

ATR/93:4

Living into Multicultural Inclusive Ministry

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Where there is no vision, the people perish: but he
that keepeth the law, happy is he. (*King James Version*)

If people can't see what God is doing, they stumble
all over themselves; But when they attend to what
he reveals, they are most blessed. (*The Message*)
(*Proverbs 29:18*)

Urban ministry's challenges are many: changes in population, aging infrastructure, and limited resources all contribute to the difficulty of ministry in urban centers.¹ Yet there are few resources available to equip church leadership for ministry in these communities. Congregational and denominational models hearken back to their rural beginnings and have long ceased to be adequate to respond to the urban challenge.² Discussion of leadership development for these congregations identifies both lay and clergy leadership as important in effective ministry. However, the emphasis in training materials and programs has been primarily on professional clerical leadership.³ The biblical model of church leadership is one of shared

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¹ For a compelling description of the challenges of urban ministry, see Heidi Neumark, *Breathing Space: A Spiritual Journey in the South Bronx* (Boston, Mass.: Beacon Press, 2003).

² Ray Bakke, *The Urban Christian: Effective Ministry in Today's Urban World* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1987), chap. 2.

³ There are several compilations dedicated to urban ministry. Among them are Clifford J. Green, *Churches, Cities, and Human Community: Urban Ministry in the United States, 1945–1985* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans Publishing, 1996); Robert Lee, ed., *Cities and Churches: Readings on the Urban Church* (Philadelphia, Pa.:

leadership, where all the baptized are called to minister to the world in Christ's name.⁴ In order to face the challenges of urban ministry congregational leaders, both clergy and lay, must come together with a common vision and must be equipped with the skills and resources to address the needs of congregations constantly living with change, especially when the favorite stance of most churches is "this is how it has always been done." As Rosabeth Moss Kanter says in her foreword to Lovett Weems's insightful leadership text *Church Leadership: Vision, Team, Culture, and Integrity*, "The task of leadership is change. Leaders inspire others to their best efforts in order to do better, to attain higher purposes."⁵ According to Weems, a "picture of a preferred future" must be in place before people can "let go of the past and permit change to take place."⁶ In the urban context, congregations have experienced dramatic change. The ability to envision how things can be different and moving people to work together to build that reality is essential to a vibrant community. Without a vision of a new way of being, churches will suffer from their resistance to the buffeting of constant change, a reality of urban centers. How does church leadership facilitate a congregation to see, receive, and live into that new vision?

Weems's elements of effective leadership identify vision as the central element from which all other leadership tasks take their direction.⁷ My years in urban ministry have shown that prayerfully reflecting and clarifying a congregation's vision for ministry is essential for the revitalization of churches. This ongoing reflection and articulation of a church's identity and call can galvanize the gifts of the congregation for ministry and fill believers with a renewed sense of purpose. The result is friends and neighbors attracted by the energy and pas-

Westminster Press, 1962); Wayne Stumme, *The Experience of Hope: Mission and Ministry in Changing Urban Communities* (Minneapolis, Minn.: Augsburg, 1991); Eleanor Scott Meyers, ed., *Envisioning the New City: A Reader on Urban Ministry* (Louisville, Ky.: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1992); and Roger S. Greenway, *Discipling the City: A Comprehensive Approach to Urban Ministry* (Eugene, Ore.: Wipf & Stock, 1997).

⁴ The Urban Bishops Coalition, *To Hear and to Heed: The Episcopal Church Listens and Acts in the City* (Cincinnati, Ohio: Forward Movement Publications, 1978), 4.

⁵ Lovett H. Weems, Jr., *Church Leadership: Vision, Team, Culture, and Integrity* (Nashville, Tenn.: Abingdon Press, 1993), 11.

⁶ Weems, *Church Leadership*, 39.

⁷ Weems, *Church Leadership*, 36.

sion of the congregation for ministry as the community benefits from a vital congregation reaching out in service in Christ's name.

Over the past twenty-five years I have worked with congregations in some of the poorest communities in the urban United States, and have seen churches come alive when given the tools, skills, and knowledge to do ministry. They come to see the changes around them as a dynamic and responsive call, not as something to be feared. Most recently my work with Holy Faith Episcopal Church in Inglewood, California, has taught me again that although there is resistance and fear of change in every congregation (every person), possibilities that are envisioned and informed by reality can become the unifying force for people to change and welcome the challenge. Holy Faith's vision is summarized in the welcome statement that appears on the worship bulletin and other materials:

As God's house, Holy Faith opens its doors to everyone. God's love is constant and Holy Faith celebrates the beauty in each one of us because we are all created in God's image. We believe the Holy Spirit embraces, protects, and cares for persons of every race, culture, gender, age, sexual orientation, economic circumstance, and belief. Holy Faith respects all people and we welcome everyone to worship with us.

Although it bucks commonly accepted church growth ideas, the clarity of their vision as an inclusive congregation that works for a just and healthy community gives focus to the work of the leadership team. The long-held belief that multicultural, multiracial, multiethnic congregations cannot be sustained is being challenged by congregations with a new vision of what it means to be church in the urban core. In *Urban Church Education*, the authors present an alternative to the market-segmenting model of church growth, and lay leadership is central to church growth and revitalization. The church is called to be what it teaches: a community that reflects God's inclusive love and justice.⁸ Living out incarnationally this new vision of a welcoming community where all God's children are gathered is a far cry from being the church that worships in the most segregated hour in America. Holy Faith's identity has shifted as they have sought not only to

⁸ Donald B. Rogers, ed., *Urban Church Education* (Birmingham, Ala.: Religious Education Press, 1989), 85.

welcome the other, but to truly be transformed by the other. Ongoing visioning has become the means for this congregation's renewal.⁹

Cycles of reflection that focus on the assets of a congregation, with methodologies like Appreciative Inquiry,¹⁰ provide the opportunity for congregational leadership teams to share the good news as they have lived it, identifying God's activity in their community. This reflection on God's incarnation in the church provides cues for mission. Discerning God's call as a community becomes the *modus operandi* for the leadership, providing flexibility to respond to the constantly shifting urban environment in a way that reflects the unique character of the congregation.

The greatest challenge for congregations seeking to be inclusive is the availability of resources that equip them for this call. There are few materials that adequately respond to the cultural, linguistic, and socioeconomic diversity church leaders must manage. Identifying readings, activities, Bible study materials, and discussion and reflection resources that deal with issues of racism, class, gender and sexuality, economic class, and educational backgrounds (formal and informal) is difficult, and finding them in more than one language is nearly impossible.

The field of "Practical Theology" supports efforts in the church to live out the gospel imperatives. Practical theology, write authors John Swinton and Harriet Mowat, "seeks to explore the complex dynamics of particular situations in order to enable the development of a transformative and illuminating understanding of what is going on within these situations."¹¹ The work of Christian education is to provide opportunities and resources for the healthy development of the life of faith in believers. The best models of urban multicultural ministry see formation as occurring in all areas of church life. "The power and attractiveness of good teaching," notes Lyle Schaller, "begins with the sermon and extends throughout the total program."¹²

⁹ Weems, *Church Leadership*, 39.

¹⁰ See, for example, Mark Lau Branson, *Memories, Hopes, and Conversations: Appreciative Inquiry and Congregational Change* (Herndon, Va.: The Alban Institute, 2004).

¹¹ John Swinton and Harriet Mowat, *Practical Theology and Qualitative Research* (London: SCM Press, 2009), v.

¹² Lyle E. Schaller, ed., *Center City Churches: The New Urban Frontier*, Ministry for the Third Millennium series (Nashville, Tenn.: Abingdon Press, 1993), 12.

Although Holy Faith's commitment to inclusion, as seen in its welcome statement, came about from discussion groups on issues of inclusion, the discussions were not a part of an ongoing formation process. The sharing of stories and perspectives and the presentation of information about how oppression is antithetical to the teachings of Scripture was a good beginning. However, given how insidious these issues are and our natural tendency to want to avoid uncomfortable topics, the reflection on these issues remained superficial and did not significantly change the way that the church operated. Congregations need opportunities to reflect more deeply on issues of race, class, gender, sexual orientation, age, ability, and theology, seeing what changes are required in the church culture to live into an inclusive identity.

Christian formation needs to inform an inclusive identity. When difference is discussed as a gift from God rather than as something to be feared, change and diversity become a part of church stewardship. Managing these powerful gifts requires the entire congregation to become conscious of the diversity that surrounds and defines them. The educational process must be a form of critical pedagogy. Building on Paulo Freire's work, faith formation must develop a consciousness that "is grounded in critical reflection on oppression and its causes," engaging the oppressed and the oppressor in a reflection that leads to liberative action.¹³ Analyzing the political dynamics that have an impact on a community is the goal of critical pedagogy, and the "central educational act is action-reflection."¹⁴ A deeper understanding of identity issues and their implications for ministry will provide a firm foundation for the inclusive "beloved community." The vision will be more than the superficial sharing of food and ethnic dress, and will include a deep understanding of the power of culture and the ways that Christ is calling us to serve in a multicultural society.

At Holy Faith this process has been ongoing, and its beginnings predate my tenure as rector. During my time in ministry with Holy Faith this process has occurred in various contexts but can be seen most clearly in the discussions of the vestry. The values and functioning of the vestry were based on those of the dominant culture; the members who were elected were often from the professional class, and discussion of ministry programs or church issues took the form of

¹³ Mary Elizabeth Mullino Moore, *Teaching from the Heart: Theology and Educational Method* (Harrisburg, Pa.: Trinity Press International, 1998), 170.

¹⁴ Moore, *Teaching from the Heart*, 171.

a business meeting, seeking to be efficient and effective. I sought to challenge these assumptions primarily by asking questions that invited critical reflection on decisions, programs, and events: "What is the purpose of this? Why are we doing it? How does it further the gospel?" Often the answers were predictable: "to build community," for example. Yet the cultural needs of those planning the event—to manage and control everything themselves—worked against the most community-building aspect of the program, which would involve including more people from various backgrounds in the planning and implementation process. When this suggestion was made, people eventually were forced to confront their class assumptions: "We want it to look *nice*, we don't want it tacky and homey." Yet when I asked around the table and in the wider congregation, people actually *did* want to participate and make it more comfortable and homey.

As these "newcomers" to the leadership and work of the church (some of whom had been members of the parish for twelve years) participated in the planning of events, the character of the events shifted. Those who had always planned everything and complained about the load began to admit, some by their departure, that what they wanted were people who would help them do what they thought should be done. This did not contribute to community-building at all; it was not charitable, and it was not just. Asking questions about how and why things are the way they are led to an expansion of leadership, because systems were changed to accommodate a wider group of people with different needs. Discussion of how this was the building up of the body of Christ made the connections: we choose to operate in this way because we are a church, and in a church not only the educated, professional class knows how to do ministry. Things did not fall apart, were not tacky, and were actually more successful because more people felt a part of the programs and not just consumers of them.

This cyclical process of reflection and praxis has come to characterize the way we do planning and problem-solving together as a vestry. It elicits from the members their experience and their vision and incorporates it in the ministry of their church. This is not a smooth and easy process by any means. Ideas and proposals must be translated into different languages, be discussed several times to facilitate broad participation, and then be reflected upon, all which takes time and patience. The value of efficiency, which had kept some people in power in the congregation and others submissive, has been replaced with a value of broader and wider participation, where everyone

brings their gifts and together the body of Christ is built. There are also many things that we have always done that we no longer do, since they do not promote an inclusive community and the sharing of the gospel, or contribute to the vibrancy of the congregation. These changes mean that there is also a sense of grief and loss in the parish, but what is born out of the process truly brings joy to the people—all the people. Not planning things so as to conform to the dominant culture has been an adjustment for all, and it has required conversations about power, class, race, gender, and sexuality that have taken the community way beyond its expectations.

Hence, an important aspect of education and reflection for these congregations will be learning about the hegemony of whiteness. Like many mainline denominations in the United States, the culture of the Episcopal Church is European. What is identified as Episcopal worship and polity is culturally British. This is true not only for white churches in the United States, but also for immigrant churches that serve Anglicans from the former British colonies. Understanding “whiteness” becomes important in unpacking the cultural identity of Episcopalians, and in some ways is more difficult in congregations with many people of color from the former colonies. In order to incorporate the many cultures and histories of the city we must discuss cultural assumptions that define how the church functions. Those we seek to welcome are mostly “un-churched” and definitely not traditionally thought of as “Episcopalian.”¹⁵

Thomas Groome’s liberation method for religious education is especially useful for designing a Christian formation program for multicultural urban churches. He identifies five movements in the process of liberative learning. In the first movement the congregation will describe their own society’s praxis; in the second they will identify the stories and visions that underlie that praxis. The third movement is a reflection on the Christian story and vision; the fourth is dialogical reflection on their own praxis in light of the Christian story; and, finally, this dialectical process will lead to the action—transformative action.¹⁶ Varied activities will involve the whole church in the work of formation.¹⁷ The church will discuss these issues of oppression and

¹⁵ It is not within the scope of this paper to discuss in detail the ways in which colonialism has an impact on the ministries of Episcopal churches in the United States.

¹⁶ Groome’s method is described in Moore, *Teaching from the Heart*, 172.

¹⁷ Rogers, ed., *Urban Church Education*, 30.

inclusion, identifying the diversity within their own identity, their overlapping identities, and how these come together in community with others who are also living with diversity within and without.

Initially issues to be explored can include: class, gender/sexuality, race/ethnicity, and the intersecting and overlapping nature of identity, privileges, and oppressions. Discussion of these categories as social constructions will be important for the church as a social institution. In "Teaching Outside Whiteness," Judy Helfand reminds us that categories of difference "might not exist as categories if they did not support systems that maintain and produce inequality and injustice."¹⁸

I would suggest that the issue of race be tackled last. For many in the United States it is the most challenging and volatile issue of oppression. The discussion of other issues first will allow trust to be built through a conversation where all are assumed to have knowledge and experience that is important to the group's learning, and all have lived with some disenfranchisement because of social oppression. This would work especially in diverse congregations. In the case of Holy Faith, the professional and upper middle class members of the parish (medical doctors, professors, researchers) are people of color. The white people are, or come from, working class families, and many are older. The men are men of color, most of whom are immigrants. In some ways the most privileged are the young people, because of their access to education, the economic achievements of their parents, and the fact that they are not immigrants. Yet as young people, and especially as young people of color, they are well aware of their own oppression. The discussion of race and of whiteness is difficult because of the ways it affects the definition of what is "Episcopal." In fact, hegemony in many ways defines the lived experience of the colonial Anglican (Episcopal) church, for hegemony combines ideological power with the consent of the people. The political theorist Antonio Gramsci defined hegemony as the permeation throughout society of an entire system of values, attitudes, beliefs, and morality that has the effect of supporting the status quo in power relations. Hegemony in this sense might be defined as an "organizing principle" that is diffused by the process of socialization into every area of daily life. To the extent that this prevailing consciousness is internalized by the population it becomes part of what is generally called "common

¹⁸ Judy Helfand, "Teaching Outside Whiteness," in *Diversity and Multiculturalism: A Reader*, ed. Shirley R. Steinberg (New York: Peter Lang, 2009), 85.

sense," so that the philosophy, culture, and morality of the ruling elite come to appear as the natural order of things.¹⁹

The issue of cultural hegemony with regard to issues of race and denominational identity will be challenging for everyone for different reasons. The discussion of other issues would provide the groundwork for unpacking the issues related to white privilege. This churchwide Christian formation would increase awareness and capacity to reflect theologically on these difficult issues. Through workshops, discussion groups, retreats, and worship, parishioners can engage these topics in a variety of mediums (experiential exercises, readings, poetry, music, and hands-on crafts). People would be better equipped to assess their engagement with others, in the congregation and the community. It would provide the opportunity for folks to reflect in concrete terms on what it means to love neighbor as self, and to "seek and serve Christ in all persons."²⁰

Creating congregations that look like the cities outside their doors is a task that requires well-honed tools for theological reflection that is fed by and challenges real socio-economic realities. I look forward to continuing to learn from all the lay leaders who have been doing this work, and sharing their stories and their experiences, as together we design maps and tools for others called to this journey.

¹⁹ Virginia Lea, "Unmasking Whiteness in the Teacher Education College Classroom: Critical and Creative Multicultural Practice," in *Diversity and Multiculturalism*, 62.

²⁰ *The Book of Common Prayer* (New York: Church Hymnal Corporation, 1979), 305.