

## Minding the Gap: Building Partnerships Across Difference

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*In a world torn apart with anger, hatred, and conflict,  
we have the privilege of being living signs of a love  
that can bridge all divisions and heal all wounds.*

—Brother David Vryhof, SSJE

For the past decade our attention has been consistently drawn to the growing income inequality gap in our country and the decline of the middle class.<sup>1</sup> The fabric of life in America is changing, politicians, economists, and sociologists tell us, as the elite wealthy class increases in numbers and isolation while a growing number of people are falling below the poverty line. The church has a role to play in addressing income inequality in contemporary American society. Communities that are vastly different from each other and yet bound together by the communion of saints and the teachings of Jesus can mind the gap and cross the income inequality divide to forge relationships and share resources. This is one priest's story of how partnerships across difference and collaboration between secular and faith-based organizations built up an economically challenged neighborhood church and its people, and allowed both to thrive.

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<sup>1</sup> See "The Great Divide," a 2014 *Opinionator* series in *The New York Times* moderated by economist Joseph E. Stiglitz; David Brooks, *Bobos in Paradise: The New Upper Class and How They Got There* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2000); and Charles Murray, *Coming Apart: The State of White America, 1960–2010* (New York: Random House, 2012).



The stained carpet down the center isle of the cold sanctuary was strewn with onion peels, wrinkled bruised apples, and dirt that fell off carrots pulled from large sacks. Volunteers in winter coats reached into fifty-pound bags for handfuls of potatoes to place in the brown grocery bags on top of cans of creamed corn and bags of stuffing. Frozen turkeys sat at the bottom of the bags that filled the pews in the stunning, beautifully boned Episcopal church designed by architect Henry Vaughan and built in 1882: St. Mary's on the Hill in Dorchester, Massachusetts. Three hundred turkeys in grocery bags filled the normally empty pews that morning. They were all gone by noon. On Sundays, the last remnants of a diminishing community gather to sing and pray in this cold, nearly empty church. On Tuesdays, people stand in line from early morning to be allowed entry because they do not have enough food. Jesus fed the hungry and told the poor that they were blessed, that the kingdom of God belonged to them. I moved to an economically challenged neighborhood to hear Jesus' teachings in a new culture, and to practice living by faith where there wasn't much else to live by.

### *What Brings Us Together?*

Before I moved to the city, I served St. Anne's-in-the Fields Episcopal Church in Lincoln, Massachusetts as their rector for twelve years. The parish name gives away its setting. The kitchen window and back porch encircled by day lilies on the south side of the country rectory looked out over an open meadow of purple heather. In warmer months I walked the wooded trails to Walden Pond and dove into the clean water to swim; when snow fell we broke trails on cross-country skis that took us into woods whose heavy pine branches held the resting snow.

One weekday afternoon a high school basketball player from my church joined me to offer a girls basketball clinic at the afterschool program in an inner city parish with which we were partners. During the car ride home she told me about the girls who came to play basketball in the dingy gym. They were good athletes and quick learners, she said. Did I know that they had no physical education classes in their school? Did I know that they never practiced or played on a team? Did I know they had no recreation department and no afterschool sports?

Two voicemails waited for me when I returned to my lovely office with its bay windows looking out on fields and trees. Two thoughtful parents had called to say their children would not be attending choir rehearsal that afternoon: a daughter had made the cut and would be dancing in the Boston Ballet's *Nutcracker*; a son had made the tennis team at their private club. These practices and rehearsals were mandatory, and the church's programs were superfluous for these families able to follow their children's talents and interests wherever they might lead.

That afternoon two worlds, twenty miles apart, touched each other. The teachings of Jesus, which our churches share in common, encourage us to regard each other, no matter how different we might be, as brothers and sisters, to belong to each other as people in a family, sharing the resources of each other's lives. My parish was affluent and generous. We had the will and money to put a turkey on the table of anyone who needed it. There were now fifty members of our church involved with this inner city parish. I became restless.

Later in the same week I attended an advisory council meeting convened by our bishop at the Union Club near the State House in Boston. Our luncheon table, overlooking the Boston Common, was laid with pale pink linens and polished silver. We talked about what to do about two urban churches in Dorchester that were unable to maintain and heat their buildings and pay the salaries of their clergy. The needs of the neighborhood could not be ignored. Our bishop wanted to have an Episcopal presence in the poorest areas of Boston, but the diocese could not pay the bills and few clergy were willing to take on the financial problems, property challenges, and pressing need for growth that both parishes faced.

As we walked out onto the Boston Common after lunch I told the bishop I was wondering if I might provide the leadership the parishes needed to forge a future. I knew people who would be willing to help with the building issues, and the conflicts and challenges in the project interested me. I did not know what it would look like or how we would begin, but I had a desire to try and a willingness to step in. The bishop offered to pay my salary for three years, and after meetings with parish leaders, they voted to accept the bishop's offer and we invested our prayer, time, and skills, willing to try a new thing we called The Dorchester Partnership.

One year later, I no longer faced a twenty-mile commute from the suburbs. I lived on Dorchester Avenue, the longest, straightest

street in Boston and a central bus route across town. Ambulances flew by on the way to the hospital two blocks away, and fire trucks backed into the street from the corner station. When the subway train doors opened the people stepping through were an ethnic rainbow: African, Caribbean, Haitian, South American, Vietnamese, Irish, and African American. One person in ten was white.

As I began the work of getting to know the community I now led, it became clear that the church needed the infusion of new blood. The gatekeepers at the parish door were unwelcoming and off-putting. A changing of the guards was in order and it needed to be done quickly and gently if we were to forge a future. New faces would not walk in off the street; we would need to look beyond the walls of the church and invite people to join us.

### *Stepping Outside Church Walls*

It was the second week in November when I walked up the hill in the darkness of early evening to my first meeting of the Jones Hill Neighborhood Association. Involved citizens and state and town employees attended the meetings: homeowners, residents, realtors, police officers, politicians, and pastors. Winnie, a respected leader from church, lived next door to the building where the meeting took place. I rang the bell at her back door, and she came down two flights of stairs with a bright scarf tied around her head. I had no idea what to expect and was glad to be with Winnie.

When I walked into the room I recognized two realtors who were at open houses I had visited when looking for an apartment to rent. Victorian homes were renovated into gorgeous condominiums in a neighborhood that was being renewed and restored largely through the investment of gay men in Jones Hill properties. A young intern on a politician's staff held out a clipboard and asked Winnie and me to sign in.

The meeting began with a report on getting lights installed at the basketball court where needles and drug paraphernalia had been found on the path to and from school. An older woman with long white hair in a braid down her back was the resident historian, and she offered memorable stories to enhance the discussion. Her knitting needles didn't even pause when she spoke. City councilors, police officers, parents, and homeowners in the neighborhood discussed

upcoming neighborhood events, local businesses that drew late night crowds, and how to motivate the city to take care of empty lots where people tossed bags of trash, loitered, and slept.

The community police officer on the beat reported eighteen crimes in the past month, and eleven domestics; a man with seventeen bags of crack tied on the inseam of his pants had been arrested inside an elementary school playground two streets over. Everyone chimed in with complaints regarding a nightclub no one wanted in the neighborhood. The city councilor spoke next. A bright, outgoing Irish Catholic woman, born and raised in the neighborhood, she would become a partner in our renewal, locating funds to surround our newly renovated church property with a fence that stopped the drug traffic on our property and kept our new playground clean and safe. The spirit of collaboration among the police department, the city councilor and politician's offices, and the residents was impressive. Everyone played a part in keeping the neighborhood safe, enhancing its beauty, and caring for its people. The police and politicians depended on the people as much as the people looked to them for help.

I introduced myself as the new priest at St. Mary's. Funded by the diocese, we had an opportunity to renew the physical and spiritual life of the historic church in their neighborhood. The hours of our food pantry were on the flyer I passed out, along with times of worship and how to reach me. I told them I would attend the Neighborhood Association meetings and wanted to know how the church could be of service to the neighborhood. Winnie invited people to join us, to send their children to our summer school, and to use our building for events. She spoke of the new playground that partner churches were helping us to build. We offered an open invitation across sacred and secular lines to all those present.

I wanted these people to come to church. I wanted them to see the church as part of their neighborhood. They wanted the church to thrive regardless of their spiritual interest in being members; they wanted its beauty on the street, and its welcome face in their neighborhood. Several gay men spoke with me at the close of the first meeting. One told me his partner played the organ at a downtown church or I would see him on Sundays. Another asked if gay people would be welcome in an Episcopal church, and a man named Daniel asked if there was anything he could do to support the resurgence of the church's presence in the neighborhood. This was the beginning of

finding people invested in collaborating to make our church a place that would succeed. Collaboration and partnerships would become the operating principle beneath our success.

### *Creating a Diverse Community*

Daniel knew Winnie and he walked out with us that night as the neighborhood meeting ended. I learned then that his term as president of the Neighborhood Association had ended a few weeks earlier. He had owned his house on the hill for over ten years. He was the founding president of DotOUT, the first gay and lesbian organization in Dorchester. He made sure I knew my way home, and then repeated his offer to help rebuild the church. He had never darkened the door because he assumed he would not be welcome, but he sensed that might change with my leadership. The story of our friendship is an example of the impact of building partnerships across difference and of collaboration across secular and sacred organizations. He participated in the restoration of St. Mary's and ended up finding his spiritual home.

A concert series Daniel organized brought people inside the church regardless of their religious affiliation. A talented musician from the local community donated his time. We produced flyers, advertised, invited people to a reception after the concert, and raised enough money to fill the furnace with oil that winter. Daniel and Winnie were at the entrance and welcomed those who came in. When I welcomed our guests to the concert, I also invited them to join us on Sunday or to come on Tuesday if they were in need of food. Maybe they wanted to join us for Sunday brunch before they came to church to meet people in the community before joining us for prayer and worship.

Daniel was setting a high bar for involvement in the parish community, but he wasn't showing up on Sunday. He had grown up Roman Catholic and loved his childhood parish church, but he had not been to church since the day he came out to his family in his twenties. I explained that we could offer all the concerts and programs we wanted, but if the parish was going to survive, we needed praying, pledging members. Just try coming to church and see what you think, I suggested. After being rejected by the church he loved, being told he was welcome here was not enough. Daniel and many others like him needed to be repeatedly invited and encouraged to attend.

We asked Bishop Gene Robinson, who was well known and respected in the secular gay community, to help us welcome the neighborhood community into our sacred church community. His popularity brought in a standing-room-only crowd on a Sunday afternoon. He spoke of being followers, not admirers of Jesus. His message was clear: get involved. He boldly endorsed the rights of gay and lesbians in church and society, including their right to marry. People who never came to church were engaged in conversation.

Soon Daniel was in church every Sunday, and he brought friends who needed the same invitation he did. Gradually our collaboration with those in the community who had exited the church deepened, and those who had been rejected knew they belonged to a church where they could be themselves, where their gifts were welcomed and their leadership was needed. But our work had just begun; there were new bridges to build—this time across the differences of our own members.

In the minority populated neighborhoods of the city the devout Episcopalians are most often Anglicans from the Caribbean islands that were British colonies. Christians from the West Indies are Anglicans with strong ties to their denomination. They are experienced at building close communities; they value their worship and faithfully care for each other. And they are predominantly theologically conservative. How were the Caribbean Anglicans who were now attending St. Mary's and the new gay members of the community going to become members and leaders in the same community?

The Caribbean Anglicans who joined St. Mary's were criticized for being part of the church where the gays went. I knew it, they knew it, we all knew it—but no one talked about it. I raised the issue and said we didn't have to talk about it just now, but we would soon be talking about who we were as a community and what we believed in. The Caribbeans were silent and reflective, nodding their willingness. Some gay men were angry that the topic even needed to be raised; others were glad it was finally on the table. Months later, after talking through the prejudices we all brought to the table, with one side admitting they had grown up in a church where it was a sin to be a homosexual and the other threatening to leave, we all agreed that we needed each other and had a lot to learn from each other. And then something happened: Rosalind took on significant leadership.

Rosalind works in the business office at MIT. She and her teenage daughter were regular, faithful members of St. Mary's from Trinidad.

They cooked and served food side by side with Daniel every Sunday at brunch, laughing like the best of friends. Rosalind spoke up at our next meeting, saying she thought it was time we posted a rainbow on our sign. "In my office window at MIT there is a rainbow that lets everyone know they are welcome in my office, and at our university. How can I be open at work and not here in my church? I don't think it is enough to say we are open to everyone. It should be stated on our website and on our sign out front. We need to say that we are open and affirming and welcoming. The gay members of our congregation should not have to ask for this. This is something we should be doing for them, they do so much for us."

Rosalind led our community across a threshold. Our differences were not as important as what we shared in common. Members of both the gay and Caribbean communities took steps closer to each other. They shared the role of reader in church and leader at the altar, they worked as altar guild members and ushers, they taught the youth and brought food to brunch, arranged flowers and washed linens. Together they took turns witnessing in church, asking everyone in their community to support the church financially. We were becoming a parish that welcomed diversity of every kind.

### *Building Bridges*

A bishop took an unlikely risk and asked me to lead in a culture foreign to me. Daniel, Rosalind, Winnie, and so many others took the risk of joining a community they were not completely at home in. Taking these risks and meeting these challenges prepared us to build bridges across the city and diocese. We came to understand that positive outcomes depend upon collaboration and partnerships, and upon courageous leaders.

Suburban churches stepped across the income and opportunity gap to become part of a community of Christians in a neighborhood foreign to them. Our church became a host site for local arts programs, evening tutoring classes, and music programs. Broken playground equipment was replaced; the churchyard was expanded, cleaned, and cushioned with wood chips and surrounded by a fence installed to protect children at play. Over fifty people from parishes ten to twenty miles away came together to raise a playground and beautifully landscape the front of the church. Our neighborhood noticed. At the ribbon cutting ceremony the mayor and city councilor,



who both contributed to our success, and even our postman came to celebrate with a large group of people from the suburbs. When our doors opened for our diocesan summer school, the Neighborhood Association was invited to send children from the neighborhood to camp. St. Mary's survived and thrives today because of partnerships that stretch across differences and collaboration between secular and sacred organizations.

There are still more people fed by food on Tuesday mornings than are fed at the altar on Sundays, but maybe that is what following the teachings of Jesus is all about. As mainline churches struggle to have authority and significance in contemporary life in America, what might it mean for every church in the suburbs to build bridges across difference and establish partnerships with churches in vastly different cultural and class settings? Collaboration across sacred and secular lines explodes stereotypes and builds understanding. Partnerships teach us how much we have to gain from, and how much we have to give to, to those we know very little about and yet live and vote and pray with in American society today.

