

Good Soil in Unlikely Places: Reflections on More than Forty Years of Shared Ministry in an Alaskan Community

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One of the most remarkable twentieth- and twenty-first-century histories of the changing shape of the Episcopal Church is the development of shared baptismal ministry. While much has been written about the scriptural, theological, liturgical, and pastoral implications of this change, large portions of the story have never been told in detail. In June 1999, at *Living the Covenant: A Ministry Consultation*, a national conference on total ministry, Timothy Sedgwick summarized a portion of this history. He identified as central Roland Allen's originating missional vision:¹ the local church is where the gospel is indigenized, and church leaders must trust and rely on the indwelling of the Holy Spirit in the local people and church. Quickening Allen's vision were proximate developments, including "the rise of an evangelical movement with its emphasis on the transforming power of the Holy Spirit in every person's life; liberation theologies (from Latin American to feminist) with their focus on Christian communities as communities of resistance and witness to a new way of life; and the flourishing of indigenous theologies (especially those of native American peoples) that celebrated the life of particular people as a people."² Although Allen wrote between 1912 and 1930, and in the missionary context of China, he appeared to foresee and suggest some answers for the mission challenges the Episcopal Church was facing

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¹ Roland Allen's 1912 classic has been republished as *Missionary Methods: St Paul's or Ours?* (Cambridge: Lutterworth Press, 2006).

² Timothy F. Sedgwick, "Vision and Collaboration: Roland Allen, Liturgical Renewal, and Ministry Development," *Anglican Theological Review* 82, no. 1 (Winter 2000): 155–171.

in the late 1960s, many of which were felt most acutely in indigenous communities.

Sedgwick also traced the lines of transmission and conversation among Bill Gordon (then Bishop of Alaska), Boone Porter, George Harris (later Bishop of Alaska), Walter Hannum, and David Cochran (also later to be Bishop of Alaska) that came to be summarized in what was called “The Porter Report” in 1967 in the Diocese of Alaska. Beginning as a manifestation of Roland Allen’s missionary vision of a truly indigenous, self-sufficient, and self-replicating church, and as an answer to the need for Alaskan native clergy in the villages of the Interior and Alaska’s Arctic Coast, the as-yet unnamed movement gained traction in the Native and other rural communities in the Diocese of Alaska, and quickly took on wider implications as it moved south into Nevada, Northern Michigan, Wyoming, Vermont, and beyond—what has become familiar across the church as total ministry, shared ministry, mutual ministry, or ministry of all the baptized.

During these same years, an interesting and unexpected thing quietly happened at St. Mary’s Episcopal Church in Anchorage, Alaska, known simply as “what we do around here.”

St. Mary’s, Anchorage is neither rural, nor underserved by seminary trained clergy, nor significantly Alaskan Native in composition. Founded in 1955, the church is located in a diverse city of two hundred ninety thousand residents that is surrounded by ocean and wilderness, and into which the terms “urban” and “suburban” do not readily translate. Throughout its formative years in the late 1960s until the present, its average Sunday attendance has varied between one hundred and two hundred fifty persons. Beginning in the late 1960s, with the arrival of Chuck Eddy as Rector, the congregation became a fertile ground for the emergence of women in ministry, the recovery of baptism as full initiation and membership into the church, liturgical reform, and changing relationships between the role of clergy and the laity. “What we do around here” has ten overlapping, synergistic markers.

Christ-centered and mission-driven. Often within the parish we reflect upon the fact that “the only thing we have in common is Jesus,” and often not even the same image of Jesus. We keep asking ourselves and one another the question Jesus asked his disciples: “Who do you say that I am?” (Matt. 16:15, Mark 8:29, Luke 9:20). The question is an open invitation to share experience and faith journeys, each one contextual and without a final settled answer to be imposed on all.

A shared liturgy strengthens, renews, animates, and gives expression to these varied relationships with God in Christ, with one another in the church, and with those who are not yet part of our family of faith. Each service begins with a “processional” as we gather as the people of God, and ends with what we call a “processional back into the world, where we live out our calling as disciples of Jesus Christ.”³

A vibrant theology of trust in the Holy Spirit. Beginning with a parish retreat in the early 1970s, the vestry of St. Mary’s began to see themselves through the lens of Acts 2:42–47. In this passage, the creation and animation of the faith community is fully dependent upon the Holy Spirit, working in the heart of each one called by Christ, through our human limitations and vulnerabilities, and in the midst of the gathered community of disciples. More importantly, the Holy Spirit is the animator of all God-given gifts, and those gifts are given to individuals not for individual enrichment alone, but primarily for the building up of the community of faith. The gift most needed by your neighbors was given to you for their benefit, and the gift you most needed was conferred upon them. In this way the faith community is necessarily interdependent, with the gifts needed for all functions of community life, intentionally dispersed. The Holy Spirit acts in ways that break things open to new understandings and configurations, and that bring order out of chaos, so that patterns which emerge might be simultaneously beneficial and flexible. In Acts 2:42–47, the Holy Spirit works in ways that are not always easily discernible or immediately recognizable to human beings, so the community must be slow to judge innovations as failures, and patient with themselves and the sometimes nonlinear process that so often marks the development of new ways of community life.

A deliberate parish narrative of multiplicity and radical hospitality. The story a faith community tells itself is instrumental in setting the limits of what that community can or cannot believe it can accomplish. At St. Mary’s, the tagline in our Sunday bulletins is “*St. Mary’s: Keeping Things Interesting Since 1954.*” It has an intentional playfulness and even irreverence about it that suggests an evolving sense of who we are. Central to our parish narrative is the question of “which Mary?” While a few of our elders and history-keepers are clear that Mary the mother of Jesus was the one for whom we were

³ From the final words of the officiant on Sunday mornings at St. Mary’s, Anchorage, Alaska.

originally named, it has been equally clear over the years that we have embraced Mary of Magdala, Mary of Bethany, and various Marys that come our way, or in whom we see ourselves. In our eucharistic prayer each Sunday, we seldom skip mentioning our multiplicity of Marys. In a similar way, the story the congregation tells itself is that we strive to be a “safe place” of refuge, of welcome to all, a shore upon which we have all washed up at one time or another. We strive to welcome all; and many have chosen to stay, that they might in turn welcome others. Parish lore includes the stories about conscientious objectors living in the parish hall during the Vietnam War, and the homeless camp “St. Mary’s in the woods” that for a time shared our property. Through the years St. Mary’s has often been a meeting place for community groups that were not welcome or permitted elsewhere, and many a parishioner has responded to such news with, “They’re meeting here now? That sounds like us.” At one point on a Saturday afternoon, there was simultaneously a blessing of same-sex union in the sanctuary while in the parish hall a few yards away an old-time fundamentalist church was holding a no-holds-barred revival. I noticed on the way in that a parishioner had discretely stationed herself at the front doors to be a greeter and to direct foot traffic, lest the day become even more “interesting” than we had planned. And yet every Sunday in the prayers of the people we pray that “we might become an ever more welcoming, faithful, and diverse church community.” Our parish narrative recognizes that we are not yet what we are called to be.

Creative tension. Conflict can doom a community, but it can also lead us into positive change. The challenge is to reframe it as creative tension between “We want/need A, and yet we want/need B.” St. Mary’s through the years has been largely successful in living within this tension long enough for previously unimagined and creative alternatives to take shape, or for the questions themselves to change. This methodology has been practiced weekly since 1990 in small group Bible studies such as Lifetext and its successor Bible Workbench, produced by The Educational Center, which describes this methodology as a “structure that embraces a ‘both/and’ perspective rather than reducing the value and complexity of each alternative to an ‘either/or’ posture. It leads one to the awareness of responsibility and possibility.”⁴

⁴ The Educational Center, 1801 E. 5th Street, Suite 210, Charlotte, North Carolina 28204; <http://www.educationalcenter.org/what-we-do-issue-centered-maieutic-education/how-we-are-different>.

Lifelong Christian formation. One of the strongest influences on the development of ministry at St. Mary's has been the impact of lifelong Christian formation, primarily through small groups and the sharing of individual faith stories and numerous points of connection with the larger faith story in which we find ourselves. In the early 1970s Flower Ross came to St. Mary's from Sewanee and trained the first leaders in Education for Ministry. Since the first EFM groups led by Tay Thomas and Chuck Eddy in 1975–76, it is estimated that St. Mary's has graduated over 175 people from this four-year extension program in the Hebrew Scriptures, New Testament, Church History, and Theology. At various times, we have had up to three active EFM groups, of eight to fourteen people each, meeting at various times throughout the day and week. In addition to Education for Ministry, Lifetext, and Bible Workbench, Keith Miller's early work with Faith at Work was used to develop small groups that became a matrix for sharing one's faith, reflecting theologically, learning to pray, being honest with oneself and one another, discerning one another's gifts for ministry, and empowering people to begin to use their gifts both in and beyond the immediate faith community. For over twenty years "Discovery," a weekend retreat that focused on using small groups to develop and tell individual spiritual journeys, was led by rotating lay leadership teams that both modeled and invited participants into deeper engagement with these areas of spiritual formation. Serendipity small group Bible study, modeled on Lyman Coleman's work combining spiritual disciplines with the accountability of the twelve step movement,⁵ and numerous other ad-hoc programs came and went throughout the decades to round out this parish-wide process of formation, and to create numerous entry points of invitation, initiation, and engagement.⁶ At its best, formation in community helps us discover and articulate where we have been, where we are, and where we are called next. Our deepest sense of self as a disciple of Christ emerges from our relationships, our context, and our social and spiritual location.

Intentional connectivity. Related to the emphasis on Christian formation and gifts discernment in community is the emphasis on

⁵ Lyman Coleman, *Growth by Groups* (Huntingdon Valley, Pa.: Christian Outreach, 1960); and *Serendipity Training Manual for Groups* (Littleton, Colo.: Serendipity House, 1992).

⁶ To this we have recently added the work of Ted Cole, Jr., arising out of the "four keys" framework developed by Vibrant Faith Ministries, www.vibrantfaith.org.

intentionality in connection. While various programs of foyer groups, home groups, newcomer dinners, book groups, Sunday morning adult education forums, gospel-based discipleship groups, youth groups, camping and parish canoe trips, and other means have been used, the basic premise has been that a faith community is the family that we make, by the power and work of God. Social media and technological advances have moved this connectivity in new directions over the past ten years. There is a large “St. Mary’s in the diaspora” online community which acts as a connection to the parish and to one another around the world. Several years ago, a young woman who had left Anchorage a number of years before was rushed to the hospital in Seattle with what turned out to be stage four colon cancer. After getting settled in her hospital room, she sent out an e-mail message to St. Mary’s members in Anchorage. She later called to say that within fifteen minutes, she had heard from several St. Mary’s members in Alaska who immediately called her cell phone, and those located “nearby” in Washington State had later showed up in person to be with her.

Intergenerational community. In an increasingly fractured society, often broken down by marketers into multiple demographic groups, there is tremendous pressure to maintain a certain distance from one another along generational lines. St. Mary’s belief that one component of true community is to have three or four generations together in one place has been expressed in several ways. We repeatedly emphasize that children of all ages are welcome in all our worship services, but various amenities are also provided for the needs of children and families throughout Sunday morning and as needed on weeknights. During worship, we use Godly Play as an optional “pull out” for children ages four to seven, to provide a developmentally appropriate telling of the gospel story in which they can wonder and engage with the story and materials, prior to rejoining us for communion. Children’s Christian formation includes a “Sunday School” that operates between services, so the children can be with us all in worship each Sunday. In addition to a full program of youth groups and activities, our youth run “Jesus Java,” an espresso stand which boasts that “It *saves* your morning. . . .” With round café tables in the parish hall, Jesus Java has become a space for conversations and fellowship all Sunday morning. In a church world that too often places adults in control and charge, we have looked for opportunities to upend the

usual social expectations, and empower youth to provide a service the wider congregation both values and depends on. Over the years, we have had youth serving as lay eucharistic visitors, lectors, guest preachers, Sunday school teachers, soloists, and musicians, as well as the prime movers of outreach projects with Heifer Project, Salvation Army, Cook Inlet Housing, and the annual Thirty Hour Famine. In May and June of 2012, a group of eleven youth will be the driving force of a parish visitation team of sixteen parishioners carrying out a number of collaborative ministry development projects with our seven sister churches in the Mangochi region of Malawi, Africa.

Theology of abundance. Terry Parsons, the former Stewardship Officer of the Episcopal Church, tells the story of walking by a book table at St. Mary's and picking up a copy of *The Message* by Eugene Peterson. Taped to the lower corner of the book was a typed warning: not the usual "For reserved use—do not remove," but simply, "Take this book; we'll get more." Grace leads to gratitude which leads to generosity which leads to a furthering opening to Grace. A theology of abundance does not falsely claim that we have everything we *want*; it faithfully observes that we have everything we *need*. As Roland Allen understood, any robust theology of the Holy Spirit will have as a component a steady trust that the Holy Spirit has *already* given us, even if in some as-yet unrecognized or undeveloped form, everything we need to do everything we have been called to do. The implications for ministry development cannot be overstated. We do not need to despair of not having enough knowledge or leadership or training or money or people. We are not only the ministers or leaders we have been waiting for, but no one really knows how to do anything until after he or she has already completed it. In the feeding of the multitude, did the multiplication happen prior to, or in the process of the sharing with one another? Why does the gospel tell us that it is *on the way* to Emmaus that we learn to understand the Scriptures, so that our eyes may be opened to recognize the Risen Christ in the breaking of the bread? One of the most important responsibilities and gifts we have been given in community is to discern, lift up, call out, and support one another's gifts for ministry, especially while they are still in fragile form. This need not be understood as a denigration of the value of seeking more knowledge or resources or expertise, but rather that waiting for such things before we *begin* both shows a profound ignorance of the trustworthiness of the Holy Spirit, and is the single

biggest barrier we face in moving beyond our own sense of powerlessness. The only outside Savior coming to save us is Jesus, and he is already here in the power of the Holy Spirit. Exactly who else, or what else, are we waiting for?

Complementary models of maieutic and adaptive leadership. The Greek word *maieú* relates to being a midwife, assisting another in giving birth. Writing in the late 1940s, Charles Penniman insisted that “the student is the curriculum”;⁷ he was committed to helping students reflect upon the religious dimensions of life as they experienced it. Teacher as midwife has been influential in the self-understanding of St. Mary’s lay and ordained leaders throughout the years, being taught and modeled by Eric and Caroline Wohlforth and others. For ministry in all its forms to flourish in the midst of “a ministering community rather than a community gathered around a minister,”⁸ the leadership must let go of any lingering imaginings of omnipotence, as well as continually resist the projections of omnipotence from others.

But the image of teachers, clergy, and other leadership as midwife is not sufficient by itself. Complementary practices of adaptive leadership⁹ are necessary to enable self-differentiated leader/learners to identify essential personal and community values and embrace paradox and change in a complex and often ambiguous world. L. Gregory Jones invites us to place church leadership into a theological context of Spirit-filled and Christ-centered practice in saying, “Christian leaders are called to a particular type of social entrepreneurship—one that does not force us to choose preserving tradition or leading change, but thinking about them together. We are called to ‘traditioned innovation’ as a pattern of thinking, bearing witness to the Holy Spirit who is conforming us to Christ.”¹⁰ The offices of paid staff and other leaders

⁷ Entry for “The Education Center, St. Louis, Missouri,” in Donald S. Armentrout and Robert Boak Slocum, eds., *An Episcopal Dictionary of the Church: A User-Friendly Reference for Episcopalians* (New York: Church Publishing, 2000), 162.

⁸ Charles R. Wilson, “The Dream: Wesley Frensdorff,” quoted in Josephine Borgeson and Lynne Wilson, eds., *Reshaping Ministry: Essays in Memory of Wesley Frensdorff* (Arvada, Colo.: Jethro Publications, 1990), 5–10.

⁹ Ronald A. Heifetz, Marty Linsky, and Alexander Grashow, *The Practice of Adaptive Leadership: Tools and Tactics for Changing Your Organization and the World* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Business Press Books, 2009), and Katherine Tyler Scott, *Transforming Leadership* (New York: Church Publishing, 2010).

¹⁰ L. Gregory Jones, “Traditioned Innovation,” *Faith and Leadership: An Offering of Leadership Education at Duke Divinity*, January 20, 2009; <http://www.faithandleadership.com/content/traditioned-innovation>.

at St. Mary's function akin to a coach's "equipment lockers," a place where congregational ministers come to seek out additional practical, theological, and programmatic resources in the perpetual cycles of discernment, action, ongoing training/support, and reflection that constitutes their spiritual growth in a ministering community. In addition to the metaphors of midwife, traditioned innovator, and coach, much routine work of leadership in the parish is, metaphorically, "air traffic control," watching for various projects, ministries, and personalities that might be on a collision course with one another, and helping to order their various landings and take-offs in a coordinated and coherent way.

Baptismal ecclesiology. All of the above markers have been influential in the practice of ministry at St. Mary's only insofar as they functioned in the firm context of a baptismal ecclesiology that understood Holy Baptism as full initiation into the life of the ministering community of all the baptized. Our Baptismal Covenant and regularly repeated vows are the commitment rite that initiates us into a life of daily ministry and discipleship in Christ. Such a serious commitment presupposes the availability of a wide range of accessible points of entry into ministry opportunities both within the faith community and in the wider community. At St. Mary's, this began in a big way with the founding of Fellowship in Service to Humanity, a comprehensive social service program which provided everything from rides to medical and other appointments to emergency food aid delivered directly to the homes or living spaces of those who experienced food insecurity. Since 1967, FISH has functioned without any paid staff, no administrative costs or overhead, and dozens of volunteers, not just from St. Mary's, but from multiple other congregations as well. This means that grocery stockpiles are often warehoused in members' garages, and emergency calls for food supplies, diapers, or furniture go out through the congregation's small groups and informal networks. Last year, FISH provided over one hundred thousand meals in people's places of residence.

Other opportunities to live out one's baptismal vows are made available through pastoral care training programs such as Care Bears, Stephen Ministry, Samaritan Counseling Center, Circles of Support, and more recently, Coffee Pals, which provided both training and ongoing support and supervision for person-to-person pastoral care. For many years, it has been expected that anyone in need, hospitalized, or in crisis will be visited by members of the congregation, of which

the ordained clergy are only a few. When the clergy are involved, they take their lead from our pastoral care team leaders Margaret Sharrow, Jeanne Ryan, Sara Gavit, and formerly, Bob Nelson. From local community organizing ministries, to community action addressing homelessness, to emergency flood response to villages along the Yukon River, to creative partnerships with our sister churches in Malawi, every organized ministry at St. Mary's began with members of the congregation seeing the need, feeling the call of the Holy Spirit, and being both expected and empowered to respond in the ways in which they judged best. The vestry adopted an approach early on in the 1970s that minimal "permission giving" was necessary for a member to start up a new ministry and solicit the participation and involvement of others. Clergy are rarely involved in the multiplicity of these ministries, other than to fulfill the above-mentioned roles of midwife, equipment locker coach, traditioned innovator, or air traffic controller. Most of the training and ongoing support of these ministries are provided by a broad cross section of the members of the congregation, who are themselves both instructors and leader/learners as St. Mary's uses locally available resources to serve as its own indigenous seminary in the widest sense of the word.

Through the years, St. Mary's, Anchorage has trusted in the work of the Holy Spirit in exemplifying much of what Roland Allen foresaw as a self-supporting and self-replicating church. For thirty years as Rector at St. Mary's, Chuck Eddy set in motion the implications of being a faith community modeled after the Book of Acts. We are becoming who we are, a church Wesley Frensdorff called us to make real in his "dream":

Let us dream of a church
in which all members know surely and simply
God's great love, and each is certain
that in the divine heart we are all known by name. . . .

Let us dream of a church
in which the sacraments,
free from captivity by a professional elite,
are available in every
congregation regardless of size, culture,
location or budget.

In which every congregation is free
to call forth from its midst priests and deacons,
sure in the knowledge that training and support
services are available to back them up. . . .

Let us dream of a church
with a radically renewed concept
and practice of ministry and
a primitive understanding of the ordained offices.

Where there is no clerical status and no classes of Christians,
but all know themselves to be part of the laos—
the holy people of God.

A ministering community rather than
a community gathered around a minister. . . .¹¹

¹¹ Wilson, “The Dream: Wesley Frensdorff,” quoted in Borgeson and Wilson, *Reshaping Ministry*, 5–10.

