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Becoming Grace

BY DEBORAH JOHANSEN HARRIS AND FRANCES A. HILLS AS TOLD
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Small churches have always had an important place in the Episcopal Church. They create and sustain faith communities in rural villages and inner cities. They are intimate and many have existed for generations.

Until now.

By the end of the 20th century, the economy took a downward turn. Mills, long since closed, never reopened. Large corporations moved out of the country for cheaper labor, and the high-tech bubble burst. New England—and Western Massachusetts in particular—were hit hard.

Recognizing that something needed to change, the Diocese of Western Massachusetts convened the Berkshire Summit, inviting congregations to participate in a visioning exercise. Attendees were asked to imagine there

was no Episcopal Church in their community. And, if given x amount of resources (time, talent, and treasure), how might you go about planting an Episcopal Church?

Following the Summit, some participating churches created pathways to renewal; some discerned the call to dissolve and intentionally “ended well.” What follows is the story of how two Berkshire County congregations – one who started the process voluntarily and another for which it took a wall falling down – found each other and became Grace.

St. James' Great Barrington

In July 2008, a stone wall collapsed at St. James' Church in Great Barrington. Access to the building was forbidden; like the Israelites fleeing Egypt, the congregation needed to find a new home. Immediately.

The laity rose to the challenge. The senior warden, an executive at the local hospital, arranged for use of their conference room for worship as well as for vestry and committee meetings. Others began to look for a larger space for Sunday worship, quickly settling on Crissey Farm, a local reception hall. Volunteers came forward to set up and break down the worship space each Sunday morning.

The executive committee and vestry quickly began to deal with the aftermath of the collapse. "With no handbook to follow, the planning and engineering skills of the lay leadership team were invaluable as we charted a course for the future, learning to trust that God would walk with us," said Francie Hills, rector of St. James, Great Barrington.

"The process was daunting," continued Francie. "There were meetings with engineers, insurance appraisers, architects, and various inspectors. Decisions needed to be made about next steps. We looked to our diocese for support and guidance. What were our options? Were they realistic?"

The vestry drew on the skills learned through the Diocese's Partnership for a Missional Church initiative. Modeled after Luther Seminary's

Vibrant Congregations Project. Partnership for a Missional Church invites groups of congregations to discover God's specific call for them to move beyond doing mission to being missional in attitude, vision, and action. With its focus on listening to scripture as well as the people in the congregation and the community, congregations develop greater capacity for spiritual discernment of where they are, who they are, what God is doing in their midst, how God is sending them, and to whom God is sending them.

Three committees were set up to explore three scenarios:

- Restore the building
- Take down the building and rebuild
- Sell and do something else

"Our committees followed a careful process, gathering input from both parishioners and experts," shared Hills. "Reports were made and shared with the congregation. Almost a year after the wall fell, the congregation was ready to make a decision about the way forward."

The night before the vote, Francie received a call identifying a potential buyer for the property.

The vote was taken, with the congregation almost evenly split between all three options. The vestry made the decision to sell.

A Garden Grows...

As the vestry negotiated the practical aspects related to the wall falling in, the congregation continued to listen for what God was calling them to do. As Advent 2008 approached, a parishioner affiliated with a local farm center invited the children to the farm to make Advent wreaths to deliver to people who were homebound. As the children worked on their wreaths, one of them observed "Wouldn't it be great if we had a garden to feed hungry people?" After a conversation with the farm's owners, 1/3 of an acre was set aside and Gideon's Garden was born.

Five years later, the garden has grown to 3+ acres, with children from the across the area tending it. Teenagers who started farming as children serve as supervisors, people unaffiliated with the church drop by to help tend the crops. A bench offers a place for quiet contemplation and students and staff from a local school for troubled youth came and worked in the garden, taking what they learned to set up a garden of their own.

On Sundays, the shared stories from the garden – mixed in with the warden’s reports on the building situation – helped the congregation stay focused on their mission and ministry.

St. George’s, Lee

For the past 10 or more years, the people of St. George’s, Lee pondered their long-term future. The area was not growing, and the large majority of town residents were Roman Catholic. In 2006, they called the Donna J. Trebilcox as their rector to help them either thrive or close with dignity.

After many parish meetings which helped solidify their sense of being as church people – or, put another way, what they as individuals could bring to the life of a parish - they discerned a third alternative: identify vital ministries, such as the Lee Pantry, that they wished to pursue and look for other Episcopal congregations with similar vision that they might join with.

By the late fall of 2010 St. George’s had a buyer for their building and their priest accepted another call. They had also discerned that St. James was a congregation with a similar vision and reached out to their leadership. Francie shared, “They asked if they could come and ‘hang out’

with us at St. James.”

In Advent 2010, the two homeless congregations began worshipping together at Crissey Farm, with parishioners from St. George’s quickly invited to participate in the Rota, altar guild, and hosting coffee hour. Both congregations continued the community ministries that were so important to both.

Grace is Born

In January 2011, Frances A. Hills, St. James’ rector, also became the vicar of St. George’s. Soon after, both congregations discerned that they were of kindred spirit and wanted to be together in mission and ministry. In 2012 they legally consolidated, and on January 1, 2013, began operating as a new parish: Grace Church, An Episcopal Community in the Southern Berkshires.

“We did not want a combined name when the churches consolidated,” explained Francie, now rector of the new parish. “We chose a new name that reflected our having been surrounded by grace on every side through this entire process.”

In that metamorphosis, members of Grace church go out into the community as one parish with their life-giving missions, includ-

ing Lee Pantry, People’s Pantry, and Gideon’s Garden.

Frances Hill is the rector of Grace Church, an Episcopal Community in the Southern Berkshires.

Deborah Johansen Harris is the communications director and missionary for the Diocese of Western Massachusetts.

Resources

- Grace Church <http://www.graceberkshires.org>
- Partners for Sacred Spaces <http://www.sacredplaces.org>
- Partnership for a Missional Church http://www.churchinnovations.org/01_services/pmc.html
- Luther Seminary Vibrant Congregations Project <http://www.luthersem.edu/vcp/default.aspx?m=3734>
- Strategic Planning for Your Church <http://www.ecfvp.org/tools/strategic-planning-for-your-church/>
- “The Difference Between Mission and Vision” by Linda Buskirk, (ECF Vital Practices Vital Post) <http://www.ecfvp.org/posts/the-difference-between-mission-and-vision/>

Editor's Letter

Growing up, July and August meant a change of routine: lazy days to bike, swim, and read, and summer camp. In my neighborhood all the kids played outside after dinner; at dusk Mrs. Manghis would ring the bell hanging by her back door and we'd all head home.

As an adult I try to keep a sense of summer, spending as much time outdoors as possible, even during the work week: Taking advantage of longer days to get outside after dinner. Eating lunch on the patio. Sitting on my porch to read, think, or daydream.

Summer can also be a time for evaluation, planning, and reflection. At the Episcopal Church Foundation's annual staff convocation, Sally Skardon, ECF board chair, challenged us to think about these questions:

Why am I proud to be an Episcopalian? How am I hopeful? What can I do to help the church grow?

These questions are essential to the vision of ECF Vital Practices and the Episcopal Church Foundation. Across our church,

congregations wrestle with questions of viability and struggle to break old patterns, recognizing the need for change.

Readers tell us:

- "I need to learn more about [how] to lead my congregation in the process of envisioning our future and making plans to have the future we believe God wants for/from us."
- "We are not forward thinking, just dealing with current problems."
- "It has been difficult to make the time to envision where we need to be heading due to short term financial concerns. We must break out of this and focus forward."
- "Relative to vision and planning (harder) we spent too much time organizing and doing (easier.)"

These comments reflect the growing awareness that often our current organizational and financial structures presume social norms that no longer exist, harkening back to a time when for many

church membership and attendance were central to family life.

So, how might we help congregational leaders "break out of this and focus forward?"

This month and next we'll share stories from congregations or dioceses who have asked themselves some variation of Sally's three questions. Some came to the visioning process out of necessity, others through the efforts of leaders willing to take on the challenge of meaningful change. Here are their stories:

- Grace Episcopal Church in the Diocese of Western Massachusetts rose from two congregations that started their visioning and planning process in two very different places. For one, a wall fell down in the church; for the other, the recognition that 'business as usual' would be the death of their parish. Deborah Johansen Harris and Frances Hills share details of this story in "Becoming Grace."
- Unlike other faith traditions, the Episcopal Church is not known as a denomination

where members talk easily – or publicly – about their faith. “Sharing Faith Dinners” by Luke Blount and Laura Shaver describes what can happen when groups of Episcopalians gather to talk about their faith.

- In “God’s Gift of Chaos,” Demi Prentiss shares how embracing the messiness of the unknown can help a congregation become unstuck from the things that prevent meaningful change from occurring.

- For many churches, the one church one priest model is no longer possible, creating opportunities for different models of leadership. In “Equal Partners,” Donald Romanik shares a story of a congregation – and a diocese – committed to the development of healthy and effective lay clergy partnerships to build up the Body of Christ in our changing world.

- Like many small churches, Christ Episcopal Church in Biddeford, Maine had seen its resources rise and fall with the

economic tide of the community. Shirley Bowen’s “Seeds of Hope” shares how this congregation multiplied their ability to serve Christ after deciding to disband as a parish. (Also in Spanish)

- “Shattering the Status Quo” by Todd Ousley challenges congregational leaders to break out of familiar patterns by entering into an exodus experience as a way to open themselves to get ‘Egypt’ out of their systems. (Also in Spanish)

- Across our church, congregations are looking around their neighborhoods with new eyes and discovering there is much for us to learn about our neighbors. In “Expanding Our Understanding,” Sam Dessórdi Leite offers resources to help non-Latinos answer the question: Who are Latinos?

Following each article is a list of resources offering additional information and/or practical tools.

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Vestry Papers with you I invite you to consider subscribing to *ECF Vital Practices* and *Vestry Papers*. Visit www.ecfvp.org and click on Register, located on the upper right corner of the page. Complete the registration form to have *Vestry Papers* and *ECF Vital Practices* content delivered twice a month to your email inbox.

Faithfully,

Nancy

Nancy Davidge

PS: To make it easier to find the resources offered through *ECF Vital Practices*, please consider adding a link to ECF Vital Practices to your website. Here’s how: Using your websites ‘add a link’ tool, insert our full URL – <http://www.ecfvp.org/>.

PPS: Do you live in an area with limited Internet access? If you have a smart phone, consider browsing ECF Vital Practices from your mobile device; the site has been optimized for smart phones which makes it easier to search for content.

Sharing Faith Dinners

BY LUKE BLOUNT AND LAURA SHAVER

Imagine thousands of Episcopalians gathering, in small groups, at the same moment, to share stories of their faith.

People in the dioceses of Texas and West Texas can attest to the power of that experience. On May 16, 2013, more than 3500 members of churches in both dioceses gathered in homes, in groups of eight to 12, to share a meal and engage in a faith conversation.

Sharing Faith began in the Diocese of Texas in 2012, fashioned after Interfaith Ministries' Amazing Faith Dinners in Houston, where people of different faiths gather for a simple meal and answer questions about their faith journeys. The Diocese of West Texas joined this year and there has been interest from the Diocese of Toronto for next year's event.

When St. Francis by the Lake in Canyon Lake decided to participate in the Sharing Faith Dinner there were some uncertainties. "How is this going to work?" and "We're not sure we want to do this." So the vestry decided to model a dinner conversation in lieu of a sermon one Sunday in April.

The vestry set up chairs in the front of the nave, sat down and answered questions from a prepared set of cards that are provided for at the dinner. The congregation heard the questions and listened as each vestry member delivered a personal response.

David Chalk, rector of St. Francis, said that the pre-event went "very well." One church member told him, "You should have warned us there would be tears this morning." Chalk said, "We had a visitor that Sunday who stood up and told us she had not been to church in five years after her son was killed by a drunk driver. She said she'd never seen anything like this in church, but on hearing our conversation, she found the courage she needed to return to church." This was the visitor's first time to attend St. Francis, and she has met with Chalk and the vestry and plans to join their community.

Held on the Thursday evening before Pentecost Sunday, when the Holy Spirit was given to God's people, the Sharing Faith Dinners are modeled as a time for participants to answer how the Holy Spirit has

impacted their lives; how faith has made a difference in their lives. Questions are fashioned to help people articulate their experiences in a thoughtful way, while others listen without interruption.

At an event in southwest Houston, parishioners of Grace Episcopal Church gathered at the Rev. Gena Davis' home. Ten participants shared a dinner of Mexican food and then gathered in the living room to share their stories.

Sandy McKneely was relatively new at Grace when she agreed to take part in the dinner.

"I'm a pretty assertive person, so I don't know if every newcomer who had been to church two times would have the courage to sign up and go to somebody's house that you hardly know. But for me--I am at a point in my life where I am needing friendships in the faith community, and I thought that would be a good way to start to make some friendships," McKneely said.

Participants shared stories of great joy and pain, moments when they questioned their faith, and

moments when they were affirmed in their beliefs. Friends shared tears and tales as they learned about each other in a new, deeper way.

“On Saturday night before I went to bed, I was thinking about going to Grace the next morning. I was thinking about seeing those people and I knew their names,” McNeely said. “That was an indicator to me that I made some connections, and it certainly makes going back more comfortable. I learned that Grace is a place that I want to return to.”

At Christ Episcopal Church, San Antonio, a group of young adults and College Missioner, Allie Melancon, attended and took some college students from other denominations. Melancon said what they took away the most is the determination to gather again and not wait for the church to say, “Okay, it’s time to Share Faith again.”

While most dinners were held in homes, several churches adapted the dinners to fit their congregations’ needs. Several times a year, St. Andrew’s in Pearland, south of Houston, holds church in different venues over the weekend. They did the same with Sharing Faith, adapting special questions for children and holding family style Sharing Faith Dinners at dif-

ferent times Friday, Saturday, and Sunday. Children were even given time to create a response to questions through drawing pictures.

In the small East Texas town of Henderson, young children came to St. Matthew’s Episcopal Church in their pajamas, were fed dinner, and had a program of their own while their parents participated in a Sharing Faith Dinner in the parish hall. The Rev. Patsy Barnham said it was important to make it possible for young families to participate and allowing kids to come “ready for bed” was helpful to her congregation.

In homes and churches, and other creative places, Episcopalians across Texas learned a great deal about each other as well as themselves through the simple act of sharing a meal and sharing their faith.

The Sharing Faith Dinners tradition will continue to grow in Texas and beyond. Visit <http://www.epicenter.org/sharingfaith/> to learn more about the program. Or contact Carol Barnwell at cbarnwell@epicenter.org.

Luke Blount is a staff writer and communications specialist in the Diocese of Texas; **Laura Shaver** is the communications officer in the Diocese of West Texas.

This article is adapted from “Sharing Faith Dinners Bring Texas Episcopalians Closer Together” published May 21, 2013 by the Episcopal Diocese of Texas.

Resources

- Global Faith in Action Interfaith Dinners <http://globalfaithinaction.org/the-amazing-faiths-dinner-dialogue-project/>
- Renewal Works: An Episcopal Planning Tool to Help Your Church Advance Spiritual Growth (Forward Movement, 2013) <http://renewalworks.org/>
- Sharing Faith Dinners Overview and Resources <http://www.epicenter.org/sharingfaith/>
- Sharing Faith Dinners Q&A http://aa86e41e7d951355383b-cb342165bfeaa4f2927aec8e5d-7de41f.r23.cf2.rackcdn.com/uploaded/q/0e499763_questions-and-answers-sharing-faith.pdf
- To order Sharing Faith Dinner Questions, contact Carol Barnwell at cbarnwell@epicenter.org

[Accepting] God's Gift of Chaos

BY DEMI PRENTISS

For the last four years – and perhaps for quite some time to come – my diocese [Fort Worth] has lived in the midst of chaotic change. After the schismatic departure of a bishop, along with a number of clergy and congregations, we embarked on the journey of re-organizing. Four years ago, the diocesan office had only two desks, two chairs, and two computers with Microsoft Office – no lists, no directories, no files, and few of the traditional organizations and processes in place. The great gift of this challenge has been the opportunity to re-think and re-vision the role of a diocesan office. With restricted resources and personnel, we focus on supporting the work of our congregations. We'll be years learning the lessons that this transition has to offer.

Not every situation is as extreme as the one my diocese is currently facing. But in spite of most congregations' desire to do all things "decent and in order," congregational leaders are often faced with what seems like chaos. Accepting and working within the inherent messiness of our church systems is one way of recognizing our call

to be co-creators with God. After all, the God we worship chose to use chaos as the raw material for the entire universe.

Usually, in spite of God's call, the leap from stuckness into chaos isn't what we'd choose to do. A number of years ago, the news that my large downtown congregation would be forced to gut and remodel our 65,000-square-foot, four-story "parish house" was hardly welcome. The church had occupied, used, and crammed keepsakes into that space for more than 70 years. Except for traditional worship, practically every function of the congregation used that building – offices, kitchen, social functions, classrooms, nursery, library, youth room, alternative worship, vesting areas, choir rehearsal and music storage, archives, you name it.

With care and wisdom, our rector grounded us firmly in our history as we planned and envisioned a future together, sharing the dream of a re-created building at the heart of our parish life. The original builders had laid the cornerstone of the parish house not long before the start of the Great

Depression. Yet they had persevered through financial hardship, creating the building that we were now working to renovate. So we understood ourselves as standing on the shoulders of giants, and we were inspired by their example.

Fortunately, we found relatively nearby space to rent – but only 15,000 square feet total. And not all in one location! Months were spent planning for vacating the building, re-establishing our congregation's work in temporary quarters, and funding the renovation. And despite our hard work and forward thinking, we ran into lots of unexpected bumps along the way. More than two years later, we celebrated the opening of a beautiful re-incarnation of the old building.

Often, we feared the chaos would overwhelm us. But looking back on the experience, I see it as a time of challenge, growth, and creativity that brought out new strengths in our congregation. We learned lessons that equipped us for future adventures in following the leading of the Spirit:

We only needed to focus on a

few steps at a time. Trying to envision the entire process and every single detail all at the same time gave us vertigo. There was too much complexity – and a wealth of willing, smart leaders and able workers who were committed to making the many parts of the process work together.

We had been hanging on to way too much stuff. It was simply astounding how many unused or under-utilized “treasures” could be repurposed, given away, sold, or thrown in the trash. Sure, we stored some things during the reconstruction. But not nearly as much as we passed along.

We could invent more than one way to do things well. Our alternative service moved to a new location and discovered that the new space called for new solutions. The congregation engaged their imaginations and learned a grace-filled flexibility, enriching the worship experience both in their temporary space and when they returned to their newly refurbished quarters.

We were able to rise to the challenge. Our temporary nursery and children’s classrooms were located across a downtown park from our church building. To help people find the way, we created an “umbrella brigade” who carried distinctive golf umbrellas rain

or shine so they could be spotted easily. These guides helped families find the way. And in the process, they became friendly features of the downtown scene, offering directions to tourists. And always welcoming the people they encountered to join us – for class, for church, and for fellowship.

We were unaware of all the gifts we had among us. Those children’s classrooms were in the basement of an office building – a really daunting environment. This changed when a gifted artist stepped forward to transform the sterile windowless walls with landscapes and forests and castles that welcomed children and their parents.

We were enriched by connecting with our neighbors. Since we couldn’t accommodate all our activities on our one downtown block, we had to interact on a daily basis with all sorts of people in the neighborhood – street people and office workers, vendors and landlords, and tourists.

We grew in generosity and hospitality. Like a big family in a small house, we had to learn how to share our limited spaces. We expanded our ideas about welcoming, especially as we developed our neighborhood connections.

Not everyone in the church was comfortable with the need to make changes. We lost some in terms of attendance, though not as many as we had feared. Some of our traditional events had to go on hiatus; many of them were re-established with renewed energy. We struggled to deal with competing needs and visions. And it wasn’t easy. There was lots of hard work, especially in learning to be far-sighted and encouraging to one another.

Like many of the challenges life brings our way, chaos is often a gift. It calls the question, forcing us to make intentional decisions about what to keep and what to discard. It tests our commitments and our faith that, “bidden or unbidden, God is present.” It compels us to connect with community, with fellow pilgrims on the way. And it invites us into new creation, working in partnership with the Creator of all.

***Demi Prentiss** is ministry developer for the Episcopal Diocese of Fort Worth. For 25 years she has worked in national, diocesan, and congregational settings equipping and supporting God’s people as they become intentional partners in God’s dream for the world. She lives with her husband and two dogs in Denton, Texas.*

Resources

- Diana Butler Bass, *Christianity After Religion*, (Harper Collins, 2013) <http://www.cokesbury.com/forms/ProductDetail.aspx?pid=1131387&vsl=0001> and a conversation with the author about this book <http://www.christiancentury.org/blogs/archive/2012-11/diana-butler-bass-christianity-after-religion>
- Eugene H. Peterson, *Christ Plays in Ten Thousand Places: A Conversation in Spiritual Theology* (Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2005) <http://www.eerdmans.com/Products/6297/christ-plays-in-ten-thousand-places.aspx>
- *Congregational Seasons: a Resource for Transitions* (a great source for stories of congregations negotiating change) <https://www.facebook.com/>
- “Experimenting” by Jeremiah Sierra (ECF Vital Practices Vital Post) <http://www.ecfvp.org/posts/experimenting/>
- Phyllis Tickle, *The Great Emergence* (BakerBooks, 2008) http://books.google.com/books/about/The_Great_Emergence
- Interview with Phyllis Tickle on The Great Emergence <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LY83MF2HZcU> publications.com
- Otto Scharmer, *Theory U: Leading from the Future as it Emerges* <http://www.ottoscharmer.com/publications/summaries.php>
- “The Essence of Theory U and Presencing” a YouTube video featuring Otto Scharmer <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7lUyGBBcdJY>
- From Bp. Steven Charleston – June 13, 2013 - “Diversity, change and imagination. These were three words that came to mind as I meditated on the nature of the God I have observed over all these many years. God’s creation sings of diversity. That creation is constantly changing. To have made it so took boundless imagination. How ironic then that these three qualities are often the ones religions have the most difficulty embracing. We can fear diversity. We impede change. We struggle to allow people to think. Let us be more like the One we worship: welcoming, evolving, ever open to a new idea.” <http://www.facebook.com/l/RAQGXLQjAQHsW8etcfFGw3rOkPm14vt8C-iF5ew4zCb6qg/www.redmoon->

Equal Partners

BY DONALD V. ROMANIK

The growing trend of part time rectors or priests-in-charge presents unique challenges and opportunities for lay leadership. Over the ages, the institutional church has elevated if not inflated the original roles and responsibilities of the early followers of Jesus, including the apostles themselves. During the first three centuries, the Gospel was spread, the Good News proclaimed, and the Church grew, due to the work of lay men and women who responded to Jesus' call to "come follow me."

Do these stories from our past, hold the key to our future?

Recently, I had the pleasure of attending a Celebration of a New Ministry at Christ Church in Exeter, New Hampshire. I've attended many of these services before and, no matter what nomenclature is used or how hard the organizers try, these events inevitably become celebrations of the new priest (usually a rector) and the formal institution of his/her new ordained ministry. They are, in essence, ordinations redux. No too long ago, I was even told that the reason why a particular service of this nature was so spectacular was because the focal

point of the entire liturgy was on the new rector especially as he or she knelt in the middle of the church during his/her dedication prayer.

The service in Exeter, NH was very different. It was truly a celebration of a new ministry of the entire community of faith during a significant transition time of the arrival of a new rector.

The words of the service were rich, inspiring, and appropriate. The bishop instructed members of the congregation that together with their rector they were called to restore all people to unity with God and each other in Christ. Significantly, he reminded us that through our baptism we were fully empowered and authorized "to exercise ministry in Christ's name, with mutual affection and respect, within the parish, in the Diocese of New Hampshire, and in the wider community." He also invited the community to join their rector in prayer, in discerning a vision for the parish, and in calling forth the leadership, resources, and talents to carry out that vision. And this was just the beginning of the service.

The entire liturgy, including the bishop's sermon, continued this theme of the ministry of all the baptized and the role of the entire faith community, in partnership with the rector, to help bring about the kingdom of God in a place called Exeter.

Not that the new rector was ignored, nor should he have been. Bishop Hirschfeld appropriately recognized the skills, talents and important role of Mark Pendleton and officially welcomed Mark and his family to the diocese. After all, it was a special day for Mark as it was for the entire parish community. But it wasn't just all about the priest.

The Diocese of New Hampshire clearly gets it and not only in their liturgy and words. Starting with the bishop, the entire diocese practices what it preaches and helps foster, nurture, and develop healthy and effective lay/clergy partnerships which are so essential to build up the Body of Christ in a changing world.

I know that some people will say that this nonclergy centric model may work well in a small diocese

diocese like New Hampshire but may not be appropriate in larger, more urbanized, and diverse dioceses in the church. Some Episcopalians even say that clergy need to lead and lay people need to follow. Nonsense! The only way we can revitalize and grow the Episcopal Church in dioceses and congregation both large and small is to develop and implement ministry models that focus on lay/clergy partnerships. And this partnership model is not just about institutional survival; it's about the Gospel. Empowered and inspired lay and clergy leadership teams are absolutely critical to bringing the Good News of Jesus to a divided, confused, and broken world.

While ECF has always been involved in lay leadership development, we have made a deliberate, mission-based decision to focus our energy and resources on helping the church develop, nurture, and implement effective lay/clergy partnerships. Stay tuned as we begin to develop resources, tools, and programs to help make this model of ministry more normative throughout the entire Church. Remember, it's not just about the priest, as important as he/she may be. It's really about the entire faith community as it discerns what God is calling us to do in a particular time and place.

Donald V. Romanik is president of the Episcopal Church Foundation. He is a strong advocate and proponent of lay leadership and the ministry of all the baptized and frequently writes and speaks on topics relating to leadership and resource development for Episcopal communities of faith.

Resources

- *Beyond the Baptismal Covenant: Transformational Leadership for the Episcopal Church in the 21st Century* <http://www.episcopal-foundation.org/tools-and-programs/leadership-tools/transformational-lay-leadership>
- Episcopal Church Foundation Leadership Resources <http://www.episcopalfoundation.org/tools-and-programs/leadership-tools>
- Education for Ministry <http://www.sewanee.edu/EFM/>
- Leadership Development Initiative <http://diomassleads.org>
- "Living Into Our Ministries" by Samuel Magill <http://www.ecfvp.org/tools/living-into-our-ministries/>

Resources

- *Becoming the Transformative Church: Beyond Sacred Cows Fantasies and Fears*, Church Publishing Inc Morehouse Book (Aug. 2013)
- Diocese of Lexington's Network for Pastoral Leadership and Healthy Congregations <http://diolex.org/?s=Holy+Conversations>
- Education for Ministry <http://www.sewanee.edu/EFM/>
- "Entrenched" by Miguel Angel Escobar <http://www.ecfvp.org/posts/entrenched/>
- Liturgy of Healing and Reconciliation, Episcopal Diocese of Lexington <http://www.ecfvp.org/tools/a-ritual-of-reconciliation/>
- "Making Room" by Nancy Davidge <http://www.ecfvp.org/posts/making-room/>

Seeds of Hope

BY SHIRLEY BOWEN

Nota - Este artículo es disponible en español

“Our backs are to the wall. We’ve got to start fighting if we are going to hold on to our church.” The year was 1958 and the conversation was about money. For years the congregation had been trying to recover from the closing of the textile mills and the departure of the workforce, many of whom were parishioners.

The history of Christ Episcopal Church in Biddeford, Maine tells the story of how this church, organized in 1869 to meet the spiritual needs of mill workers from England, developed into a working class faith community committed to feeding all aspects of the lives of Biddeford residents. This history shares the church’s commitment to the community and choices made, through periods of growth and decline and frequent financial struggle.

In 2008, the congregation of Christ Episcopal Church in Biddeford decided to let go. And in letting go, they were reborn – intentionally transforming themselves from a house of worship to a Jubilee Center – and discovering that, as Seeds of Hope they were now sharing God’s presence and abiding love

with so many more people than they ever would have as Christ Church.

Here is our story:

At the end of 2006, the Christ Church congregation needed to make a decision. Having a three quarter time rector was becoming impossible to support; they cut the position to half time and were then in need of a new priest.

As the new priest-in-charge, called in 2007, it was clear that the congregation was at a low point. After several months together, conversations began happening in earnest as to the future of the parish. Two things became clear. First, because most of the people served by the parish are poor, working class, or on fixed incomes, the size of the congregation could triple, but it would have little effect on the budget. Second, residing in one of the poorest sections of the city illuminated how much desperate unmet need surrounded the tiny church.

For many years there have been conversations among congregations in Southern Maine regarding collaborations, mergers, and the

like. Each time, the conversation ended with no substantive change. This time, the conversation focused not on our survival, but on our ministry in our neighborhood and the community. From the very beginning, it felt different.

Our parish hall was ‘home’ to a number of community organizations. Each of these groups served the poor in Biddeford and, like us, wondered how the need could ever be met. We gathered and talked. What services were being offered? Where were there overlaps? Where were the gaps? How might we work together to better serve our community?

With this collective insight, supported by a sister parish, our 15 congregants came to understand that they were articulating a Jubilee Ministry mission – serving those in need and trying to help break those things which kept people in need.

This was a critical moment in the life of the parish. With an endowment already in place, the parish could have decided to reduce the priest-in-charge position to an even smaller per-

centage and continue for a very long time. Or, the parish could listen to the Baptismal Covenant, take the risk of expending all its endowed income on serving others, and possibly eventually close or become something very different. We chose the latter, and have never once looked back in sorrow. A new kind of mission was born:

"The Seeds of Hope Neighborhood Center offers hospitality and support to all those who pass through our doors. The collection of our efforts strives to offer hope to those who are struggling, care for those in need, advocacy for those who have been silenced, companionship for those who are alone, and compassionate love for all.

"As a Jubilee Center we will partner with poor and oppressed people, wherever they are found, in the spirit of mercy and justice - to meet basic human needs and to build a just society."

With support from the Diocese, over the course of the next five years the Seeds of Hope Neighborhood (Jubilee) Center has continued to expand its conversations into the community, including the neighbors served, the city of Biddeford, multiple social service organizations, sister churches in surrounding communities, community and civic

organizations, the local University and interested individuals. It has grown from being open two days/week and serving breakfast to 10-15 people a day, to:

- Being open four days/week serving breakfast and lunch to 70-100 people a day
- Offering free clothing and a staffed Career Resource Center - working to help people seek living-wage employment
- Serving as a warming and cooling center in the city of Biddeford
- Serving as a hub for neighborhood meetings and community engagement
- Being a regular referral site for many of the local social service organizations who serve those in the city that need a place to feel safe, accepted, and welcomed
- Serving as a resource in the community to assist with facilitating difficult conversations and encouraging collaborative partnerships helping to care for families and victims of violent crime, fire and other tragedies
- Offering sacramental opportunities to those who have no

parish home and/or who cannot afford funerals fees, or who desire to experience the blessed gifts of communion and reconciliation in a safe environment.

Operating as a non-sectarian organization, all services are available for everyone. A balance has been struck between creating a climate that is welcoming to everyone, regardless of his or her background, including religious beliefs, and being responsive to those who are seeking spiritual support. And, although the worship services at Christ Church have been suspended, pastoral care, occasional services, and reconciling love permeates the Center. All of the programming, volunteer recruitment and training, outreach, and collaborations are grounded in the Baptismal Covenant of the Episcopal Church. The Community Guidelines and the ways in which they are implemented are based on a very basic principle: everyone who walks through the doors is a precious child of God. This principle requires two components: everyone deserves to be treated as such, and has a responsibility to treat others the same.

This work is counter-cultural for those who are served at Seeds of Hope, many of whom live with violence in all its forms on a daily

basis. Communication can often be narrowly defined by profanity, threats, or silent submission. The work is daily acknowledging the dignity of every individual and offering compassion and kindness. It is about having high expectations for behavior and offering, sometimes for the first-time, loving boundaries and the accompanying caring environment. The work is giving the opportunity to people who don't know God but know the staff and volunteers of the Center, to know God because of being cared for at the Center.

The spirit of Christ is alive at the Seeds of Hope Neighborhood Center. The holy conversations over the past six years have given more visibility to God's presence and love as manifested in the work of Seeds of Hope than the small parish could have done on its own. Former members of the parish have transferred to a parish in a neighboring community, but their hearts continue to hold Christ Church/Seeds of Hope in prayer. And our hope is that in time we will once again foster a regular worshiping community, although likely in a different form than Christ Church had been. When caring for God's people is the foundation of the conversation in our communities, truly, the listening and sharing are holy.

The Rev. Shirley Bowen is the Executive Director/Chaplain at Seeds of Hope, and helped bring the Jubilee Center into being in 2008. She has served as parish priest at Christ Church from 2007 – 2012, and also served as the Campus Missioner for the Diocese of Maine.

Resources

- Christ Church Biddeford <http://www.christchurchbiddeford.org/history.html>
- Leadership Development Initiative <http://diomassleads.org/about-ldi/>
- "Molting Out Of Old Shells" a video by Tom Brackett <http://www.ecfvp.org/tools/molting-our-of-our-old-shells/>
- Seeds of Hope <http://seedsof-hope4me.org/about.php>
- Strategic Planning for Your Church, Episcopal Church Foundation <http://www.ecfvp.org/tools/strategic-planning-for-your-church/>
- "The Difference Between Mission and Vision" by Linda Buskirk, ECF Vital Practices Vital Post <http://www.ecfvp.org/posts/the-difference-between-mission-and-vision/>

Shattering the Status Quo

BY TODD OUSLEY

Nota - Este artículo es disponible en español

The closure of Wurtsmith Airforce Base changed everything.

St. John's Episcopal and Hope Lutheran both had a long and proud history of self-sufficiency, full-time clergy, vibrant Sunday Schools, and fierce devotion to their faith. The 1993 closure of Wurtsmith Air Force Base signaled the beginning of the end for congregational life as they knew it.

Faced with a devastating economic loss and dramatic population loss and realignment, both congregations fought separate but parallel battles to maintain life as they knew it. In 2002, they began to informally share clergy while maintaining separate worship spaces. A few years later, worship was consolidated at St. John's while Hope became a community outreach center. Ultimately, economic reality forced a consolidation of all ministries into one building for the organically, if not canonically, merged Episcopal-Lutheran congregation.

Firmly and graciously resisting diocesan and synodical visions for their combined future, the people who are Hope-St. John's Parish

in Oscoda, Michigan, settled into congregational life with cautious regard for one another, enthusiasm for shared worship and outreach ministries, and tenacious guarding of such sacred spaces as the kitchen and all its contents! Clearly, if the Episcopalians owned the building, the women's guild would exercise jurisdictional control! All that changed the night the kitchen cabinets mysteriously detached from the walls, shattering the Episcopal dishes and glasses.

What had never been fully accomplished by diocesan or synodical consultation, vestry or parish council initiative, or privately brokered agreement was made real and true through the power of the unexpected. Struggling for years to claim a new and united identity, the simple acts of cleaning-up the mess, selecting and installing new cabinets, and shopping together for new dishes, jolted the "merged" congregation into finally "gathering around one table." Finally, Hope-St. John's had found the elusive answer to the question hanging in their midst: Who are we? We are one.

Time in the Wilderness

Congregational leaders (and diocesan officials!) seem to prefer tightly organized, predictably executed, linear processes for visioning and planning. While occasionally successful, all too often the results restrict rather than empower and quickly get filed away to never be seen again or get hidden in plain sight by printing the vision statement on all publications, quickly becoming unheeded background noise. The experience of Hope-St. John's is a vital reminder of the need for vision and planning that is open to the lived realities in our midst and an openness to the unexpected winds of the Spirit.

The story of Hope-St. John's is a holy narrative of exodus --- a wandering in the wilderness for a period of time while getting Egypt (Episcopal or Lutheran prejudices, personal agendas, territoriality, etc.) out of their systems. Meanwhile, their wandering produced moments of clarity and success coupled with times of distress and confusion. All the while, they went about the rhythms of their corporate life looking for pillars of cloud by day and pillars of fire by night --- seeking God's guidance in manifestations of the Spirit rather

than a tightly organized strategic plan.

Being Nimble

Vestries and other congregational leaders embarking upon strategic visioning and planning processes can no longer afford to be rigidly tied to a carefully crafted plan with a three or five year horizon. Today's leaders must remain nimble and visionary, able to discern the signs of the times and to act with dispatch when opportunities arise. Few congregations can afford a plan that does not make space for the surprising signs of the Spirit's presence often encountered as we journey to become the people God has called us to be.

A few years ago, I began using imagery from the exodus from Egypt in visioning retreats with vestries and governing bodies. Specifically, I focused on the guidance that Moses and the Israelites received from pillars of cloud by day and pillars of cloud by night --- signs of God's holy presence and "markers" guiding the people forward in their journey to the Promised Land. This imagery invites leaders to move beyond maps with rigidly prescribed routes and to look imaginatively toward God's beckoning toward a future which may not lie in a straight line ahead --- it may even take a bit of wandering in the wil-

derness to get there.

Seven Habits for Successful Journeys

A helpful tool along this imaginative journey is one whose authorship has long been forgotten but has proven invaluable to many. Explore *Seven Habits for Successful Journeys* with your congregation's leadership as you move toward God's beckoning.

1. Curiosity

Adaptive congregations notice what is going on around them. Declining congregations often barely realize that the world has changed. Curiosity is engaged by investigating what is happening both in "the neighborhood" and in the larger community of the congregation.

2. Honest Self-Assessment

What are the foundations and resources that the congregation already has? What is your history and what stories from the past inform your future? Looking at yourselves takes courage, but also invites laughter and grace!

3. Playful Experimentation

Try new things . . . experiment . . . succeed . . . fail . . . laugh . . . celebrate!

4. Entrepreneurship

Think "outside the box" about who

might help do what needs to be done. Discover where treasures are hidden in your midst.

5. Using Drama and Symbols

Engage the imagination and the heart. Actions speak louder than words and stories communicate better than lectures. Find ways to embody struggles and visualize signs of the future.

6. Practicing Hospitality

Being friendly and welcoming . . . making room at the table for all . . . perhaps, even entertaining angels unaware!

7. Embracing Conflict

Congregations that change are congregations where there is conflict. Embrace conflict! Discover that it is possible to disagree but still move forward --- a critical difference between a peaceful-but-stagnant congregation and one that is willing to disturb the status quo.

Who Are We?

Moses and his band of fellow former slaves knew who they were --- God's Covenant People --- and what they were called to do --- journey from slavery to freedom and occupy the Promised Land. Our task in visioning and planning is first to ask ourselves the same questions: **Who are we? What are we to do with that knowledge?** Second, we are to open ourselves to the sacred

journey of a lifetime that takes us from our bondage to fear, caution, complacency, and a lack of creativity into the promised land of hope, courage, energy and imaginative faithfulness.

May your congregation's journey in faith be blessed with plenteous pillars of cloud and fire and an abundance of imagination.

Todd Ousley is Bishop of the Diocese of Eastern Michigan. Following 10 years of parish ministry in the Diocese of Texas, Todd served on the Bishop's staff in the Diocese of Eastern Michigan for five years focusing on congregational development and clergy deployment. In 2006, he was elected as the 2nd Bishop of Eastern Michigan. His diocesan ministry has focused on strengthening small congregations, discovering creative solutions for clergy staffing, and ministry of all the baptized. When not involved in church-related activities, he focuses his energies on his wife, Ann Schumann-Ousley, Director of Development for Saginaw Valley State University, and their three sons: Ian, a junior at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln; Dae, a 19 yr. old freshman at Ferris State University in Big Rapids, MI; and, Josh, a 16 yr. old high school junior.

Resources

- Exodus 13:20-22
- Episcopal Diocese of Eastern Michigan Vision & Mission: Mutuality, Vitality & Viability: Pray, Learn, Serve, & Grow <http://eastmich.org/index.php/constitution-canons/vision-mission>
- Episcopal-Lutheran "Called to Common Mission" <http://www.episcopalchurch.org/notice/prayers-people-developed-recognize-landmark-10th-anniversary-episcopal-lutheran-%C2%80%C2%9Ccalled-com>
- Episcopal Diocese of Massachusetts' Leadership Development Institute <http://www.diomass.org/inside/training/leadership-development-initiative>
- Hope St. John's Parish <http://www.hopestjohnsparish.com>
- "Magical Thinking" by Joe Duggan, ECF Vital Practices Vital Post <http://www.ecfvp.org/posts/magical-thinking/>
- *Missional Map Making: Skills for Leading in Times of Transition* by Alan Roxburgh <http://www.familychristian.com/missional-map-making-skills-for-leading-in-times-of-transition.html>
- Wurtsmith Air Force Base http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wurtsmith_Air_Force_Base

Expanding Our Understanding

BY SAM DESSÓRDI LEITE

I expect the St. James neighborhood is similar to many urban neighborhoods across the United States.

Walking the streets, I see and hear a rich mix of language and culture; at St. James we see and hear this same richness within our church.

As congregations learn more about their neighborhoods – and their neighbors, we find many of the commonly used labels to describe places of origin do little to help us understand the hundreds of cultures that might be part of the area.

One of the questions that should be asked when church members talk about Latino ministries is ‘who are the Latinos I am working with?’ or the deeper question: ‘who are Latinos?’ It may seem an irrelevant question for some but sometimes people use the prism of ‘us’ and ‘them’ to qualify the ‘other’. The United States of America has a wide diversity of ethnicities and races yet many use the term ‘American’ when referring to people who are Caucasian or with lighter skin color, fluent English speakers, and people with European Protestant roots. Looking back to the historical formation of the country the panorama is an amalgam of cul-

tures coming together in the same geographical area. (1)

Who are Latinos?

In 2010 I interviewed Christians from the Episcopal and Roman Catholic Church who are working with Latino populations in the U.S., as well as Latinos and Latinas from the first, second, and third generations in this country. With ignorance of what Latino means one of the topics raised by many of the people interviewed, it became clear there’s a need to widen the understanding of the term Latino and provide resources to help non-Latinos learn more about this diverse group of people.

The French coined the term Latin America around 1860 when Napoleon III was establishing an alliance with Mexico. The term Latin could strengthen the identity of the nations in the New World where Spanish, French, and Portuguese had settled. (2) The emperor of France saw their shared linguistic roots as a common ground to bring allies together and at the same time isolate the Anglo-Saxon colonies.

Diversity

From that period on Latin America was used to refer to a huge geographical extension of nations with different and distinct cultures. It is a large area of incredible ethnic complexity.

A quick look at two Latin American countries illustrates this complexity:

In Mexico, a majority of the population is descended from indigenous people and the Spanish who colonized Mexico. Culturally, the Mexican celebration of the Day of the Dead – with its candy skulls inviting people to eat their own death – embodies a practice unfamiliar to people from the United States precisely because its intimate inspirations are largely non-Western.

Argentineans living in Buenos Aires are ethnically more European than residents of Washington, D.C. Not only does a larger percentage of the population descend exclusively from European immigrants, but they also maintain more European contacts, such as dual

Argentine-Spanish citizenship and relatives born or still living in Italy or England. And, the modern cityscape of Buenos Aires is very self-consciously modeled on Paris, and French movies have a popularity there unheard of in the United States.” (3)

Shared Identity

Brazilian scholars Leandro Narloch and Duda Teixeira raise the question: “What is in common between Amazon River’s people, Argentinean cowboys, businessmen in Mexico City, indigenous people from the islands in the Titicaca River, and voodoo followers in Haiti?” (4)

Their answer shows that Latino is not only the Hispano from Central America but also a broader understanding of the term beyond language settings. What defines the Latin American identity today is not the Latin roots but history written through recent generations. Latin American countries share similarities such as mourning the tragedies suffered by indigenous peoples during colonization, people who were subjected to slavery, as well as the experience of oppressive dictatorships. Latin Americans also use local culture as a model of resistance against globalization and often bring up

discourse against capitalism.

Latinos/as in the US

But who are the Latinos and Latinas living in the United States? For many years society, even the church, worked with Spanish speaking groups with the understanding that this is the group to whom Latino Ministries must be addressed. But in fact, as noted above, language cannot be the only determinant to identify the Latino population. Besides Spanish they speak Portuguese, French, English, and several other Indigenous languages. They are also people born in this country, Latinos and Latinas of the second and third generation who sometimes do not speak the language of their grandparents or who chose one or the other.

The church needs to switch the lenses used to look at the United States population and then address the needs of Latinos according their own peculiarities. There have been Brazilian families in Massachusetts since the end of the 19th century and even now, there are people who keep calling their descendants *the Brazilians*.

Across the United States there are cities including Los Angeles, New York City, and Miami where there are more people

of Mexican, Puerto Rican, or Cuban origin than there are in all but the largest cities in Mexico, Puerto Rico, or Cuba. Together, Hispanic Americans comprise nine percent of the total American population, making them the country’s second largest ethnic minority. If present trends continue, Hispanics may become the largest American ethnic minority sometime in the 21st century, surpassing African Americans. (5)

Moving Past Fear

The fear of change coming from the outside is often what stops congregations from more fully embracing ethnic minorities. Most of the interviews I conducted revealed that Episcopalians have their identity rooted in the worship pattern expressed in the 1979 *Book of Common Prayer*.

Opening the doors to ‘others’ means that the way ‘we’ have of doing things may change because outsiders may not worship in the same way ‘we’ do on Sunday morning. For Latin Americans living in the United States there are many other ways of worshipping and serving God’s mission. These include the Quinceñaras, the traditions for The Day of the Dead, patronal feasts, and devotions to the saints.

Looking back to our early Christian roots, we are reminded that the nature of the Early Church abides in the diversity of cultures and languages. Pentecost marks the definitive event of becoming a Christian community: It is our duty to celebrate the differences that compose the body of the church. The challenge is to know how to live the diversity without losing the particularities. Fear of the unknown and of the stranger many times prevent the church from experiencing the Grace of God.

The Power of Stories

Sharing our stories – telling and listening – helps break down the walls that divide people in the church. Making people's stories relevant for the healing and reconciliation of the Body of Christ is a powerful instrument for evangelism.

The expected result of sharing the stories of many Latinos and church leaders who are working with Latino Ministries in The Episcopal Church is that local communities will be able to enter the dialogue about multiculturalism and become more culturally sensitive in their congregations. The first step to break the walls of division and ignorance is to be open to listening to stories with-

out seeking much clarification. How do these stories relate to the local context? What can the local church learn from those stories and how can they be transformed by the Holy Spirit to prophesize in dry places that need God's Grace.

Sam Dessórdi Leite is a priest from the Episcopal Anglican Church of Brazil currently serving as rector of St. James Episcopal Church in Oakland, California. An ECF Fellow, he is working on his Doctor of Ministry degree at the Church Divinity School of the Pacific. His current research is designed to identify ways to empower Latino Ministries that will help the Church engage in a true dialogue with the Latin American population. Sam has been very active on the provincial level with the church in Brazil, particularly in Christian formation, youth ministry, and liturgy. Sam also served as Chairman of the National Worship Committee of the 9th Assembly of the World Council of Churches in 2005-2006.

Resources

- Episcopal Church's Office of Latino Ministries <http://www.episcopalchurch.org/page/latinohispanic-ministries>
- St. James Episcopal Church <http://www.stjamesoakland.com/Ministries.html>

- *Seeing the Face of God in Each Other: The Antiracism Training Manual of The Episcopal Church* http://archive.episcopalchurch.org/documents/AntiRacism_Book-revise3.pdf

- The Episcopal Church's Strategic Vision for Reaching Latinos/Hispanics http://www.episcopalchurch.org/sites/default/files/strategic_vision_7-09.pdf

- The Parable of the Eagle by James Aggrey <http://cher-ylphipps.blogspot.com/2009/04/parable-of-eagle-by-james-aggrey.html> and video <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yzO0DXhcx2o>

Footnotes

1. Lewis Killian, *The Impossible Revolution*, Phase 2 (New York: Random House, 1975)
2. John Charles Chasteen *Born in Blood and Fire: a Concise History of Latin America*, (NY: W.W.Norton & Company, Inc., 2001)
3. *ibid*
4. Leandro Narloch and Duda Teixeira, *Guia Politicamente Incorreto da América Latina*, (Sao Paulo: Grupo Leya, 2011)
5. Martin N. Marger, *Race and Ethnic Relations: American and Global Perspectives* (Belmont, California: Wadsworth Publishing Company, 1994)

Echar por Tierra el Statu Quo

POR TODD OUSLEY

El cierre de la base de la fuerza aérea Wurtsmith cambió todo.

Las iglesias St. John's Episcopal y Hope Lutheran tenían una larga y orgullosa historia de autosuficiencia, sacerdotes a tiempo completo, dinámicas escuelas dominicales y una firme devoción a su fe. El cierre de la base de la fuerza aérea Wurtsmith, en 1993, marcó el inicio del fin de la vida de la feligresía como la conocían.

Enfrentadas a una devastadora pérdida económica y a una significativa pérdida de población, ambas feligresías libraron batallas separadas pero paralelas para conservar la vida como la conocían. En 2002 empezaron a compartir sacerdotes informalmente, pero manteniendo espacios separados. Varios años después el culto se consolidó en St. John's y Hope se convirtió en un centro de extensión comunitaria. Finalmente, la realidad económica forzó la consolidación de todos los ministerios en un edificio para una feligresía episcopal-luterana fusionada orgánica y probablemente hasta canónicamente.

Firme pero gentilmente resistiendo visiones diocesanas y sinódicas

para su futuro combinado, la feligresía que ahora es la parroquia Hope-St. John's Parish en Oscoda, Michigan, inició una vida eclesial con una cautelosa consideración del otro, entusiasmo por el culto y los ministerios de extensión compartidos, y una tenaz protección de los espacios sagrados como la cocina y todo su contenido. Estaba claro que si los episcopales eran los dueños del edificio, la cofradía de mujeres ejercería control jurisdiccional. Todo eso cambió la noche en que las alacenas de la cocina se despegaron misteriosamente de las paredes, haciendo trizas la vajilla y los vasos episcopales.

Lo que nunca se había podido lograr completamente mediante consultas diocesanas o sinódicas, iniciativas de juntas o consejos parroquiales, o por acuerdos realizados en privado, se convirtió en realidad gracias al poder de lo inesperado. Tras haber luchado por años en obtener una nueva identidad unida, el simple acto de limpiar los escombros y los platos rotos, de elegir e instalar nuevas alacenas y de comprar juntos una nueva vajilla inspiró a la feligresía "fusionada" a finalmente "reunirse alrededor de la mesa". Por fin Hope-St. John's

había dado con la respuesta tan difícil de alcanzar al interrogante de ¿Quiénes somos? Somos uno.

Tiempo en terrenos inexplorados

Los líderes de las feligresías (¡y los funcionarios diocesanos!) parecen preferir procesos estrictamente organizados, realizados predeciblemente y lineales al diseñar y planificar su visión. Si bien de vez en cuando las cosas salen bien, con excesiva frecuencia los resultados restringen en lugar de empoderar y o se archivan rápidamente para nunca más salir a la luz o se ocultan a plena vista imprimiendo el enunciado de visión en todas las publicaciones, con el predecible resultado de que se pierde en medio de tanto ruido de fondo. La experiencia de Hope-St. John's es un recordatorio importante de la necesidad de contar con visión y planificación abiertas a las realidades de nuestro medio y con apertura hacia los vientos inesperados del Espíritu.

La historia de Hope-St. John's es una sagrada narrativa de éxodo: un deambular por terrenos ignotos por un tiempo hasta sacar a Egipto (prejuicios episcopales o luteranos,

prioridades personales, etc.) de sus mentes. Entretanto, su deambular produjo momentos de claridad y éxito unidos a momentos de aflicción y confusión. Todo el tiempo hablaron sobre su vida corporativa, buscando columnas de nubes por el día y columnas fuego por la noche, en pos de la orientación de Dios en manifestaciones del espíritu, en lugar de un plan estratégico estrictamente organizado.

Ser ágiles

Las juntas parroquiales y otros líderes de feligresías que se embarcan en procesos de visión y planificación estratégica no pueden darse más el lujo de estar rígidamente atados a un plan cuidadosamente elaborado con un horizonte de tres a cinco años. Los líderes de hoy en día deben permanecer ágiles y visionarios, capaces de discernir los signos de los tiempos y de actuar con rapidez cuando surgen las oportunidades. Pocas feligresías pueden darse el lujo de tener un plan que no deje espacio para los sorprendentes signos de la presencia del Espíritu que encontramos frecuentemente en nuestra jornada para convertirnos en el pueblo que Dios nos ha llamado a ser.

Hace unos pocos años empecé a emplear imágenes del éxodo de Egipto en retiros de visión de juntas parroquiales y organismos rectores. Específicamente, me

concentré en la orientación que Moisés y los israelitas recibieron de columnas de nube por el día y columnas de fuego por la noche, signos de la presencia sagrada de Dios y “marcadores” que guían al pueblo hacia adelante en su jornada hacia la Tierra Prometida. Estas imágenes invitan a los líderes a que trasciendan los mapas con reglas rígidamente prescritas y a que miren imaginativamente hacia las señas de Dios en dirección a un futuro que tal vez no esté en línea recta, sino que requerirá algo de deambulación por terrenos ignotos para llegar a ella.

Siete hábitos para las jornadas exitosas

Una herramienta útil a lo largo de esta jornada imaginativa es una cuya autor ha pasado al olvido desde hace tiempo, pero que ha demostrado ser valiosa para muchos. Explore los **Siete hábitos para jornadas exitosas** con el liderazgo de su feligresía a medida que avance hacia las señas de Dios.

1. Curiosidad

Las feligresías con capacidad de adaptación notan lo que está ocurriendo a su alrededor. Las feligresías en decadencia a menudo apenas se dan cuenta que el mundo ha cambiado. La curiosidad se despierta investigando lo que está ocurriendo “en el barrio” y en la comunidad más general de la feligresía.

gresía.

2. Autoevaluación franca

¿Cuáles son las bases y los recursos con los que ya cuenta la feligresía? ¿Cuál es su historia y qué historias del pasado informan su futuro? ¡Mirarse a uno mismo requiere coraje, pero también abre paso a la risa y a la cortesía!

3. Experimentación juguetona

¡Pruebe cosas nuevas. . . experimente. . . tenga éxito. . . fracase. . . ríase. . . celebre!

4. Espíritu emprendedor

Piense de manera original en lo que podría ayudar a hacer lo que hace falta hacer. Descubra dónde están ocultos los tesoros en su medio.

5. Uso de representación y símbolos

Active la imaginación y el corazón. Los actos hablan más fuertemente que las palabras y las historias comunican mejor que las cátedras. Encuentre maneras de encarnar las luchas y de visualizar signos del futuro.

6. Hospitalidad

¡Sea amistoso e incluyente.... dejando lugar en la mesa para todos... tal vez hasta ser anfitrión de ángeles sin saberlo!

7. No rehuir los conflictos

Las feligresías que cambian son las feligresías en las que hay conflicto. ¡No rehúya los conflictos! Descubra que es posible estar en desacuerdo e igual avanzar... una diferencia fundamental entre una feligresía pacífica pero estancada y una dispuesta a perturbar el statu quo.

¿Quiénes somos?

Moisés y su grupo de ex esclavos sabían quiénes eran – la Alianza de Dios con su Pueblo—y lo que estaban llamados a hacer: pasar de la esclavitud a la libertad y ocupar la Tierra Prometida. Nuestra tarea al elaborar una visión y planificar para alcanzarla es ante todo preguntarnos ¿Quiénes somos? ¿Qué hacer con ese conocimiento? Segundo, debemos abrirnos a la sagrada jornada de un tiempo de vida que nos saca de nuestro cautiverio de temor, cautela, complacencia y falta de creatividad y nos lleva hacia una tierra prometida de esperanza, coraje, energía y fidelidad imaginativa.

Les deseo que la jornada de sus feligresías en la fe esté bendecida con numerosas columnas de nube y de fuego y una abundancia de imaginación.

Todd Ousley es obispo de la Diócesis de Michigan Oriental. Tras 10 años de ministerio parroquial

en la Diócesis de Texas, Todd fue parte del personal del obispo de la Diócesis de Michigan Oriental por cinco años durante los que se concentró en el desarrollo de la feligresía y del sacerdocio. En 2006 fue elegido 2º Obispo de Michigan Oriental. Su ministerio diocesano se ha concentrado en fortalecer las feligresías pequeñas, en descubrir soluciones creativas para la contratación de sacerdotes y en el ministerio de todos los bautizados. Cuando no está participando en actividades de la iglesia concentra sus energías en su esposa, Ann Schumann-Ousley, directora de desarrollo de la Universidad de Saginaw Valley, y en sus tres hijos: Ian, que cursa el tercer año en la Universidad de Nebraska-Lincoln; Dae, de 19 años de edad, que cursa el primer año en la Universidad Ferris State University en Big Rapids, MI; y Josh, un estudiante de escuela secundaria de 16 años de edad.

Obras de Consulta

- Éxodo 13:20-22
- Missional Map Making: Skills for Leading in Times of Transition por Alan Roxburgh <http://www.familychristian.com/missional-map-making-skills-for-leading-in-times-of-transition.html>
- Episcopal Diocese of Eastern

Michigan Vision & Mission: Mutuality, Vitality & Viability: Pray, Learn, Serve, & Grow <http://eastmich.org/index.php/constitution-canons/vision-mission>

- Episcopal-Lutheran “Called to Common Mission” <http://www.episcopalchurch.org/notice/prayers-people-developed-recognize-landmark-10th-anniversary-episcopal-lutheran-called-com>
- Episcopal Diocese of Massachusetts’ Leadership Development Institute <http://www.diomass.org/inside/training/leadership-development-initiative>
- Hope St. John’s Parish <http://www.hopestjohnsparish.com>
- Magical Thinking <http://www.ecfvp.org/posts/magical-thinking/>
- Wurtsmith Air Force Base http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wurtsmith_Air_Force_Base

Semillas de Esperanza

POR SHIRLEY BOWEN

“Tenemos la espalda contra la pared. Tenemos que empezar a luchar si vamos a conservar nuestra iglesia”. Corría el año 1958 y la conversación giraba alrededor del dinero. Por años la feligresía había estado tratando de recuperarse del cierre de las plantas textiles y de la partida de los trabajadores, muchos de los cuales habían sido miembros de la parroquia.

La historia de Christ Episcopal Church de Biddeford, Maine narra la manera en que esta iglesia, organizada en 1869 para cumplir con las necesidades espirituales de los trabajadores de las plantas textiles de Inglaterra, se convirtió en una comunidad de fe de clase trabajadora dedicada a nutrir todos los aspectos de las vidas de los habitantes de Biddeford. Es la historia de la dedicación de la iglesia hacia la comunidad y de las decisiones que se tomaron a lo largo de períodos de crecimiento y deterioro y de luchas financieras frecuentes.

En 2008, la feligresía de la Iglesia Episcopal de Biddeford decidió dejar de aferrarse al pasado. Y al hacerlo renació, al transformarse intencionalmente de una casa de culto en un Centro de Jubileo y des-

cubriendo que como Semillas de Esperanza ahora están compartiendo la presencia y el eterno amor de Dios con muchísima más gente que lo que lo hubieran hecho como Christ Church.

Esta es nuestra historia:

A fines de 2006, la feligresía de Christ Church tenía que tomar una decisión, porque contar con un rector las terceras partes del tiempo estaba resultando imposible de mantener. Al reducir el puesto a medio tiempo quedaron necesitando un nuevo sacerdote.

En mi calidad de nueva sacerdote a cargo, llamada en 2007, tenía claro que la feligresía estaba en un punto muy bajo. Tras varios meses juntos, se empezó a hablar seriamente en el futuro de la parroquia. Dos cosas quedaron claras. Primero, debido a que la mayoría de los parroquianos eran pobres, de clase trabajadora o con ingresos fijos, el tamaño de la feligresía podría triplicarse, pero eso tendría muy poco efecto sobre el presupuesto. Segundo, residir en una de las partes más pobres de la ciudad me mostró cuántas necesidades incumplidas existían

alrededor de nuestra iglesita.

Por muchos años se había estado conversando en las feligresías del sur de Maine sobre colaboraciones, fusiones y cosas por el estilo. Todas las veces las conversaciones habían terminado sin cambios de fondo. Esta vez la conversación no sólo se concentró en nuestra supervivencia, sino también en nuestro ministerio en nuestro barrio y en la comunidad. Desde el principio no se sintió como las conversaciones anteriores.

Nuestro salón parroquial era el ‘hogar’ de un número de organizaciones comunitarias. Todos esos grupos servían a los pobres de Biddeford y, al igual que nosotros, se preguntaban cómo se podría cumplir con las necesidades de los habitantes de la ciudad. Nos reunimos y hablamos. ¿Qué servicios se estaban ofreciendo? ¿En cuáles había yuxtaposiciones? ¿Dónde estaban las brechas? ¿Cómo podríamos trabajar juntos para servir mejor a nuestra comunidad?

Con estos conocimientos colectivos, apoyados por una parroquia hermana, 15 de nuestros

feligreses llegaron a entender que estaban expresando una misión de Ministerio de Jubileo en la que se atendería a los necesitados y se trataría de eliminar lo que causaba que la gente estuviera necesitada.

Ese fue un momento crítico en la vida de la parroquia. Con un legado ya establecido, la parroquia podría haber decidido reducir el cargo de sacerdote a un porcentaje todavía menor y seguido por mucho tiempo. O la parroquia podría prestar atención al Pacto Bautismal, asumir el riesgo de gastar todo el ingreso de su legado en servir a otros y posiblemente cerrar o convertirse en algo muy diferente. Optamos por lo último y nunca lo lamentamos. Había nacido un nuevo tipo de misión:

“El Centro del Barrio Semillas de Esperanza ofrece hospitalidad y apoyo a todos los que pasan por nuestras puertas. El objetivo de nuestros esfuerzos es ofrecer hospitalidad a los que están luchando, ayuda a los necesitados, servir de voz a los que fueron silenciados, compañía a los que están solos y amor lleno de compasión a todos.

“Como Centro Jubileo nos asociamos con los pobres y los oprimidos, independientemente de donde se encuentren, en espíritu

de misericordia y justicia, para cumplir con las necesidades humanas básicas y ayudar a crear una sociedad más justa.”

Con el apoyo de la Diócesis, en el curso de los próximos cinco años el Centro del Barrio (Jubileo) Semillas de Esperanza Neighborhood siguió expandiendo sus conversaciones en la comunidad, incluyendo los vecinos a los que sirve, la ciudad de Biddeford, múltiples organizaciones de servicios sociales, iglesias hermanas en comunidades cercanas, organizaciones comunitarias y cívicas, la universidad local y personas interesadas. Ha crecido desde estar abierto dos días por semana y servir desayunos a 10 a 15 personas por día a:

- estar abierto cuatro días por semana y servir desayunos y almuerzos a 70 a 100 personas por día
- ofrecer ropa gratis y un centro de Recursos de Carreras con personal que ayuda a los que buscan empleos con salarios vitales
- servir como refugio contra el frío y el calor en la ciudad de Biddeford
- servir como un centro de reuniones del barrio y de participación en la comunidad

■ ser un sitio de remisión para muchas de las organizaciones locales de servicios sociales que atienden a los habitantes de la ciudad que necesiten un lugar en el que puedan sentirse seguros, aceptados y bienvenidos

■ servir como un recurso en la comunidad para asistir en conversaciones difíciles y estimular asociaciones para ayudar a socorrer a familias y víctimas de crímenes violentos, incendios y otras tragedias

■ ofrecer oportunidades sacramentales a los que carezcan de un hogar parroquial y/o que no puedan costear las cuotas de las pompas fúnebres o que deseen experimentar los dones sagrados de la comunión y la reconciliación en un medio seguro.

Al funcionar como una organización no sectaria, todos los servicios están a disposición de todos. Se ha logrado obtener un equilibrio entre crear un clima que da la bienvenida a todos, independientemente de sus antecedentes, incluyendo sus creencias religiosas, y responder a los que buscan apoyo espiritual. Y si bien los servicios de culto han sido suspendidos en Christ Church, los cuidados pastorales, los servicios religiosos ocasionales y el amor que

todo lo reconcilia permean el Centro. Toda la programación, el reclutamiento y la capacitación de voluntarios, la extensión y las colaboraciones están enraizados en el Pacto Bautismal de la Iglesia Episcopal. Las Directrices Comunitarias y las maneras en que se ponen en práctica se basan en un principio muy básico: todos los que pasan por las puertas son un precioso hijo de Dios. Este principio requiere dos componentes: todos merecen que se los trate como tales y todos tienen la responsabilidad de tratar a los demás de la misma manera.

Esta labor es contracultural para los que sirvieron en Semillas de Esperanza, muchos de los cuales viven a diario con violencia en todas sus formas. La comunicación a menudo está definida por blasfemias, amenazas o sumisión silenciosa. La labor es aceptar a diario la dignidad de todas las personas y de ofrecerles compasión y bondad. Es sobre tener expectativas elevadas de conducta y de ofrecer, a veces por primera vez, límites llenos de amor y el medio acogedor que los acompaña. La labor es dar la oportunidad a los que no conocen a Dios, pero que conocen al personal y a los voluntarios del Centro, de conocer a Dios porque se los acoge en el Centro.

El espíritu de Cristo está vivo en el Centro del Barrio Semillas de Esperanza. Las conversaciones sagradas de los últimos seis años han dado más visibilidad a la presencia y el amor de Dios como se manifestó en la labor de Semillas de Esperanza que lo que la pequeña feligresía hubiera podido hacer por sí sola. Ex miembros de la parroquia pasaron a una parroquia en una comunidad vecina, pero siguen orando por Christ Church/Semillas de Esperanza. Y esperamos que con el correr del tiempo nuevamente seamos una comunidad de culto, si bien en una forma diferente de lo que fue Christ Church. Cuando cuidar y nutrir al pueblo de Dios realmente es el fundamento de la conversación en nuestras comunidades, los actos de escuchar y compartir son sagrados.

La Rev. Shirley Bowen es directora ejecutiva y capellana de Semillas de Esperanza, y ayudó a convertir en realidad el Centro Jubileo en 2008. Fue sacerdote parroquial en Christ Church desde 2007 hasta 2012 y también fue misionera de campus en la Diócesis de Maine.

Obras de Consulta

- Christ Church Biddeford <http://www.christchurchbiddeford.org/history.html>

- Leadership Development Initiative <http://diomassleads.org/about-ldi/>
- “Molting Out Of Old Shells” un video de Tom Brackett <http://www.ecfvp.org/tools/molting-our-of-our-old-shells/>
- Semillas de Esperanza <http://seedsofhope4me.org/about.php>
- Strategic Planning for Your Church, Fundación de la Iglesia Episcopal <http://www.ecfvp.org/tools/strategic-planning-for-your-church/>
- “The Difference Between Mission and Vision” por Linda Buskirk, ECF Vital Practices Vital Post <http://www.ecfvp.org/posts/the-difference-between-mission-and-vision/>