be a missional church, we know that one of the keys is our elders, our lay leaders. If becoming missional is completely clergy driven, it will never happen. We believe in the priesthood of all believers. If our elders only function as a board of directors, we won't be able to make the shift. If our elders realize that their name, Presbyterian, is a reference to their leadership in the church and the community, then we can begin to make some of the paradigm shifts that are needed. Leadership is such a crucial issue for the church today. We need people who are willing to take some smart risks, gain the trust of the people and who have the skills to help lead us forward.

So, if we Presbyterians are predestined by our name, then we are called to be leaders. We are not called to pass more and more legislation. We are called to lead the church into our communities. We are called to lead people back into our neighborhoods. We are called to help people discover what God is already doing in our cities, and find out how we can join Christ in the work he has already begun. Presbyterian is actually a great name. Being Presbyterian is about providing the leadership that the Body of Christ needs. It's time to reclaim the true meaning of our name. It's time to be proud to be Presbyterian again. It's time to recover our true identity. I think it's predestined.

P.S. If you have the same name as me, I already like you!

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