



Local Ministry

EXCERPTED
from:

story,
process
& meaning

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Creating a hospitable environment for Mutual Ministry

TOM RAY AND JIM KELSEY

When Tom Ray was elected Bishop of Northern Michigan, he had been rector of a good-sized parish (St Luke's, Evanston in Illinois) in a good-sized diocese (Chicago). When he and his family drove north to begin this new episcopal ministry, it was with certain assumptions. Among these was his conviction that the main task of a good bishop is effective deployment. Specifically, he believed that if you could match the right priest with the right parish, this business of the episcopate would be a piece of cake. It did not take long for him to be disabused of this assumption.

Waiting for him on his desk in his office was a curious letter, sent actually to his predecessor who had left it behind for whoever might next inhabit his chair. The letter had been written by an older and revered member of a small congregation, St Stephen's Church in DeTour Village. This was one of any number of congregations in the small, rural Diocese of Northern Michigan which had no resident vicar, and no funds to support one. This tiny worshipping community was dependent upon visiting 'supply' priests, who would often be few and far between in that part of the world. This little congregation would sometimes go for up to three months without celebrating Holy Eucharist. The people of God were being malnourished.

In the letter, the warden observed how difficult it was to find supply clergy to travel to their church and a neighbouring congregation about 25 miles away, St Matthias Church in Pickford. She suggested that the faithful lay reader who had served them so generously for 15 years might be 'licensed' (her word) to give both congregations communion. Following her signature on the first page were the signatures of all the other members of St Stephen's. On the reverse side were the signatures of all the members of St Matthias, endorsing this

request. This seemed a bona fide call! But it was not the sort of approach commonly embraced in the Episcopal Church, and it hardly matched the assumptions Tom had brought with him, that deployment of competent, professional, seminary-trained clergy was at the heart of good bishoping.

It was clear to Tom that this problem, which turned out to be quite typical of circumstances throughout the diocese, would require significant deliberation by the key leaders of the diocese. He quickly learned, in fact, that there was a history in the diocese of a previous attempt to develop local ordained ministry models, but the first time around it had been a scheme of the bishop and had failed in large part for lack of support by the wider diocesan family.

So, Tom convened a series of 18 monthly meetings of key diocesan leadership groups – the Standing Committee, the Commission on Ministry, and the bishop – to discuss how this development of local ordained ministry might be a solution to the deployment and financial problems they faced.

They acknowledged that the lay reader endorsed by the two congregations was a 75-year-old certified public accountant. What a brilliant bureaucratic solution! Ordain him locally. If it did not work out, his advanced age would before very long erase the indiscretion. By the time these groups had worked out all the issues that needed to be addressed, such as procedures for formation, for consent by neighbouring dioceses as the canons required, and so on, the faithful old lay reader had died. Tom then travelled to St Matthias Church to discuss their future. What he found was totally unexpected.

This lay pastor had modelled himself after the clergy in the diocese he had known, loved and respected. Then, out of his generosity and self-sacrifice, he had so over-functioned that upon his death no one left in the congregation even knew how to open the church building. He had lovingly incapacitated the other adults in that community. He had done all the reading, praying, visiting, accounting, everything. Clearly, what was needed was more than effective deployment of clergy, professional, local or otherwise. It was most important for the local competence of the congregation to be nurtured and developed. The seeds for what became Mutual Ministry had been planted.

Indeed, over the years that followed, these same key diocesan leadership groups, along with others, continued to gather for the

purpose of developing a strategic plan, continued to learn from the experience of the several congregations in Northern Michigan, and also from other dioceses, across the country and beyond, who had been dealing with similar challenges and opportunities for ministry development. There were networks of these dioceses, such as Coalition 14, New Directions Ministries, Sindicators, the Coalition of Bishops of Small Dioceses, Appalachian Peoples Service Organization (APSO), and more. Northern Michigan both learned from and contributed towards this collaboration. The clergy and other gifted members of the diocesan leadership circle developed methods for helping congregations discern, or discover, the gifts already resident in their communities. They assembled a formation process, first designed as a regional school, and finally developed as a congregationally based approach, known as the Covenant Group process. A basic curriculum of study was authored by the seminary-trained clergy of the diocese. It took over eight years to launch the process, until finally, in 1990, the first of the Ministry Support Teams was commissioned, including the licensing of local preachers, the ordination of priests and deacons, and the commissioning of any number of ministry co-ordinators in such areas as stewardship, education, worship planning and oversight, diaconal ministry, outreach, hospitality, evangelism, and more.

In 1989, before the first commissionings took place, Jim Kelsey joined the diocese as the Ministry Development Co-ordinator. This was a significant investment, since in that tiny diocese at the time there were no full-time employees in the diocesan office other than the bishop. But it was clear that even with so few stipended clergy available to serve as rectors and vicars in the congregations around the diocese, it was of paramount importance that this overall process of ministry development be well co-ordinated.

The development of the infrastructure for the Mutual Ministry process took almost a decade, in fact. Throughout that time, the membership of the Commission on Ministry, a key strategic group, remained quite constant. It was vital that a clear vision and plan be constructed and implemented with consistency. There was also a strong emphasis placed upon consultation and communication with the wider diocesan community. The seminary-trained clergy were brought on board, and it was they who wrote the initial curriculum used to prepare the first of the Covenant Groups. Still, some of these same clergy expressed hesitancy about the changes that would inevitably

affect their role, as Mutual Ministry influenced congregations and the diocese. A good deal of time and energy was spent in thinking through the implications and moving together through what did prove to be significant change. That so many collaborated in the process turned out to be one of the most important aspects of the transformation of the Diocese of Northern Michigan.

Tom Ray has described the circumstances typical in the Episcopal Church in the early 1980s as a 'painful pattern of failure'. In the conventional-traditional pattern of ministry, he observes, the clergy person was the subject of enormous expectations and responsibilities. The subtle expectation was that he or she could do things that no one else in the congregation could do. This was mutually seductive. The circle of expectations for the clergy person included liturgist, administrator, preacher, teacher, pastor, intervener in crisis, visitor in hospital and home, community leader, and then being expected to bring in the youth. What was left outside that intimidating circle? Not much; but after all, those of us on the outside of this circle are 'only lay persons' – unskilled, unprepared, inexperienced, incompetent, second rate. 'Don't expect much from us, because we don't expect much from ourselves.'

This recipe guarantees for the clergy that they will be isolated, overworked, unsupported, broken. We break clergy constantly and clergy families are often in deep trouble. This recipe guarantees for the laity that they will be underutilized, undervalued, with low self-esteem, and apologetic. 'Don't expect much from me, I'm only a lay person.' In the collapse of the ministry upon the pastor, the priest, the minister, there emerges a separation that is often adversarial – 'We-They'. Given such a discrepancy in expectations, we are assured that eventually the members of the community will be disappointed in the clergy, and eventually they will grow a bit more anti-clerical.

These distorted expectations have taken some of our most committed – the seminary-trained and ordained – and placed them at serious risk. Ordination certificates should have warning labels. The United Church of Canada has statistics showing that at any given time 18 per cent of its clergy are on stress leave. In fact, the Church says that 60 per cent have reported some conflict with their congregations. According to the national Church's specialist on clergy stress issues, 'the Church is well aware of the endemic nature of the problem and is searching for remedies'. We know we share this dilemma with other

churches. For example, visitors from the Scottish Episcopal Church recently shared their concerns about the impact of stress on clergy marriages.

Immediately after his ordination as bishop, Tom Ray and his wife, Brenda, gathered together the clergy spouses (all women then) for a retreat at the diocesan conference centre. They continued this every year for some time. One spouse attending these gatherings recalls,

Once we knew each other better we did some very helpful sharing. This constructive sharing needed to be done for our very survival. We laughed a lot over the good things in our lives, which also helped keep us going. We found that we could not say things that really bothered us about parish living to a friend and especially not to our already stressed spouses. We would plan what we wanted our next meeting to entail before parting. Tom and Brenda suggested having a friend of theirs from Evanston, a former clergy spouse and therapist, to come and guide us. Having her objective viewpoint was indeed helpful and reassuring. She joined us for many years.

Even with all of this I found myself worried about the amount of stress many of us continued to experience. I could see that all of us want things to go well and we do not want to complain. Some of us had almost impossible situations to deal with at home and were desperately trying to have a happy life for our families.

After several of these meetings it became clear that we also needed to meet with our spouses so we could all share what we are facing. Our bishop had Bishop David Richards (who at the time was responsible for pastoral care for our House of Bishops) lead us at a conference centre for a two-day meeting. This was only moderately successful but at least we could all see that there were issues that all of us needed to deal with as couples, not just as individuals.

We had more of these annual couples' meetings in hotels. Each time another area of concern was agreed upon. A couple that had some experience with this would volunteer to address the subject at the next meeting. This was a good way for us to know each other better. We found comfort knowing that we were all dealing with similar problems. Now I realize that the paradigm of 'the minister' is impossible. One is set up for failure when one cannot possibly meet all of the expectations.

This was all before Mutual Ministry came into the picture as something that would bring more intentional ministry to this diocese. As some congregations called people in their church to a variety of ministries, Covenant Groups formed to study for three years. After

members were ordained and commissioned there was a noticeable change in those churches. Gradually, as this way of ministering was accepted by more congregations, the lower stress level in these congregations was being recognized. The Ministry Support Teams were not only taking on their roles earnestly, they were also involving many more people in their congregations.

At the very end of the 1980s our Episcopal Church commissioned a national study of 'Excellence in Ministry', now called 'The Cornerstone Project'. The study provided the following conclusions:

- 1 There appears to be considerable confusion about the role of priests. Some priests find it hard to balance being a 'person of God' as described in the ordination vows with the heavy administrative and managerial responsibilities involved in running a parish. Others have lost their sense of call and their grounding in faith. Still others feel abandoned. Personal and family crises are common.
- 2 Many clergy experience isolation from their bishop as well as from other clergy and lay people. Secrecy, fear and distrust all too often enter these relationships.
- 3 Working relationships between many bishops and their clergy and congregations are seriously flawed.

Hartford Seminary has recently released an elaborate research project on mainline denominations funded by the Lilly Foundation. The data for the Episcopal Church has been extrapolated and the report confirms the destructive nature of the traditional-conventional model of ordained ministry. The data points out the disturbing fact that in the last five years studied, 86 per cent of Episcopal congregations had experienced significant and noticeable conflict. The top three reasons given for the conflict are (1) how decisions are made, (2) the leadership style of the rector, and (3) money.

These insights have shaped the ministry development initiatives in Northern Michigan to a significant degree. As bishops, we have been committed to address the dysfunction resulting from the traditional-conventional pattern of ministry for the seminary-trained and ordained, which was so obviously dangerous to the clerics' health and the happiness of their families. We have also been concerned to address the implications of this disease, as it has afflicted the congregations with whom the clergy are called to serve.

In the Church of England report *Faith in the Countryside* (1990) two sobering quotes, taken together, reinforce our concern for the health of congregations having clergy in the traditional-conventional pattern:

Within the lifetime of some of the people in this place, the vicar has changed from being the person who distributed money to those who were the chief charge on the community, to now being the chief charge on the community himself!¹

A number of parishes testified to a common experience that the life of the church was enhanced rather than diminished during a period of vacancy. One churchwarden near Bath said that 'we all slowed down again' after the arrival of the new incumbent. There is clear evidence that while rural clergy may be trained to serve a parish they may also unconsciously be restricting its growth and the potentiality of its leadership. During a vacancy congregations can often break out of patterns of deference and dependence, but when a new appointment is made these patterns reassert themselves.²

Both of these also characterize the experience in Northern Michigan. In a small congregation it is not uncommon for the salary and benefits of the clergy person to consume 60 to 70 per cent of the sacrificial giving of the congregation. This is another factor which is corrosive to the clergy person. When preaching eloquently on the virtue of sacrificial giving, she knows that the lion's share of that giving goes for her own support. She has become the chief charge on the community. This knowledge then further motivates the clergy person to over-function in order to justify her own compensation. We came to realize the serious danger of having a competent, self-motivated, energetic clergy person in a small congregation. In order to justify his salary and fill his time and meet the exaggerated expectations previously described, such a clergy person would over-function and steal the competence of the adult baptized members of the congregation. Such a clergy person would incapacitate the congregation, not out of any mean spirit, but out of the virtues of generosity, commitment and caring. Everyone loses, both the clergy person and the congregation.

As bishops, seeking to nurture an atmosphere hospitable to Mutual Ministry development, we have addressed these issues within a wider context of consultation and collaboration. We were aware that previous attempts in Northern Michigan to identify and form

local priests had failed, in part because the plan had been primarily at the initiative and commitment of the bishop without a wider consensus throughout the diocese, and in part because the vision was still a priest-centred approach, rather than drawing upon the variety of gifted members of the wider community.

As described above, the very development of the Mutual Ministry process engaged the full circle of diocesan leadership. Each congregation which considers entering the process does so as a community. The formation process from beginning to end, including all assessments and evaluations along the way, is communal. We have learned that the best proposal has many 'fingerprints' on it, meaning that it has been shaped by as many different people in the system as possible. Not only does the proposal have a better chance of being embraced with that kind of ownership, it is also inevitably itself a superior product.

The diocese has also recognized and responded to the need to reshape its own canons to support and extend the ministry development which is now taking root in virtually every corner of Northern Michigan. Over several years, proposals for these revisions were made, discussed in any number of venues, then revised again and again to reflect the growing consensus around the diocese. What emerged is a radical and virtually unique framework for our diocesan governance. At our annual Diocesan Convention, all baptized persons are offered a seat and voice. In addition, each congregation, regardless of size, may designate up to four members to serve as voting delegates. In this, the ordained have effectively given up their automatic vote at convention. We have also abolished the distinctions between 'parishes' and 'missions', thereby honouring all-sized congregations as equal partners in our diocesan life.

What has evolved is a clear movement away from a hierarchical, top-down management style, to one which is characterized by collaboration, consensus building and circular leadership. Significant decisions are made only after consultation and deliberation by all affected parties. This begins on the local level with the Ministry Support Team in which no one person is in charge, where plans are made by collaboration, and decisions are made by consensus. Next, the diocesan Ministry Development Strategy Team brings together the Missioners and congregational leaders regularly to discuss, to reflect and to evaluate how the routine life of the congregations is playing

out. Here new skills for ministry development are studied, learned and shared. Then, since Jim became bishop, a unique group simply called the Core Team has evolved. Here a selected number of ordained leaders and unordained leaders within the diocese meet regularly with the bishop to review and deliberate serious issues emerging in the diocese and reflect on the ministry of the bishop to reassure us that it is as truly collaborative as we intend. These several spheres of responsibility and accountability are often overlapping in a small diocese so that Missioners are present to the Ministry Support Team, the bishop and congregational leaders are present to the Ministry Development Strategy Team, and all are represented on the Core Team.

In visiting Northern Michigan you would also find that the canonically mandated bodies such as the Standing Committee, the Commission on Ministry, the Diocesan Council, Regional Boards and other committees and agencies pursue a similar methodology of collaboration, consensus building and circular leadership.

The formation process itself reflects our commitment to community. In the earliest years, we initiated a regional study programme that pulled participants out of their local setting to a nearby centre where they joined with leaders of other congregations for training. After a year or two, a serious and unanticipated flaw became clear through repeated evaluations. As excited as these participants were, over time they came to feel more distanced from their home congregation and, in some instances, viewed by local friends with some suspicion. By taking a select few from their base community and taking them somewhere else to a diocesan or regional centre, we were unintentionally separating them and even isolating them over time. Today basic study and formation takes place within one's home congregation. Special studies may occur from time to time through seminars convened regionally or diocesan-wide, but the basic effort is locally experienced. Our formation process, called 'Life Cycles', has emerged from our own two decades of experience, and has been shaped by collaboration with other dioceses who have had similar experience: Nevada, Wyoming and some in New England, with consultation by Leader Resources, a publishing and consulting organization serving the Episcopal Church, specializing in Christian formation and leadership development resources.

A central role in all of this development has been that of Missioner. For many years in small rural dioceses such as ours, the

deployment strategy was to try to simulate as closely as possible the 'one priest—one parish' model, so enshrined in our tradition since the time of George Herbert and his *Country Parson* paradigm. This often and increasingly resulted in clergy being assigned to two, three or more congregations at once, and they would find themselves driving madly between towns and villages trying to deliver ministry to those small, struggling communities. There were many collateral consequences of this strategy, including competition among the yoked congregations, and overwork and stress among the clergy and their families. As resources continued to dwindle, and as populations continued to decline, salary levels decreased as well. No wonder the typical pattern was for very short tenures of these rural vicars. No wonder it became more and more difficult to attract strong and effective clergy. No wonder the congregations themselves began to diminish and lose their vitality. No wonder it became ever more clear that this entire system was bankrupt.

Gradually, in Northern Michigan, as elsewhere across the country, a new kind of leadership role began to appear. Instead of clergy being called to serve as vicars of multiple congregations, teams of clergy (and in some cases unordained leaders) were called to serve not as ministry deliverers but as ministry *developers*. It was a different job description. Instead of ministering *to* the congregation, the Missioner supports, encourages, educates and thereby helps to transform the congregations from being communities gathered around a minister into becoming ministering communities. Through a process of visioning and planning, the congregations are shepherded through a process of discernment, formation, ordination and commissioning, so that there emerges a Ministry Support Team who serve, not as a corporate vicar, but as a group who support and develop the baptismal, daily ministry of all the members of that congregation. In this we have discovered that instead of trying to 'empower the laity' by clericalizing a team, we do better to aim at drawing a new circle of shared leadership which engages more and more from throughout the community. A central concept is that of the 'ever-widening circle', by which those engaged in leadership roles in the Church seek not to close ranks and narrow the power circle, but to draw increasing numbers of persons into the shared leadership patterns. This is how the congregation grows ever closer to the goal of a fully ministering community.

Within this context, the Missioner is neither priest-in-charge nor vicar of the congregation, but is more a companion, guide and mentor. In truth, this role is more that of an extension of the episcopate than it is a glorified regional vicar. A real partnership has emerged between the diocese and the congregations, and, in fact, among participating congregations. The diocese has been divided into regions. Each region has about six to eight worshipping communities. A team of Missioners serves them, supported by a budget supported by a proportional sharing among the congregations and a share of support from the diocesan budget (utilizing funds previously used to try to maintain some semblance of the 'one priest—one parish' model). Each region has a council, which provides support and structure to the work of the Missioners and seeks to develop partnership and collaboration among the leadership of the various congregations.

This reorientation has resulted in a number of features in the diocesan office, in the configuration of our staff, and in our style of leadership. Overall, we have moved from seeing the bishop as pastor to the pastors to finding our own place within the overall community of mutual care. Because of the size of the diocese, we are able to be quite relational, and to nurture primary relationships with key leaders throughout the various congregations. We understand the partnership of Missioners, along with the two remaining rectors, to be such that they, too, are more partners than managers. The variety of gifts are nurtured in a way which allows everyone involved to be honoured and engaged in the priestly, diaconal and apostolic work we share. We have moved from hierarchies of domination to holarchies of collaboration.

Our diocesan staff is quite small. In the office, which has been remodelled with many open doors and much glass, with all offices opening into a central common space, we have a Ministry Development Co-ordinator, a Diocesan Operations Co-ordinator and an Office Manager. Instead of having an archdeacon, we gather together the Missioners and other key persons as a seven-member Core Team, who meet regularly and communicate by phone and e-mail to share episcopal oversight. Our approach is not delegation, but collaboration.

These are some of the ways we have tried to create an environment which is hospitable to the nurturing of the ministry of the whole people of God. When Tom Ray retired, Jim Kelsey was elected and

ordained bishop, and he has sought to continue this journey. Shared leadership continues to be the guiding principle, and there are new discoveries, new learnings every day. We are both blessed to have been invited into this work. The winters are long in Northern Michigan, but it is a glorious place to live and to share in the life and work of this remarkable diocese.

Notes

- 1 Archbishops' Commission on Rural Areas, *Faith in the Countryside*, London: Church House Publishing, 1990, p. 146.
- 2 Archbishops' Commission on Rural Areas, *Faith in the Countryside*, p. 145.