

Church of the Good Shepherd
and
St. John the Evangelist

The Parish Project
Week 4
October 7, 2007

**“To Be Meeting the Needs of Our Members as the Body of Christ and the
Greater Community”**

“The hand of God is upon me...” these are the opening words of the first reading from the book of Ezekiel today. They remind us of the words of Isaiah that Jesus quotes, when he first returns to his hometown of Nazareth after his ministry begins. Let us set the scene: It is the Sabbath, the Synagogue in Nazareth is packed to hear the home coming boy, for now he is a young Rabbi. The pews are filled with the townsmen, while the women peer in from the dividing partition at the back and sides. The Elder rises and he gestures for Jesus to go to the Great Book and read from the scriptures:

Jesus reads: “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me. For he has sent me to bring good news to the poor and to proclaim a time of liberty to captives, to make the blind see and to set free those who are oppressed.”

When Jesus put down the book, he looked at the assembly and he said:
“These words have been accomplished today in your hearing.”

Luke’s Gospel tells us that all who heard him were astonished, because he taught with authority. They were astonished for another reason. They were astonished because the words that Jesus quoted from Isaiah are words that Jews most associated with the “Messiah.” In choosing these words, Jesus was proclaiming, to all who would listen, that he was the long promised Messiah, he was the one promised to Israel from the time of the Prophets.

When I came to begin this ministry at Good Shepherd on May 5, 2003, I remembered these words. They were words from the Gospel on my Ordination Day June 28th, 1980. Over the previous few months, I had heard all the stories of strife and conflict in this parish that had taken place over the previous 4 years. I knew that I was not a Messiah, but I knew someone who was.

I think that I would have been very foolish if I had thought that I could turn around many years where problems were resolved by conflict and division. Thinking back on those days, today’s first reading seems appropriate. Ezekiel has seen his world destroyed and all his people dragged into exile. God leads him while he is still despairing into this desert valley and shows him the bones; asking him the question: “Son of man, can these bones live?”

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My predecessor's answer was:

“No this church and this parish are on a relentless road to destruction.”

“First” he said, “There is not a priest who wants this job or wants to deal with you. And second, no priest will fair any better than me. Sooner or later he will be stabbed in the back.” Nov 2002.

When I read those words, a thought came to my mind that the only person who could succeed in such a situation was our Lord Jesus Christ. In that thought was born the seeds of an idea and that idea was “shared ministry.” It was the idea that when we all participate in one mission, one agenda, and serve one Gospel, then we are all ministers, all priests and all responsible for our church and its future. If we could acknowledge that we all work for Christ and this was his church, his ministry and his mission, then not only would we succeed but we could not fail. There is a real sense that “shared ministry” has led us to the true meaning of being the “Body of Christ.” The Body of Christ cannot fight, divide or be in conflict, the Body of Christ gave itself for others and the one sane way that we would know that we were a Christ centered church would be how we reached out to others and met their needs.

Of course “shared ministry” is not entirely my idea. We had been talking about Child Centered Education in schools for years. You do know the difference?

Most of us were brought up in an education system where the child had to conform to the rules, regulations and standards of the school curriculum in all subjects. That meant that we were tested and examined, irrespective of our aptitudes or strengths or kinds of intellect. You went in one end and came out the other stamped: “pass or fail.”

Child centered education began in Europe in the 1980's. It began with the premise that not all children are the same. Its philosophy was that teaching, curriculum and classes should be designed to meet the needs of the child. While there may be a core curriculum of seven subjects all children do not pass through at the same level or even with the same style of teaching. “Electives” play to children's strengths and allow them to shine at something.

“Shared ministry” works philosophically in the same way. “Shared ministry” moves from a clergy centered program to identify and bring to the fore the needs of the community and fellowship.

In “shared ministry”, more people have more opportunities to participate and to have a say. In “shared ministry” the clergy person does not have to be a genius at everything, he can use the expertise already sitting in the pews. In “shared ministry” we all participate in growing the “Body of Christ” such that what happens to Evangelism, Youth, Pastoral Care, Shut-ins, and Worship, concerns all of us. We all have opportunity and we all have

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responsibility. In “shared ministry” the “needs of the one do not outweigh the needs of the many.”

So, you may well ask, how are we today and why do we need a “Wellness Program”, let alone a “Wellness Manual.” Are we not healthy, wealthy and wiser? Have we not put an end to conflict and strife? Have we not grown in these last four great years?

The answer is yes, yes, yes and yes. But it is also no, no, no and no. You see for “shared ministry” to really work you do have to have everyone on board with it. At the moment we do not. Do you remember when the wise and revered Sandy Beecher told us at the vote for the Pipe Organ: “The train is at the station and you can either get on or be left behind. And I’ve waited all these years and I’m getting on.”

When we heard those words I think we all interpreted them in the same way. It might be a wild ride, it might even be uphill at times, but we needed to be all in on it.

To be in on “shared ministry” also means to change your habits, things don’t go your way, you lose the control you once had, then it is never a good idea to uncouple a carriage or try to derail the train. “Shared ministry” asks us to leave our pride and ego at the station. “Shared ministry” invites us to build Christ’s Kingdom not our own.

After four years, the Vestry and I began to identify several problems and we decided to make adjustments to irradiate them.

1. We know that some people promise to serve in a particular ministry but time, work and family lead them to fail.
2. We know that there are areas of parish and community life that we are not addressing.
3. We know that ministries that need upgrading cannot be touched because one individual or another refuses to relinquish control.
4. We know that at the first sign of change someone will shut-up shop, refuse to participate and begin a negative gossip that undermines everything shared ministry is trying to achieve.

What we have achieved together as a church and a fellowship is both courageous and outstanding. I can tell you that for one simple reason, because the eyes of the Diocese are upon us: “Shared Ministry”, the “Parish Project” and now the “Bertrand Schema” is talked about in vestries, on clergy days, and in Bible studies all over the Diocese for two reasons. People have read it in every parish in the Cobblestone and Bishop Paul has held us up in every visit to parishes he has made.

But I have to tell you today that “shared ministry” is only the beginning.

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“The Bertrand Schema” redefines the role of every Vestry member, every officer and every ministry in this parish. It invites you the members to join one of the eleven teams. It will transform power back to the Vestry and it will force us all to center our ministries on the needs of the members and the community.

Last week Maryann said to me: “I heard someone stab you in the back last week with a knife.” I said: “That wasn’t a knife, that was a toothpick.” To stab “Shared Ministry” and “The Bertrand Schema” in the back you have to use 120 knives for we have 120 backs and we will not be divided.

We stand at an important moment in our parish history. When we review the parish project and write the Wellness Manual we will put in place a blue print for the ministry, mission and conduct of this church for 100 years. From it will flow our new By- laws and how and who we choose as future pastors.

I know that there are one or two and this is hard to say, who refuse to participate in the Parish Project and dislike the Bertrand Schema. Given an opportunity they would prefer to return to a former style. I have to tell them now, and I do serve notice, that nothing will be allowed to get in the way of the work, growth, and mission of Jesus Christ in this place.

Disagree by all means, but this Vestry, clergy and congregation backed by our Bishop have set ourselves on a course to grow the Episcopal Church in Milford and Pike county and that I promise to do.

For all of you who are rightly proud of the last four years, I give my sincere thanks on behalf of your Vestry. to the very few for whom the Pipe Organ is an anathema, the full time Rectorship a mistake and the Parish Project a joke, I have to tell you that we will continue to pray for you, meet your needs and love you.

Things have changed as they had to. May our Lord Jesus Christ who set us on this course guide us with his Spirit; fill us with his grace that we may see his Kingdom come among us.

Amen+

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