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Mission and Ministry: Responding to Schism and Economic Downturn

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In the summer of 2007 I accepted a call to serve as rector of St. Paul's Episcopal Church in Mt. Lebanon, Pennsylvania (a close-in suburb of Pittsburgh). Like many Episcopalians, I was well aware of the storm of schism sweeping through the Diocese of Pittsburgh. Like most Episcopalians, I was totally unaware that we were also about to be hit by an economic tsunami. Fortunately, St. Paul's has weathered the theological and financial storms that have buffeted our region. Our goal, however, is to thrive, not just survive. This article explores the impact of the schism (minimal, thanks be to God) and the economic downturn (more significant) on this parish, the steps being taken to move forward into a bright future, and the theological imperative for doing so.

Background

St. Paul's was founded in 1836 near downtown Pittsburgh. In the 1920s it abandoned its original site to move to the suburbs. Our current location is marked by our cornerstone dated 1930. After struggling financially during the Depression years, the situation improved during World War II, and during the 1950s and 1960s St. Paul's was one of the fastest growing Episcopal churches in the country.

In more recent times, the high water mark for the size of St. Paul's was 1999, when average Sunday attendance (ASA) was just over 400. During the next seven years there would be a steady decline to ASA of 290. The 27 percent slide between 1999 and 2006 served as a wake-up call for the parish leadership. The parish profile developed during 2006 for the rector search process listed as the first goal,

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"Enhancing church membership." ASA rose to 317 in 2008 and remained the same for 2009.¹

In spite of the decline, St. Paul's remains a large parish with over 1,300 baptized members, multiple staff, and large numbers of children, youth, and young families. However, the parish is dependent on annual giving for 90 percent of its income, with no endowment or other significant sources of income.

Effect of the Split in the Diocese

On October 4, 2008, the annual convention of the Diocese of Pittsburgh voted in favor of "realignment," purporting to leave the Episcopal Church and to affiliate with the Province of the Southern Cone.² However, there were many anticipatory actions taken by Bishop Robert Duncan and the other leadership of the diocese to move away from the Episcopal Church. The direction of the bishop and his followers was well known long before the action taken in 2008, and much of the effect of the diocesan split on St. Paul's was felt in the months and years before the final action. Anecdotal evidence suggests that for several years leading up to the split a number of parishioners may have left, but for different reasons. Some may have gone to more "liberal" parishes out of concern that St. Paul's was too conservative and leaning toward Bishop Duncan; some may have left for parishes more clearly aligned with Bishop Duncan, given St. Paul's more moderate stance. And some parishioners may have dropped out because they were tired of hearing about the issues raised by Bishop Duncan.

When I was interviewed by Bishop Duncan while being called to serve as rector, he told me that St. Paul's was split 50/50. He believed that 50 percent of the congregation supported him and his direction, and 50 percent was opposed. Based on my information, I felt a more accurate assessment was that about 5 percent of the congregation supported him, and the rest were either opposed, neutral, or essentially unaware of the situation.

¹ Average Sunday Attendance is generally considered to be the most important indicator of the size of a parish, given its relative reliability in comparison to the usually less accurate baptized membership data.

² Fifty percent of the individuals counted as being part of the Diocese of Pittsburgh have left the Episcopal Church. All are welcome to return.

Based on the reaction of the parish after the formal split in the diocese occurred, my assessment would seem to be much more accurate than Bishop Duncan's. No parishioner suggested that we should have voted for "realignment." (The St. Paul's deputation voted unanimously against it.) Many parishioners stepped up to take on leadership positions as the diocese reorganized. And since "realignment," the number of St. Paul's parishioners who have joined realigned parishes can be counted on the fingers of one hand.

Rather than damaging St. Paul's, I believe the split in the diocese, as sad as it was, energized and liberated the parish. Many parishioners were pleased to see decisive leadership by the vestry, deputies, and clergy to put the controversies behind them and give priority to mission and ministry. St. Paul's was proud to host the reorganizing convention of the diocese in December, 2008.

Effect of the Economic Downturn

The devastating economic downturn that wracked the nation in 2008 and beyond did not spare St. Paul's. A few parishioners lost their jobs. Many more feared losing their jobs. Parishioners' investments linked to the markets dropped significantly in value. Worst of all, there was anxiety and uncertainty about what would happen next. I believe this uncertainty had a greater impact on the financial situation of the parish than the actual effects of the recession. According to data reported in the news media, Pittsburgh fared better than much of the nation in terms of job loss and decline in home values, but there are no data for the fear factor. Pledge results suggest there was a fairly dramatic, albeit short-term, effect of the recession. While the prior year saw a significant increase in pledges (13.6 percent), pledges dropped almost 10 percent for 2009 in the regular stewardship campaign, and then increased by 10.6 percent the following year. While not possible to prove, I believe this fluctuation was attributable to the rise and subsequent decline of fear and uncertainty, coupled with some economic improvement a year after the initial decline.

A New Vision for St. Paul's

Regardless of the exact impact of the diocesan split and the recession on St. Paul's, we needed something new in order to move forward boldly, to reverse the slow decline of the recent past, and to thrive

rather than merely survive. At our 2009 vestry retreat, not one person could quote from the St. Paul's mission statement, including me. Knowing that churches that are clear about their mission and purpose are more likely to grow than churches that are not so clear, I believed it was imperative that we develop a new vision and mission statement.³ The question was, how?

In my previous parish (St. Andrew's, Madison, Connecticut), the vestry and I had developed a new vision and mission statement and presented it to the congregation. While successful, we did not achieve full buy-in from the parish. This time I used a bottom-up rather than top-down approach to develop the vision and mission statement. Having studied Appreciative Inquiry (AI), I felt AI would allow us to engage the entire congregation in developing a new vision and sense of mission, with a greater ownership of the final product.⁴

We were fortunate to obtain the assistance of a skilled facilitator with a calm and nonthreatening presence to help lead our process.⁵ In the summer of 2009 the vestry approved moving forward. The facilitator conducted a series of test interviews with vestry members and several representative groups of parishioners. Then we planned what is sometimes referred to in Appreciative Inquiry as a "summit," a gathering to engage as many parishioners as possible. This was a Sunday morning event called "Vision 15: Celebrating St. Paul's" that combined food, fellowship, worship, and planning. In late September approximately 150 parishioners gathered from 8:30 a.m. to noon for the Liturgy of the Word, with our planning process as the response to the

³ From Faith Communities Today (FACT), an ongoing process to collect information on a wide variety of topics concerning congregational life, worship, leadership, and program in Episcopal congregations. This survey, conducted in 2000, 2005, 2008 and 2010, is part of a larger ecumenical/interfaith research project involving many religious bodies. The survey was also mandated by General Convention in 2006. The FACT 2005 survey is summarized in a Power Point presentation available at http://www.episcopalchurch.org/109378_ENG_HTM.htm.

⁴ "Introduction to Appreciative Inquiry," offered by the Clergy Leadership Institute, the Reverend Robert J. Voyle, Ph.D.; <http://www.clergyleadership.com/appreciative-way/appreciative-way.html>. See also Mark Lau Branson, *Memories, Hopes, and Conversations: Appreciative Inquiry and Congregational Change* (Herdon, Va.: The Alban Institute, 2004).

⁵ Our facilitator was Ms. Dana Phillips, a lay leader at St. Thomas in Oakmont (Pittsburgh) with extensive experience as a management consultant with corporations and nonprofits. She also led a visioning process for the Episcopal Diocese of Pittsburgh.

gospel, concluding with Holy Communion. Individuals interviewed each other about why they loved St. Paul's and what they hoped St. Paul's would look like by 2015. Then small groups developed their top four hopes and dreams for St. Paul's based on the interview results. Finally, each group presented in plenary session and we posted each group's hopes and dreams throughout the parish hall for everyone to see.

Later we held a series of follow-up sessions to craft a vision and mission statement that captured the outcome of the summit. These were open meetings attended by vestry members, staff, and interested parishioners. The resulting vision statement, "The most welcoming congregation in the South Hills for all generations," serves as an umbrella for all that we do. We wanted to set a high bar for being welcoming by proclaiming that we are *the most* welcoming congregation, not just *a* welcoming congregation. We emphasize that this vision applies both to newcomers who walk through our doors on Sunday mornings and to our long-time members: we are welcoming to all. We also wanted to be clear that we serve people beyond Mt. Lebanon. The South Hills is a broad and not precisely defined geographic area that includes many surrounding communities. And finally, we intentionally adopted a double meaning in the phrase "for all generations." We are most welcoming for people of all ages, and we will be most welcoming for many years to come.

The vision statement is designed to be memorable, easily known by all. Our mission statement is longer and more detailed:

We are a beacon of Christ's love. We celebrate Christ's love:

- In worship, an Episcopal liturgy expressed in a variety of styles enriched by great music;
- In programs for children, youth, and adults;
- In fun, food, and fellowship; and,
- In service to each other and outreach to the community, the Diocese, and the world.

Each of us warmly welcomes all, no matter where they are in life or in their spiritual journey. We offer a refuge where people of all ages can learn and grow spiritually in their relationship with God. We joyfully act on our faith through service to others. We give generously to make our vision a reality, recognizing that all that we have is a gift from God.

The vision and mission statements were approved by the vestry in November of 2009, in time to be used starting with the First Sunday of Advent, 2009. The vision statement appears on all of our internal and external documents. The longer mission statement appears on all of our service bulletins (in addition to the vision statement).

The next step was to develop goals and objectives with measurable deliverables, and to assign responsibility for each goal. The vestry has developed nine goals:

- becoming most welcoming;
- promoting food, fun, and fellowship;
- developing small group ministry;
- increasing pastoral care;
- increasing outreach;
- launching a new Sunday evening service;
- increasing our visibility in the community;
- promoting a more vigorous, year-round stewardship approach; and
- conducting a capital campaign.

These goals are a combination of doing more with existing ministries, such as fellowship, pastoral care, and outreach, and completely new activities: small group ministry, a new Sunday evening service, and a capital campaign.

The three Vision 15 goals for new activities are particularly important for achieving long-term revitalization and growth. Small group ministry should provide a greater sense of community in this large parish, and give us a helpful tool for connecting new members. The new Sunday evening service will be a way of attracting new members and more young adults. Modeled after an innovative service at the Cathedral of St. John in the Wilderness in Denver, Colorado, the service will be creative, contemplative, multisensory, and multidisciplinary, yet firmly anchored in the Episcopal eucharistic tradition.⁶ Finally, the capital campaign will give us the resources we need to make our vision a reality: building projects to make our campus truly welcoming and available for generations to come; special funds to

⁶ <http://www.wildernessdenver.org>.

expand our programs for children, youth, young adults, and music; significant outreach projects; and a jump start for our endowment fund.

Reflections on the Theological and Ethical Implications

Congregations have a choice. They can become mired in the controversies of the day, or they can focus on the gospel. I believe that church is about proclaiming the gospel and carrying out the work of Christ in the world, not about judging the theological purity of the Episcopal Church. In my view it is sinful to divert time, energy, and resources from carrying out the mission of the church, and in Pittsburgh, such diversion was actively practiced by the former leadership.

In a few cases, significant numbers of people left a particular congregation to follow Bishop Duncan. In other situations, the congregational leadership, particularly the clergy, led the congregation out of the Episcopal Church, purporting to take the property and assets of the parish with them. In either case, these actions seem to me to be at the least misguided, and at worst unethical and theologically unsound.

After my arrival in Pittsburgh in the fall of 2007, I began to notice a shift in the rhetoric from the supporters of Bishop Duncan. The issue of homosexuality seemed to be losing traction, with broader challenges to the theology of the Episcopal Church taking its place. By the 2008 Diocesan Convention there was a major emphasis on the alleged heretical nature of the Episcopal Church. Having experienced the broader Episcopal Church for over twenty-five years in two other dioceses and an Episcopal seminary, and having attended dozens of Episcopal churches around the country, I knew these allegations were untrue. Some supporters of Bishop Duncan may have believed that the Episcopal Church had been hijacked by heretics; personally, I believe it was an unethical drive for more votes for breaking away.

On the issue of homosexuality, "realignment" supporters claimed that the Episcopal Church had abandoned the authority of Scripture. In reality, the dispute has been over the interpretation of Scripture, not its authority. Thus the argument that the church's position on homosexuality was grounds for leaving was at best misguided. The majority and minority could simply have agreed to disagree, and continue the debate in the great Anglican tradition, rather than fracturing the body of Christ.

Any individual can leave the Episcopal Church. Taking property or fracturing congregations is a different matter. In some cases, formerly vibrant, self-supporting congregations have become financially fragile, less able to reach out to a world in need. In other cases, the resources built up by generations of faithful Episcopalians have been removed, at least for now, from the Episcopal Church. Based on court decisions elsewhere, what has happened in Pittsburgh was not only unethical, but perhaps unlawful.

St. Paul's made its choice: to remain faithful to our roots in the Episcopal Church and to the gospel. We chose not to let the controversies distract us from our mission to build up, not tear down, the body of Christ. We chose to work together and respect each other, whether we consider ourselves theologically conservative, liberal, or simply mainstream Christians.

I believe that we are called to grow the kingdom of God, not shrink the kingdom of God; to do more of Christ's work in the world, not less. The biblical warrants are clear: the Great Commandment to love God and one's neighbor, the Great Commission to preach the gospel, Jesus' inaugural address at Nazareth proclaiming the kingdom, and the parable of the sheep and the goats calling us to care for the poor and the stranger are some of the more obvious examples.⁷ At St. Paul's we believe in being radically welcoming to all, offering great liturgy and music, providing compelling programs for children, youth, and young adults, and caring for each other and those in need in the community and beyond. God calls us through our Vision 15 process to be the most welcoming congregation and a beacon of Christ's love for all generations. Through the grace of God, we will grow, not shrink, and thrive, not just survive.

At the end of the day, as Episcopalians we unite in mission and ministry. We may debate and disagree about the theological issues of the day, but in the great tradition of Anglicanism, we join in common mission and common worship. We can agree to disagree, leave our differences at the door, and come together at the altar to share in "one bread, one body, one Lord of all, one cup of blessing which we bless."⁸

⁷ See, for example, Matthew 22:34-40, Mark 12:28-31, and Luke 10:25-28; Matthew 28:18-20; Luke 4:16-21; and Matthew 25:31-46, especially verses 35-36.

⁸ From "One Bread, One Body," text by John Foley, S.J., in *Lift Every Voice and Sing II* (New York: Church Publishing Incorporated, 1993).

We remember that "we all are one in mission; we all are one in call, our varied gifts united by Christ, the Lord of all."⁹ No schism or financial calamity can overcome the power of mission and ministry in Christ Jesus.

⁹ From "We All Are One in Mission," text by Rusty Edwards, in *Wonder, Love, and Praise* (New York: Church Publishing Incorporated, 1997).