

NW Texas Diocesan Convention  
Community Ministry  
Keynote – 29 October 2005

We're here to talk about ministry – about that burning that the fire of God sets off in us. All kinds of ministry – yours, mine, ours, lay and ordained, but especially, baptismal ministry and the kind of ministry that flourishes when an entire community really begins to live into their baptismal promises. Here in NW Texas, you call this community ministry.

I'd like to begin by telling you about a congregation that's been engaged in this way of being church for about twenty years.

St. James is a small congregation in a depressed rural area. Twenty years ago they were about 10 people on Sundays, and their sacramental worship needs were filled by supply clergy who drove a couple of hours to reach them. The members of the congregation were long-time residents of Cathlamet and Skamokawa, little towns on the lower Columbia River, which runs to the Pacific between Washington and Oregon. During most of the time the towns have been there, the economy has been based on fishing, logging, and dairying. Twenty years ago all those industries were collapsing. Families who had made a good living fishing, farming, or falling trees suddenly had to figure out another way to support themselves. Women who had been long out of the workforce were looking for jobs and going back to school. Families were taking in foster children as a way of trying to make ends meet. We're talking big-time social displacement and all the kinds of fallout you'd expect – domestic violence, divorce, parents abandoning their families, alcohol and drug abuse.

A woman in the congregation of St. James looked around and noticed that child care was an enormous unmet need, and she went to the vestry and said, "if you let me use the two Sunday school rooms, and if I can find 7 pre-school children, I think I can break even." The congregation enthusiastically said "yes," helped find some educational expertise, and began to help recruit children. They did find seven, and lots more, and before long the congregation made a conscious decision to limit their own expenses and devote all of their budget over \$25,000 a year to "the kids."

Along the way St. James called a priest and a deacon from among their members. I first met the priest candidate when she was studying at the Diocese of Oregon's School of Theology, which was a lot closer than her own diocese's program in Seattle.

Today the St. James Family Center has an annual budget of \$750,000, offers toddler care and a preschool, Head Start, after school programs, parent education, teen programs, a lending library for videos and parenting resources as well as car seats, and it oversees the county domestic violence shelter. It serves 130 children a day, it is the third largest employer in Wahkiakum County, and it has received grants from the Murdoch Trust, the UTO, Weyerhaeuser, and the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation. The congregation is not much larger than it was 20 years ago, but it continues to transform the entire community around it.

Community Ministry begins in mission. There is no reason for any sort of ministry, no matter what we call it, except in the service of mission.

What is the mission of the church? to restore all people to unity with God and each other in Christ.<sup>1</sup> It's about healing, peace-making, transformation, and building a society of shalom – that ancient dream of Israel for a community where all are fed and clothed, each has worthwhile work, the ill and broken are healed, prisoners liberated, and all live at peace. That is why we exist, why the church exists, why we baptize people and gather together to eat at God's table. This is what loving God and our neighbor looks like. The work that leads in that direction is what we call ministry, and it is as rich, unique, and varied as the number and gifts of God's people.

The church has always had a tendency to focus on the inside-the-walls kind of ministry – what some have called maintenance. That is not a pejorative term, for feeding the spiritually hungry is foundational to our ability to be ministers. Clearly Sunday worship is central to mission, but it is not the fullness of reconciling the world, and never will be! Given what I know of the passions of your bishop, there is probably nowhere in Northwest Texas where this is true, but in many places when the subject of ministry comes up, it quickly moves to what the ordained are up to, or what people are doing inside the church building.

The reality is that the liturgy only begins at 10 am on Sunday morning. The work of God's people takes the liturgy out into the larger world for the rest of the week. That is what's going on when the deacon sends us out, rejoicing in the power of the Spirit – it's a charge to get out there and get busy, or as Bp. Moore used to say, “get up, get out, and get lost!”

Only a small part of God's mission takes place on Sunday morning, even though it is absolutely vital to the mission and ministry that is accomplished the rest of the week. Think about how different the world would be if when we started talking about ministry, the conversation evoked images of Joanne teaching chemistry on Thursday morning, Michael designing a “green” office building in Plainview, or Jean negotiating a revision of the tax code in Austin. All of them have the opportunity to transform people and communities through the love of God.

This prayer book so many of us still call “new” has been a significant motivator in reminding us that all ministry begins in baptism. We are just beginning to live into the theology that under girds that book. It is a radical notion – in the sense that radical means going back to the roots. When Jesus called fisherfolk and tax collectors to join his team, he affirmed that the dailiness of our lives is the place where God is most often at work. Anglicans have always held up the Incarnation as our central doctrine. We are called into Christian living because God has sanctified it in human presence.

God's mission of reconciling the world is carried out by all of us, not just those who stand up front or run around in funny clothes. And the work of the church within its own bounds is to equip all of the baptized for God's mission in our daily living. An Archbishop of Canterbury of the last century, William Temple, put it this way, “the Church the only institution that exists primarily for the good of those outside of it.” If we sit in church on Sunday thinking that we have it made because we've gotten up and gotten ourselves to the service, we've missed the boat. This wonderful and exasperating institution we call the Episcopal Church is not here to make us feel good. It exists to equip and motivate us to change the world, to transform it into something that looks a good deal more like the reign of God!

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<sup>1</sup> *Book of Common Prayer*, Catechism, p 855

The mission of the church, whether it is a tiny congregation in a little town, or the biggest cardinal parish in the diocese, is carried out by its members. Ministry is accomplished by the lovers of God in that place, and to be effective, it has to be the fruit of that community. It is, after all, Christ's ministry, not ours.

If you begin to do some exploring of this way of being church, what I would call a baptismal ecclesiology, you begin to find a wide variety of language: Shared Ministry, Team Ministry, Mutual Ministry, Total Ministry, Community Ministry, Ministry of All the Baptized. They may not be describing absolutely identical experiences, but all are about ministry as a response to God's mission, and all understand that ministry begins in baptism.

This baptismal ecclesiology is not about how the sacraments are provided in a congregation. It is not necessarily about who preaches, who is paid by the congregation, or whose name appears on the church letterhead. It is a recognition that all of us were called into ministry at baptism, that all are gifted for ministry, and that we have unique gifts. It affirms the Pauline language about the Body of Christ having many parts, all of them significant, and none more important than another. It also recognizes that God provides what is needed for mission in a place, and that together, we are co-creators of God's dream of a reconciled world.

I've shared one example of the kind of mission and ministry this baptismal notion can generate. This understanding is not limited to small, poor, or rural communities, although the blessings of leanness in those places have certainly led to its flowering and flourishing. I know a large, urban congregation in Portland, Oregon, that has been living into this sense of shared ministry for more than ten years. St. Michael and All Angels has been characterized by ministry to and with their multicultural neighbors in the inner city. They include a Spanish-speaking worship service in their schedule, they have provided space for a Native American congregation, they sponsor classes in English as a Second Language and community assistance for immigrants, they participate in a ministry called "Rahab's Sisters" that reaches out to prostitutes. They send teams to Central America every year to learn about their baptismal vows as they build houses or laundry facilities. The church is alive every day of the week. They have a rector, and they have had other paid clergy staff at times in those ten years. They also have a fireball deacon. Most of all, they have a congregation who have been formed and educated in the understanding that each one lives a daily ministry, whether it is as a city planner or teacher or a parent. They are transforming their neighborhood, their part of the city, each of the places in which they live and work, and small parts of the global village. They support these many ministries through a solid program of Christian discipleship, grounded in the belief that every baptized person is gifted for ministry.

What is different about this way of "being church" is the focus on baptism as a call to ministry, as the primary way to serve God's mission. If you visited any such congregation, you would find familiar worship services and the usual kinds of in-church ministries. You would also find a lot of people who are truly passionate about what it means to be a Christian in the world today.

There is room and need for community ministry in every congregation in this Church. Every congregation that is more than a family chapel or chaplaincy has elements of community ministry, or it wouldn't function. We all expect to find the ministries of an Altar Guild and a Sunday School in almost every congregation, because they are

essential. So is the ministry of the treasurer, and the vestry or bishop's committee or vestry of the whole. Where this way of being church begins to diverge from what we all grew up with is how leadership is understood and functions.

Community ministry takes seriously the authority conferred in baptism. It recognizes that the Body of Christ has many parts, each gifted, and none more important than another. It presumes that decisions for the good of the Body are made collaboratively, in mutual discernment, rather than being dictated by one person or from on high. It assumes that each baptized person is a leader in some part of his or her life, working toward the transformation of a part of this world into something more like the Kingdom of God. That is radical in the sense of looking a lot like our Christian roots. On the surface it may not seem so different from the way things operate in your parish. It becomes challenging when we realize that mutual accountability is expected, that each of us owes the community some accounting for the gifts we have been given and how they are being used.

We lived for a long time in a church that expected the clergy to tell us what to do, and lay people to meekly respond. When I was growing up, there was little tolerance for questioning the authority of the clergy, and by the same token, not much was expected of lay people, other than what was joking summarized as “the duty to pay, pray, and obey.” We were all rather comfortable in our respective roles, and as long as there wasn't too much conflict or crisis, we all let it go merrily along.

That caricature of church is not baptismal ministry. It's an abdication of the authority each of us received when we were baptized. It's also an abdication of the authority the ordained received. We are all called to grow up into the full stature of Christ, and that means active participation in transformative living! Transformation is basic to Christianity – it is what the paschal mystery is all about. We die to old ways of living in the hope and expectation that a new and different life will emerge. If we do not yet live in the fullness of the Reign of God, then something needs to die and change.

So what does a leader in this kind of a church look like? The necessary virtues resonate with the classic understandings of Christian life and vocation – servanthood, humility, and gratitude, all lived in a life of faithfulness. An attitude of gratitude underlies all ministry. If we don't know any good news, then we haven't got anything to share, and we really aren't capable of loving our neighbor. It implies gratitude for life, learning, companions, all of creation, and the vision of God's reign planted in each one of us.

Humility is about knowing who we are as creatures, made of the earth, grounded in God. The roots of the word are the same as humus and human – good basic earthy stuff. Humility has to be appropriately grateful for the gifts one has been given, not lost in an abject sense of unworthiness or alienation from God. There's a need for humor as well, and it grows out of humility. God must surely have a sense of humor to make us as we are – creatures of the dirt who aspire to the divine! That word “humor” has its roots in the waters of baptism<sup>2</sup> as well as what the Orthodox see in the resurrection – God's cosmic joke on the devil. Humor is essential to life in community – we will not long survive without it.

Servanthood. That's a basic definition of ministry, and it is a response that grows out of humility and gratitude. It includes vulnerability, a willingness to listen with the ear

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<sup>2</sup> humor comes from the same root as “humid”

of the heart, to listen well and carefully, knowing that God is at work all around us, even in the most unexpected people and events. It includes an openness to the Spirit, to encountering Christ in our neighbor, and to the evidence of God at work in the deaths we experience every day. That openness and vulnerability includes a willingness to hold things and ideas lightly. The Scots are fond of saying that angels can fly because they take themselves lightly...

That kind of servanthood vulnerability includes a willingness to risk – to risk being wrong, to risk looking for Christ in a surprising person or place, to risk changing something ancient when the life has gone out of it. That kind of willing and judicious risk-taking counters anxiety. It may not eliminate fear, but it does engage that fear in the faithful expectation that God is at work in the midst of it. Toni Cade Bambara calls it “sheer holy boldness” in *The Salt Eaters*.

Faithfulness is another fruit of this kind of relational leadership. Faithfulness in the sense of being in it for the long haul, willing to endure the hot air of many conventions or vestry or city council meetings. Transforming the world takes endurance!

The trust that’s built out of faithful relationships leads to the ability to transform people and communities. Each of us learns that in our relationship with Jesus. We learn to love by being loved by the people around us, by the people who hang with us even when we’re downright wretched. Communities become sources of that transforming love through the persistence and faithful endurance of their members.

The ministry of leadership in this church is modeled by servanthood, humility, and gratitude, lived in a life of faithfulness. Christians who live in a community that holds this sort of leadership as central have confidence that God has provided the gifts necessary to respond to the mission needed in the larger community. By way of example, if there are hungry folks in Quanaah, then Trinity Church must have the resources to respond – people who can organize the larger community, folks who can distribute the food, those who can find food resources.

Furthermore, if there is a mission to feed the hungry in Quanaah, then God must have gifted the faith community there with the gifts to support this kind of mission. That includes in some form the gifts of pastoral care-giving, worship leadership, preaching, administration, teaching, and diaconal ministry – for if we have heard that there are hungry people, then some deacon-type must have been busy!

Communities like this are centered and grounded enough to take their authority seriously, through shared discernment within and beyond the community. The congregation of St. James in Cathlamet moved in that direction more than ten years ago, with the support of the Diocese of Olympia. They have called a priest, deacon, and preachers from within their community. St. Michael and All Angels in Portland has been moving in the same direction, calling a deacon and preachers from within, as well as several candidates for the priesthood. Both communities have been able to do that as a result of confidence in the community’s vision. That means the parish community shares a common and consistent vision, one that is grounded in service to and transformation of the larger community.

Resistance to shared or community ministry usually comes in two forms: what we can variously call narcissism, self-centeredness, need for control, idolatry, or that old basic term for excessive self-interest, sin; and the resistance that has its roots in fear – and the two are probably related. When the subject of mutual or shared ministry comes up,

the first fears expressed are usually about clergy job security and priestly status. “If we decide to call and ordain a local ministry team, what happens to the seminary-trained priest?” I firmly believe we are going to need every graduate our seminaries can produce in the coming decades, but they are going to need to be deployed differently. If we are really serious about baptismal ministry, we need clergy who are teachers and equippers of the ministry of others. But we need to spread them around so that every community has access to their particular gifts, not just those who are large enough and wealthy enough to support one.

We especially need leaders who are willing to give ministry away, not those who need to be the center of ecclesiastical attention. We need icons who image a self-giving ministry, a ministry that is kenotic. That’s a good theological word that means self-emptying, as God did in becoming human. Kenotic ministry means a willingness to get out of the way, to provide opportunities for others to grow, rather than needing to do it all oneself. We need people who can demonstrate how to lay down their lives for others. That is a high and holy calling.

We also need to be good stewards of the gifts in our midst – of baptismal gifts for ministry, and of educational resources, and of finances. It is not good stewardship to deploy a full-time paid priest to Austin, Nevada, where the congregation is at most 12 people on Sunday. Yes, they need priestly ministry, and support for the baptismal ministry in which they are all engaged, but there are more appropriate ways of providing that support than for the diocese to send 90% of a priest’s stipend. That congregation has been served for more than 20 years by a priest who was called, formed, and educated there, and another is now in the pipeline. Both are long-term residents of that community and have connections that go far beyond the congregation. [I don’t know about this part of Texas, but in Nevada, one soon discovers that most of the folks who have been there more than 10 years are related to most of the others.] That congregation in Austin has a good sense of its ministry to the travelers who pass through, and they have a good sense of their ministry to each other and the few hundred residents of that town. They are life-givers in the middle of the desert, and they are being the Body of Christ in a way that is authentic to who and where they are.

The other side of the fears about mutual ministry comes out of the expectation that all of us are ministers, by virtue of our baptism. That means we can’t simply sit in the pew and expect Father or Mother so-and-so to do our ministry for us. It means we must all continue to grow up into the full stature of Christ, and claim our authority as co-creators of that divine dream. Community ministry, or a baptismal ecclesiology, may be a scary and daunting prospect. But it is the direction in which abundant life is to be found.

Perhaps the greatest pitfall in beginning to think about this way of being church is an expectation that shared ministry means there is only one possible image of what ministry will look like. If we are committed to this ecclesiology, it will mean taking the local context of a congregation even more seriously. There is no cookie-cutter model which can be replicated everywhere. Community ministry means starting with basics and living out the spirit of a congregation in a way that is most responsive to the needs and blessings of the people in and around it. It is about what Frederick Buechner meant when he said, “ministry happens where our deep gladness meets the world’s deep hungers,” and that takes a different form in every community.

This kind of ecclesiology is based on incarnation. The mission questions and the ministry questions are about the unique gifts, desires, and dreams of people and their community. What is God's dream for this place? What sorts of ministry can serve to build that dream? Who has the gifts for each ministry? How can the church support and serve those ministries and that mission? Or more bluntly, who are you, why are you here, and what are you going to do about it?

An example. St. Mark's, Tonopah, is a tiny congregation in the middle of the Nevada desert, a mining town that boomed about 100 years ago, and in 1906 built a lovely stone church with beautifully simple Tiffany windows. Their Sunday attendance is in the range of 8-12, and it's been that way for at least 20 years. They are emerging from the grave after the deposition of priest who did not understand boundaries. Indeed, they are discovering that what they have learned about grieving is a gift. They are the only remaining mainline congregation in this town of a couple thousand, and they have discovered a ministry of burial. They have two competent worship leaders, and some good down home pastoral caregivers, and a woman who knows everybody and can play the organ. This congregation has a ministry of funerals when there is no one else to turn to. They are calling a new priest from their midst – who is clearly a spiritual leader but does not need to do it all himself. Their lovely old building could easily have become an albatross, but it is finding increasing use in ministering to the whole town. Their gifts and their griefs have met those of the people of Tonopah, and both have been blessed.

Is community ministry – whatever it's called – easy to grow into? Certainly not, and even places that have been engaged in this kind of an ecclesiology for decades still wrestle with challenges.

We have a congregation in Las Vegas that was begun by a church planter about 15 years ago. The congregation declined to about three families after the church planter left under a cloud. They have been fairly peripatetic through their life, meeting in preschools and a set of trailers until building their own worship space two years ago. They have grown, albeit with continued struggles, to over 150 attending Sunday worship. They have grown beyond the ability of volunteer lay leaders and non-stipendiary clergy to manage, and while they might just as well have decided to call a lay administrator, they are wrestling with what it means to call a rector. They still don't have a coherent vision of what baptismal ministry means as they try to live together. They're focused on finances, rather than their mission in the community. Their central struggle is how to live in a community of shared authority, where neither the rector nor the founding families nor the vestry have the last word. They are growing up into the full stature of Christ, and it is just as challenging as the journey of a teenager. They will find their vocation as they wander in the desert. Like Jacob, eventually their wrestling will bless them.

Most of the challenges to living as a community of the baptized seem to have to do with authority – who is in charge, and whose vision will rule. This congregation in Las Vegas is still learning about kenotic ministry, about getting out of the way so another's ministry can be developed, or setting aside one's own desires so the newcomers and strangers can be welcomed.

St. Luke's is another congregation in Las Vegas, much smaller, and in a far poorer neighborhood. Two years ago they were down to fewer than ten people on Sunday morning. Several of them were residents of an elders' housing complex next door, and they were coming to St. Luke's because some parishioners had gone visiting

there years before. And then, out of the blue, a Filipino immigrant came to church. She was a member of the Philippine Episcopal Church, and she was looking for a church home in Nevada. Within a few weeks, she had brought 50 more of her friends and relatives! This congregation continues to reach out to and welcome its neighbors. What the new members struggle with is this crazy and unfamiliar way of being church. They are learning about leadership and taking responsibility for discerning the direction of this congregation, in ways that weren't encouraged at home. The senior warden asked several times initially why we don't pay the priest, but he's beginning to understand that the congregation is expected to be responsible for its life and ministry. This congregation is learning to exercise its own authority, and it is growing up into the full stature of Christ as well.

The shift in leadership style from a more traditional rector-led model to community ministry also brings challenges. The big church in Reno saw its rector of nearly 33 years retire last spring. His leadership style did not change much over those 33 years. But in his last year, he encouraged a worship committee to form, and that body has begun to make changes to liturgical practice. I heard a couple of weeks ago that the interim rector stood up on his second or third Sunday and pointed to a piece of furniture that had been moved, and reminded everybody that he hadn't done it, the worship committee had, after consultation with the vestry and with him. That congregation has begun to take responsibility for its common life in new and exciting ways. They are beginning to live into their baptismal authority.

Most of our struggles in the church have to do with authority, whether the decisions of a worship committee, a rector, bishop, or the General Convention. Whose will is being discerned, and whose will is being implemented? Our baptismal vocation is to seek the will of God, and to use every gift we've been given to carry out God's mission.

Community ministry is at its most vital when all the orders of ministry are functioning as they were baptized and ordained to do – each providing leadership in some sphere of life: baptized Christians who are reconciling the world on the playground, in the grocery store and in the state legislature; deacons who are nagging the rest of us to pay attention to the hungry people on our doorstep; priests who are gathering the faithful at God's table to be fed for the daily round; and bishops who continue to call us back to the central marks of following Jesus. Community ministry recognizes that none of these people is the head of the church – we already have a head in Jesus, and our *koinonia*, our common fellowship, and our mission, come from God through him.

God's dream of shalom – the Reign of God – includes all of humanity and all of creation. Each one of us is offered a part in turning that dream into reality. The question is will we say yes, will we take our part, and will we challenge the people around us to say yes to their invitations? Can we be vulnerable enough to let our zeal burn brightly?

Give thanks for the gifts with which each of us has been created. Give thanks for the call of baptism. Give thanks for God's dream that leads us out of our narrow self-interest. Give thanks, and let's get busy living that dream of God.

Shalom, my friends, shalom.