

Grace in the City: Urban Ministry in the New Normal

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The current “great recession” has had an impact on Allentown, Pennsylvania, just as it has on every city in the world. Well before the days of Bernie Madoff and subprime mortgages, though, Allentown and the other cities of the Lehigh Valley were navigating an economic tragedy.

The driver of the Lehigh Valley’s economic fortunes was the Bethlehem Steel Corporation. It was headquartered in a twenty-one-story building, the tallest in the Lehigh Valley by only eight feet, but that was enough to dispel any doubts about who dominated the economy. Its research center and executive dining room sat clearly visible on the highest mountain in the Valley, a looming reminder of the power that controlled the destiny of nearly every person below. And there below, deep in the crevice between the hills, was the plant that produced the steel that made Bethlehem and its neighboring cities thrive. Allentown was one.

The Bethlehem Steel plant was the largest factory in the world, and they say it glowed red in the night and lit up the sky for miles. It is empty now and decrepit except for one small corner that has become a Sands Casino. So grand are the buildings that they are striking even in their rusted decay. The mountaintop building has been absorbed by Lehigh University, and the office building stands dark and empty, towering against a sky no longer bright with the furnaces’ fire.

The fate of many who once worked for Bethlehem Steel is like the fate of the company’s real estate. So is the fate of many of their descendants. So, too, is the fate of many of the people who moved into the homes of the workers who made the steel. As they chased faraway jobs, their once grand houses were divided into makeshift apartments, while “outsiders,” who brought with them problems that

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the Lehigh Valley had never known, resettled the neighborhoods. Center City Allentown, more than any other place in the Lehigh Valley, fell apart.

Building a Fire in the Darkness

On a corner that is like a stake in the ground between the most revitalized part of the city on the south and the most troubled part on the north is the oldest house of worship in continuous use in the city. Grace Episcopal Church has been there since 1856. The members from before the economic downturn—the first downturn, not the second—remember Grace as a “country club church,” but it is hardly that now. The average Sunday attendance—which is essentially the entire membership—is fifty-five. Even that is a startling large number, since Center City Allentown has a reputation as a place of gangs and drugs, of danger and death. Most people will not even drive through, even with their windows rolled up and their doors locked.

Of the fifty-five who come to Grace Church, all but eight pass by at least one other Episcopal Church on the way. Grace is not a neighborhood church but a “destination” church. The people who come have made a choice.

Their predecessors made a choice, too, not to close the church and move to the suburbs when urban blight took hold. Other mainline congregations did flee, but the people of Grace made a conscious decision to stay “because we felt we were needed here,” one of the most senior members reminisced when we talked about how to tell our story in this article. “Many of our members left and went to [a parish in a more prosperous neighborhood], but we stayed.”

First there was a food bank that was no more than a closet in the rector’s office. Then came the AIDS services center. Soon after, a Montessori school was founded for the children of the clients of the food bank, which by then filled the entire undercroft. Gradually new programs were added: the five-days-a-week GED classes, the neighborhood employment agency, the rehabilitation programs for juvenile offenders, the free legal counseling service, and now, in partnership with the Diocese of Bethlehem, a shelter for chronically homeless people. For thirty years, the parish has responded to the needs of the city as they have emerged.

To claim that this is the fruit of perfect selflessness would be to tell only half the story. More than altruism drove this remarkable

outreach effort. The ministries allowed the parishioners to keep their beloved church open: the place where they and their children had been baptized, confirmed, and married, and where their ancestors had been commended to God. No one wanted to see a place so dense with memories abandoned, but a building that stood empty six days a week in a dying neighborhood was not worth saving. A building that housed the work of the gospel every day was, so Grace Church by tiny steps became arguably the most socially active church in northeast Pennsylvania, certainly for a church of its size.

The Crisis That Became the Status Quo

The recent economic downturn—the great recession—has not radically changed the way Grace Church does business. The ministries do serve far more people than they did only two years ago. The reasons “we were needed here” are undeniably more critical, and so are the responses. Still, they are not new. In Allentown, the current economic downturn is not so much a crisis but a spike in a long-established pattern of poverty and inequity, and the people of Grace Church do not imagine that the situation will ever change.

When the current recession is over and Allentown has returned to its post-steel normalcy, the neighborhood will still need the food bank, the school for children whose poverty makes them ill-prepared for public schools, the job placement agency, and the rest of the programs that Grace Church created for an earlier crisis that has become the permanent status quo, and perhaps not only in Allentown.

Allentown is, oddly, a bellwether of the presidential election. Statistically, as the city goes, so goes the nation. Allentown may also be a bellwether of the larger American economy. The seemingly recent and seemingly temporary bifurcation of the national economy between the upwardly mobile and the chronically poor has been underway for decades and is no longer an aberration. The first wave hit Allentown decades ago, but now the entire country is awash in it.

Old Problems, a New Response

“What has changed here since the economy faltered a couple years ago?” I asked the entire community one Sunday, and someone shot back, “We have renovated our liturgical space.” At first the answer seemed absurd, but it was the most telling comment anyone

could have made. When the current financial crisis was at its worst, we ripped out the pews and tore up the floor, dismantled the altar rail and moved the organ console, and we set to making functional, beautiful, and new a space that had grown confining, ugly, and worn. With the help of friends and even strangers from afar who admired our forbearers' decision to stay when others had left, we, by the sweat of our collective brow, spent Advent 2009 bringing our worship space to rebirth. Only one former member contacted us to object that we were doing a major architectural renovation in the midst of an economic crisis, putting me in mind of the old rant about spending money on nard when it might have been used to feed the poor.

The renovation was more than cosmetic, although it certainly was that. New paint, new flooring, new lights: that was part of our work. Beyond all of that, however, our project was to escape from a room built for an ecclesiology other than ours, another Prayer Book, and an economy that required of our founders a far different engagement with the world. The renovation, even though it may seem to have been about bricks-and-mortar, was actually about our common mission and our common life, all inextricably woven into our common prayer.

Crisis and nostalgia restrained our ancestors from moving out. For different reasons, our decision today is to move in, driving by other churches to a corner where, were it not for Grace Church, few of us would ever think to go. Our liturgy is essential to why we take that risk and why, once we are there, we struggle to keep alive our ancestors' response to the economic collapse.

As a liturgist, I must guard against the temptation to credit common prayer with a power it may not have. Charlemagne believed that by changing the liturgy of Europe he could consolidate his empire. Similarly, the first generations of the Oxford and Cambridge Movements were certain that by restoring the church's common prayer they could restore the church. More recently, the luminaries of the Liturgical Movement convinced the churches that a reinvigorated liturgy would almost automatically reinvigorate Christian evangelism and social action in a post-Christian world. Those are all bold claims and impossible to prove.

At Grace Church, in fact, the opposite dynamic seems to have been at work. The culture of justice had to come before the renewal of the liturgy. Had not an ethos of social justice and gospel foolishness been in place before the parish undertook liturgical renewal in

earnest ten years ago, changing the liturgy would probably not have transformed the culture. Moreover, had not that ethos already been well-established—an ethos that one of us insightfully pointed out frees us from the urge to conform—we probably could not have undertaken the remaking of our liturgy and our liturgical space. What happens at Grace Church is a radical departure from what most people think of when they imagine Sunday in an Episcopal church, and the culture of solidarity with those suffering under the weight of the economy prepared us to create it.

Yet, whether the outreach or the liturgy came first, a symbiosis has now evolved where our social action and our ritual action depend upon one another. Despite the sorts of protestations that see nard as a waste of money, we have discovered that investing in the liturgy is investing in the lives of the poor. The members of the parish report unambiguously and consistently that the liturgy as we celebrate it both convicts and comforts them, compelling them to do the works of justice and giving them the strength. Without the liturgy, we often say, we would be just a social service agency, and none of us is interested in that.

Common Prayer, Common Life, Common Mission

Our liturgical space is now quite flexible, and we gather for both the Word and Communion services face-to-face. Whether across an empty nave, across a font, across a coffin, across a row of chairs waiting for those with feet to be washed, or across a Table that holds the Bread of Life and the Cup of Salvation, we see our brothers and sisters at prayer. Some of them we know well, and some, we know hardly at all. What we do know is that our lives are inextricably bound together by baptism. In a room stripped of clutter and rid of pews, we find ourselves looking into one another's eyes. "As I look at the faces of the people I love across this room," one of us said, "I see the Body of Christ, and I cannot fail to realize that the Body of Christ continues outside these walls."

While our ancestors' decision to keep the place open and alive seems not to have been motivated by the liturgy, our determination to stay the course surely is.

As Grace Church celebrates a holy rite with integrity and intention, it finds itself being converted and formed into a force for "unity, constancy, and peace" in a world of brokenness, uncertainty,

and strife. Without presuming cause-and-effect, I hazard the following theses about the relationship between the celebration of the liturgy and the engagement of at least this one parish with the casualties of the American economy.

1. It is not so much the words of the liturgy that form the parish and sustain its commitment to action, but the enacted rite. The sharing widely of the tasks and ministries and the arranging of the room so that the entire assembly is clearly the liturgical actor gradually form a community that knows instinctively that the Christian life is about *doing* something. It is not a passive enterprise. Furthermore, in celebrating a liturgy that is clerically led but not clerically dominated, the community experiences in a stylized way life in an ordered community of equals. As one member said, "We don't just stand and watch in the liturgy, so we learn not to stand and watch during the rest of the week."

2. The 1979 Prayer Book liturgy can sustain and compel a church as it confronts an inequitable economy. *The Book of Common Prayer* is, as it is so often said, a masterpiece, and as a matter of principle, we at Grace Church do not violate its rubrics nor deviate from its texts, although we do sparingly use the authorized texts in the *Enriching Our Worship* series. "The worship of Christ as this Church has received it" does not need to be improved upon to transform and sustain a community as it engages the most gritty realities of life. Importing hymns, prayers, and eccentric ritual actions focused on an economic-justice agenda will do no good if the liturgical actions and liturgical planning processes enshrine power-hoarding and social stratification. A dictatorial system that forbids the assembly to use the word "Lord," for example, not only fails to create a liturgy that models an equitable economy—its supposed aim—but actually models the culture's lust for power and control, of which economic inequality is the greatest symptom.

The Roman Catholic liturgist Robert Hovda once wrote that the church does not need more peace liturgies, since all our liturgies are peace liturgies. Truer, he might have said, all well-enacted liturgies are peace liturgies. As a corollary, the church does not need to overlay the liturgy with themes of economic justice because the entire liturgical event, celebrated well, unveils economic evil and models economic virtue. The liturgy, celebrated well, facilitates an encounter with the Christ who himself lived among a people politically and

economically oppressed, and so the rite exposes the well-disguised evil of the status quo. The liturgical event, celebrated well, is an experience of a well-ordered economy, a word Archbishop Williams in his lecture at the Trinity Institute pointed out means “housekeeping.” In the household of God, we experience the economy of God. All good liturgies, then, are economic justice liturgies. The layering upon them of justice-themed texts from outside the Prayer Book tradition is, at best, unnecessary and, at worst, a distraction from the real business of enacting in ritual form life in God’s reign.

3. The liturgy and the works of justice can become symbiotically related and mutually supportive when both are porous. Clients from our social services agencies worship with us on Sunday and, conversely, more than half of the members of the liturgical assembly do hands-on work in our outreach. The Prayers of the People are freshly composed every week, and they name not only general categories of need, but also specific instances of it. Every week, for example, we read aloud the names and ages of all the American soldiers who died in the past week in Iraq and Afghanistan. The list echoes like a funeral drum, as often more than a dozen names of startlingly young people sound among us a tragic beat, and then we pray for the dead among our “enemies,” whose names we will never know.

Our common prayer is not an escape from the tragedy of the world but a confrontation with it in view of the challenge and the promise of Grace. The Sunday after a young man was murdered in our parking lot, we processed from the church to the site—amazingly, the very spot where we light the paschal fire—and named in unambiguous terms what had happened there, why it had happened, and our determination to claim holy ground in “the valley of the shadow of death.” When a tenement in the next block burned one winter Saturday, we took the furniture out of the church and turned the room over to the Red Cross to use as a shelter for the displaced poor. The sacred and the secular are separated, if at all, by the thinnest of membranes.

4. Neither a liturgy that is shabby nor one that is opulent models life in the economy of God. When Grace Church decided to renovate its liturgical space in the midst of an economic downturn, it was at once rejecting poverty and decay, and excess and artificiality. The community would not be formed for life in the reign of God, including putting itself at the service of God’s bringing the reign to birth, if our weekly enactment of the gospel embodied either the plight of the

poor or the excess of the wealthy. A celebration that employs what is good, true, and beautiful in ways that are modest and direct immerses the church in an enactment of the gospel, where poverty is not tolerated but overindulgence is rejected.

All of this is but the experience of one parish. It is not meant to glorify the people or the process, but to set forth one model that works in a particular time and place. It is not a formula for success or a promise that, in the short run, all will be well. Still, Grace Church has been confronting for decades the irreversible economic collapse that has now spread abroad. What once happened and continues to happen in Center City Allentown is proof that sometimes risk can beget return, tradition can beget revolution, and poverty can beget wealth in the household of God. All of it is proof that death inevitably gives way to life in the economy of the Everliving One who brought Jesus forth into glory.