

Distribution Ministries in a Multicultural Society

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St. Clement's is a 112-year-old parish of about 375 people in the Makiki neighborhood of Honolulu—a neighborhood that has the highest per capita residential rate in Hawai'i. The one-acre parish campus is surrounded by high-rise apartment and condominium buildings, along with private and public schools, hospitals, and commercial businesses. The annual income of the neighborhood ranges from below the poverty level to the multimillions, and residents include a large number of college students and faculty from the University of Hawai'i, as well as many professional individuals and families. In the past twenty-five years, the level of low-income and homeless individuals in the community has increased, and the number of recent immigrants from Micronesia to the Makiki neighborhood has also seen a significant increase.

The parish is comprised of St. Clement's Church and St. Clement's School, a sixty-year-old preschool-kindergarten that serves approximately 135 students. The initial mission of the school was to serve parish and neighborhood children. It currently enrolls students from all over Oahu, many of whom come from middle- to high-income families. Seven percent of the students receive financial aid.

In 2001, the Right Reverend Harry Bainbridge, then Bishop of Idaho, made an episcopal visitation to St. Clement's for the on-sabbatical Bishop of Hawai'i. In his sermon, Bishop Bainbridge asked the congregation, "Would anyone in this neighborhood miss St. Clement's if it weren't here?" That question, along with the commitments of our Baptismal Covenant and the parish tagline, "An inclusive and caring Christian community," provided the foundation and impetus for reviewing and expanding our ministries to the surrounding community.

St. Clement's provides a monthly food distribution that in 2001 served 35 to 40 families and currently serves between 100 and 125

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families and provides lunch for about 200 to 250 individuals. During office hours every day, the staff makes up and provides bags of food for those who come to request them. The rector's discretionary fund, which in 2001 provided approximately \$5,000 for bus passes, utility bills, medical needs, rent, and emergencies, in 2009 provided over \$36,000 in assistance for these items. With the \$50 cap we put on each check (except for extreme circumstances) and the restriction of one check every twelve months, simple division told us that we served approximately 700 different individuals with financial assistance. The need was great enough to restrict requests for financial assistance to two days a week so the office staff could get the rest of its work done. Requests for food, however, were responded to every day.

The sources of funds for the rector's discretionary fund are free-will offerings from the parish, as well as designated contributions from inside and outside the community. There were two or three times during the past year when the fund became dangerously low. Requests via parish email and on Sunday mornings resulted in donations of \$5,000 to \$7,000 each time.

The source of food for distribution has been the community food bank, parishioners, and, twice a year, collections from the 135 children of St. Clement's School. More than once, the food bank was severely depleted. Special requests to parishioners resulted in immediate replenishment of the parish pantry so that the limited resources of the food bank would be available to other nonprofits. The pantry also received special donations from a local foundation, as well as individual parishioners who would make a "Costco run," loading up their SUVs with close to \$1,000 worth of canned and packaged goods, as well as hundreds of pounds of rice, an essential food in the local diet.

Another continuing ministry since 2001 has been the preparation of meals for the homeless shelters of the Institute for Human Services. Every other month a crew of parishioners prepares and serves a hot dinner to the men of the homeless shelter, while a portion of the meal is delivered to the women and children's shelter. This is not a unique ministry; scores of organizations do similarly. But it is an important and time-intensive ministry that helps to keep the costs down for the shelters, and gives parishioners an exposure to those who have nowhere else to turn.

Over the past year, the parish took on one more community ministry: a weekly farmers market. This was an outgrowth of a request by the neighborhood library to hold such an event four times during the past

summer as a fundraiser. The response by the neighborhood was such that the vestry decided to take the market on as a weekly ministry, giving a place for neighbors to gather as a community on the parish campus. With thousands of apartment and condo dwellers, the potential for isolation is high; a weekly event provides the opportunity for increased interaction among neighbors, along with the opportunities to purchase fresh local produce and prepared foods. The three-hour, once-a-week event has grown from an average attendance of about 200 to over 600 during the past eight months, with an average of twelve vendors at each market. We know we have only scratched the surface of potential attendance, and we continue to find new ways to get the word out to the neighborhood. What is unique about this particular market is that all the funds collected from vendor rents are put back into community ministries of the parish. We also insist that all produce sold be grown locally, thus supporting our local farmers. The vendors have developed a strong loyalty to the market for these reasons, and have positive feelings of contributing to the needs of the community.

With the recent severe downturn in the U.S. economy, the needs of the surrounding community have increased significantly. An ongoing challenge has been to keep in front of parishioners the understanding that our ministries are not just “do-good” programs. Rather, they are ministries that put into action the faith that we claim. Our understanding of faith in the context of outreach ministries is multifaceted, and based in our responses to several theological questions:

1. What is the mission of the church?
2. What is it that we are required by God to do in our lives?
3. What is our duty to our neighbors?
4. What do we promise in the Baptismal Covenant?
5. What is our understanding of humanity?
6. What is our understanding of sin and judgment?

We find resources for our discussion of these questions in both Scripture and our Anglican tradition. In the catechism in the 1979 *Book of Common Prayer* we learn that the mission of the church is carried out by its people, who *are* the church, and who “bear witness to [Christ] wherever they may be” and “carry on Christ’s work of reconciliation in the world.”¹ Micah 6:8 gives us a state of mind and heart

¹ *The Book of Common Prayer* (New York: Church Hymnal, 1979), 855.

to carry out the mission and ministries of the church, telling us *we are required by God* to “do justice, to love mercy, and to walk humbly with God.” Christ’s work of reconciliation is best outlined in Matthew 25:35–46, where we are urged to respond to those in need as if we were responding to Christ himself. When we consider our duty to our neighbors, the catechism also provides us with an elaboration of how we respond to those in need, based on the Ten Commandments: in loving others as ourselves we are “to be honest and fair in our dealings; to seek justice, freedom, and the necessities of life for all people; and to use our talents and possessions as ones who must answer for them to God.”² And the last three questions of the Baptismal Covenant provide us with an ongoing reminder that we are to “proclaim by word and example the Good News of God in Christ,” to “seek and serve Christ in all persons,” and to “strive for justice and peace among all people, and respect the dignity of every human being.”³

Once we have studied and prayed on these precepts for ministry, the real challenges come as we live them out in “the real world”—the questions about how we understand humanity, sin, and judgment. After a couple of years into my ministry at St. Clement’s, I began to hear variations on the statement, “I’m getting tired of giving food/help to people who drive here in Cadillacs and SUVs and are obviously taking advantage of us.” Conflicts also developed as a result of cultural differences in values and expectations with the Micronesian community, in particular. A lack of resources on the part of the parish was never really an issue; we could always manage to gather what was needed to respond to those with less. But the feeling that we were being taken advantage of was a major block to being able to participate in the ministries from a Christian sense of sharing what we have with others. Twice over the past nine years, distribution ministries were put on short hiatuses so we could work through these issues. We dealt with feelings of resentment, of judgment, of sinfulness. We dealt with our understanding of the kinds of people God has created, and who our neighbors/sisters/brothers really are. We dealt with whose responsibility it is to separate the sheep and the goats, the wheat and the tares. And we dealt with who we are as human beings making these judgments on other human beings. Underlying all of these discussions was the parish’s vision of being an inclusive and caring Christian community.

² *Book of Common Prayer*, 848.

³ *Book of Common Prayer*, 305.

These ongoing theological discussions are essential among parishioners who are living out their faith, as opposed to “merely” doing good works. In a community like Honolulu, where volunteerism is highly valued, it was especially important to understand that living out one’s faith through works—sharing the Good News of God in Christ—is directly connected to one’s essence, one’s *raison d’être*, unlike volunteer work that can be based in any number of humanistic or personal motivations. Understanding the reasons that some might actually “take advantage of” our ministries was also important—not as an excuse, but as a way to look at life circumstances and what might cause different values to develop in families and individuals. Understanding that those on both sides of a ministry responding to needs are loved equally by God was another important aspect of the discussions. And discerning what a just distribution of available resources might be continues to be an ongoing topic of discussion.

Near the end of 2009, two situations in particular caused us to reconsider how we were responding to requests for financial assistance. One was a comment by someone who walked into the parish house and asked our sexton, “Is this where we get the free money?” We learned that the word had gone out through the Micronesian community that there was “free money” and free food at St. Clement’s. The second was one day in November when we gave out over \$2,000 in \$50 monthly bus passes. This was an unusually high distribution, and as we looked over the records for the day, we discovered many bus passes had been given to individuals living at the same address—in one case, six bus passes to one “family” of adults. We also learned that many of the individuals who came to us that day were gathering throughout the day planning how they would request bus passes so we wouldn’t know they were all from the same large group. They had learned how to play our system. We also knew that some of these bus passes were being sold on the streets after we had made it possible for them to be purchased. And we became very aware that this surge in financial assistance prevented us from giving assistance to those who came to us after this particular day. Subsequent discussions focused on the issues of just distribution of funds, a better understanding of some of the driving forces in the Micronesian culture and values system, and the development of new parameters that would enable us to continue to assist those in need.

We also discovered a similar effort to “play the system” in our food distribution, where a specific number of bags of food were given

to each family. Suddenly we found ourselves with many individuals claiming to be a “family” but who were all part of the same family at the same address. They would walk away with three to four times the amount of food that other families would receive. By the time the last people in line were served, there often was not enough food. Once again, the questions of humanity, judgment, respect, and just distribution had to be addressed.

Finally, we have been helped by efforts in the wider community to promote greater understanding of who the Micronesians are and how we can better work with them to meet their needs. This will continue to be a challenge in Hawai'i as various ethnic groups immigrate to the Islands and try to establish their communities and cultures in this multiethnic society. Learning about the Micronesian culture has been an eye-opener for us. What we have perceived as “Micronesian” is actually a number of different cultures from a small group of islands in the South Pacific who eventually formed as the Federated States of Micronesia (FSM). After World War II, they came under the protection of the United Nations and subsequently were transferred to the authority of the United States. The relationship has been one of a significant level of dependence by the FSM on the U.S., resulting in a below-subsistence agricultural economy. Conflicts between Western and Micronesian cultures in the areas of leadership, education, work ethics, family values, and the importance of the community rather than the individual have made integration into Western (and, in this case, Hawaiian) society challenging. Micronesians also have been given a no-visa, no-cap immigration policy by the United States, resulting in continually increasing numbers of families migrating to Hawai'i and the mainland searching for better education and jobs. Differences in cultural practices, however, have continued to make integration into Western-based cultures difficult. For example, Micronesians are accustomed to “borrowing” items from others without asking permission. This is not an issue in their own society, where the emphasis is often on the communal holding of goods, but causes great concern in those communities where this is not seen as appropriate because of the emphasis on individual ownership and control. So as we are continually faced with these cultural differences at so many levels, we must also find ways to manage our resources for some level of equity in distribution to those in need.

A number of practices have been put in place to help us ensure that we have resources enough for those who need them.

1. We do not give out cash. All checks are written to the debtor (landlord, utility company, supermarket) and 99 percent of the checks are \$50 and under. Those who come to us are aware that this limit exists and that they must provide proof of the need. With a few exceptions, we tend to limit financial help to once per year per family.
2. A maximum of two bags of food per family are distributed no more than once a month. The local food bank requires that we keep records on individuals who receive food, so this makes it easier to maintain a level of supplies that enables us to meet daily needs. We also distribute information about the other food sites on the Island so individuals have a variety of options.
3. We have a small list of individuals to whom we give no assistance. These are folks who have told us untrue stories about their circumstances, who have traveled the circuit of churches around the Island asking for money, and who are quite aggressive in their insistence on receiving financial resources and lodging. Fortunately, the staffs of churches on the Island talk with one another enough to be able to identify these individuals and compare notes on their stories.
4. We are currently limiting our financial assistance efforts to those within the parish's zip code, to those who are living in safe-and-sober houses, and to those in YWCA and YMCA residences. We have good working relationships with the staffs of many of these residences, and these relationships help us to maintain the integrity of our assistance ministries.

These efforts do not guarantee that we will not be taken advantage of, but we are no longer the place where folks come for “free money” and free bus passes. These guidelines have been helpful in ensuring a more equitable distribution of resources, while also allowing us to be flexible in our response to those in need.

For the people of St. Clement's, our challenge is to remember that we do these ministries because we are called to share the Good News of Christ always and in every way we possibly can, especially by reaching out to those who are on the fringes and have been marginalized for a variety of reasons. Passing judgment on others is not what God calls us to do, although responsible stewardship of our resources is an important part of our ministries. We need to learn how to focus

on the one and let go of the other. We have indeed become a significant entity in the Makiki community, providing services through a variety of ministries. Continuing to work through our own faith issues and challenges in these ministries strengthens and deepens our understanding of who we are as people of God, and encourages us continually to look for new ways to share the Good News that Christ has given us.