

## Developing Leaders for the Mission of Christ

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### *Introduction*

In 2001, the American Religious Identification Survey (ARIS) reported a jump in the number of Americans claiming no religion (“nones”), from 8.2 percent in 1990 to 14.2 percent in 2001. Taking into consideration the population growth during this time, this translates to an increase of over 4.7 million “nones” in eleven years. Although some thought the 2001 findings were an anomaly, the 2008 ARIS survey confirms it was not. By 2008, the number of people reporting their religious affiliation as “none” had grown in every state in the United States, increasing to 15 percent of the total population. The number of “nones” now exceeds the number of people who self-identify as mainline Christians (Methodist, Lutheran, Presbyterian, Episcopal/Anglican, and United Church of Christ combined). Mainline denominational affiliation self-reports shrank from 18.7 percent in 1990 to just 12.9 percent in 2008.<sup>1</sup> Clearly, mainline Christian denominations such as the Episcopal Church face a challenging task. What has worked in the past is no longer working.

This issue of the *Anglican Theological Review* seeks to address leadership in and for mission in a time when, as Ellen K. Wondra has described it, “the church increasingly understands its mission as participating in the mission of God, rather than maintaining itself. This [recovery of] purpose brings with it a redirection and recovery of theology and ecclesiology, and it does so in a set of ecclesial and socio-economic contexts that poses particular challenges at this time.”<sup>2</sup>

Given the challenges of today’s rapidly changing context, what is leadership in and for mission for mainline denominational leaders?

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<sup>1</sup> See [www.americanreligionsurvey-aris.org](http://www.americanreligionsurvey-aris.org).

<sup>2</sup> Ellen K. Wondra, e-mail to author, December 4, 2008.

Addressing this question from my perspective as Director for Evangelism and Congregational Life at the Episcopal Church Center, three questions emerge.

- What is this rediscovery of core purpose?
- How does it inform today's leaders?
- How is the program staff of the Episcopal Church Center uniquely poised to contribute?

If the Episcopal Church is to continue to proclaim the Good News of Jesus Christ in a way that is relevant in today's social landscape, leaders must return to the core purpose to which God calls us, and leaders must be willing to adapt and refocus on partnering with God on God's mission. Churchwide program structures, including those at the Episcopal Church Center, can play a key role in facilitating this process.

#### *What Is This Rediscovery of Core Purpose?*

In today's rapidly changing ecclesial, socio-economic, technological, and cultural context, trying to define the church's mission can be divisive and distracting, and can lead to a loss of clarity of purpose—an almost counterproductive exercise. But at the same time, it is vital to continue these attempts to define and understand mission. We have reached a watershed moment in the church's history, and Episcopalians are poised to reach out with the message of Christ's love in new ways. We have the opportunity to connect with a growing number of people who identify themselves as “spiritual but not religious” (the ARIS “nones”) who currently are not being fed spiritually by any faith community. We have the opportunity to become the truly multicultural church about which we dream. However, there is an urgency of the moment. We must, as a Communion, embrace the refreshingly simple notion that the mission of the church is the mission of Christ.<sup>3</sup>

#### *How Can This Rediscovery of Core Purpose Shape Today's Leaders?*

Embracing the unity of the mission of Christ with the mission of the Episcopal Church and the Anglican Communion returns us to our

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<sup>3</sup> *Bonds of Affection*, report of the Anglican Consultative Council 6, 1984 (London: Church House Publishing, 1985), 49; *Mission in a Broken World*, report of the Anglican Consultative Council 8, 1990 (London: Church House Publishing, 1990), 101.

core purpose. And rediscovery of core purpose is essential, especially in the increasingly secular American society of the twenty-first century. In fact, congregational growth is strongly correlated with a member's sense that the congregation has a clear sense of mission and purpose. Dr. Kirk Hadaway, researcher for the Episcopal Church Center, writes in his report "FACTS on Episcopal Church Growth," "Essential to the mission of any religious congregation is creating a community where people encounter God. Otherwise, congregations often resemble inward-looking social clubs with little unique sense of purpose. [There is a] strong correlation between mission and purpose and growth."<sup>4</sup>

Stating that a congregation's mission is the mission of Christ is one thing, but how can congregations move toward living out that purpose? Fortunately, to help inform church leaders in this process, the Anglican Consultative Council developed Five Marks of Mission:

1. To proclaim the Good News of the Kingdom
2. To teach, baptise, and nurture new believers
3. To respond to human need by loving service
4. To seek to transform unjust structures of society
5. To strive to safeguard the integrity of creation and sustain and renew the life of the earth.<sup>5</sup>

Therefore, today's church leaders (lay and ordained) who wish to move toward more missional, purposeful leadership in the twenty-first century can rediscover the core purpose by focusing their ministry efforts on programmatic work that exemplifies these five marks of mission.

Some questions that leaders, such as Christian education leaders, altar guild members, music leaders, worship team leaders, priests, and deacons, might ask themselves as they reflect on these goals include:

*Proclaiming the Good News of the Kingdom:* How are you, as a leader, sharing the Good News? Is it through the use of public narrative? How are you sharing your own story of how Christ's love has transformed your life with your friends and family? Is it through holy

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<sup>4</sup> C. Kirk Hadaway, "FACTS on Episcopal Church Growth," page 6; found at [www.episcopalchurch.org/documents/FACTs\\_on\\_Episcopal\\_Church\\_Growth.pdf](http://www.episcopalchurch.org/documents/FACTs_on_Episcopal_Church_Growth.pdf).

<sup>5</sup> *Bonds of Affection*, 49; *Mission in a Broken World*, 101. Also found at [www.anglicancommunion.org/ministry/mission/fivemarks.cfm](http://www.anglicancommunion.org/ministry/mission/fivemarks.cfm).

listening, and taking the time to listen and risk sharing when opportunities arise? Is your congregation or worshiping community intentional about evangelism efforts? How many new church plants or other non-traditional gathered communities has your diocese started within the past five years?

*Teaching, baptizing, and nurturing new believers:* How are people growing in Christ because of your ministry? How many children have been baptized this year at your congregation? How many adults have been baptized? What intentional lifelong Christian education programs does your congregation or worshiping community offer? What continuing education and spiritual direction are you personally pursuing?

*Responding to human need by loving service:* How does your own leadership exemplify “Christ with skin on” to those in need? How are you proclaiming Christ’s love in action? Is your congregation or worshiping community intentional about identifying need in your community and seeking to address that need with clarity of theology behind your actions?

*Seeking to transform unjust structures of society:* When you, as a church leader, see injustice, how do you respond? With whom do you partner to both identify injustice and organize your efforts to transform it? Is your congregation a means for community organizing around issues of injustice?

*Striving to safeguard the integrity of creation and sustaining and renewing the life of the earth:* Is your own leadership a living example of what it is to be a steward of this planet? Has your congregation or gathered community made efforts to become greener? Are you and your congregation a voice in the community for guarding the integrity of creation and working to “sustain and renew the life of the earth”?

While not all leaders, congregations, dioceses, or provinces will be exemplary in all areas, missional leaders should be focused and balanced in their approach and aware of the range of efforts to which they are called by God.

### *How Is the Program Staff of the Episcopal Church Uniquely Poised to Contribute?*

The programmatic or mission areas of the Episcopal Church include a varied staff that carry diverse ministry portfolios. Examples include those whose ministries focus on proclaiming the Good News

of the kingdom, such as staff working in evangelism, church planting, and Latino/Hispanic ministries. Others work toward teaching, baptizing, and nurturing new believers, such as the lifelong Christian formation and young adult ministries staff. Those working to respond to human need with loving service include the staff of the Office of Episcopal Migration Ministries, who work with an affiliate network of thirty offices in twenty-six dioceses to make a tremendous difference in the lives of refugees being resettled in cities across the United States. The Office of Government Relations and the Episcopal Public Policy Network, a network of more than twenty thousand Episcopalians across the United States, seeks to transform unjust structures of society by bringing the positions of the Episcopal Church to lawmakers in such areas as international peace and justice, human rights, immigration, welfare, poverty, hunger, health care, violence, civil rights, the environment, racism, and issues involving women and children.<sup>6</sup> And coordinating churchwide efforts to safeguard the integrity of creation and sustain and renewing the life of the earth is the Officer for Economic and Environmental Justice.

The diverse work of these program officers is made possible through diocesan contributions. However, with over seven thousand congregations in 110 dioceses, no staff person can begin to fill the demands and needs of every congregation. The Presiding Bishop, the Most Reverend Katharine Jefferts Schori, is clear that her staff is to do only what cannot be completed locally. While there is acknowledgment that this may differ from one diocese to another, it is a guiding principle for work among the mission centers staff at the Church Center.

Therefore, within this broad guideline, the question is, How can the staff of the mission centers contribute to the development of missional leadership?

Perhaps the most valuable attribute of the staff is that they are in a position to acquire a view across Episcopal dioceses and provinces and collaborate with ecumenical and Anglican partners. Ideally, this far-reaching view allows staff to both seek out and share on a global basis. For example, one Church Center staff person had contact with leaders from over seventy Episcopal dioceses, two Anglican provinces, and four denominations as she sought to define her ministry in

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<sup>6</sup> See [www.episcopalchurch.org/eppn.htm](http://www.episcopalchurch.org/eppn.htm).

the first year of her work. Clearly, the information gained from developing these connections can facilitate the process of learning about the best examples of Christ's mission at a grassroots level. It also makes it easier to share that information in other places, develop resources based on those learnings, initiate collaborative projects, assist in linking missional work with potential funding sources (both internal and external), and facilitate conversations/connections/gatherings. At their best, Church Center staff members are uniquely positioned to serve as conduits of emerging missional information and to catalyze the process of developing missional leaders.

While all of the program officers can offer many stories and reflections about the missional nature of their Church Center work, a few firsthand stories are shared below.

Programmatic evidence for the second mark of mission—to teach, baptize, and nurture new believers—includes collaborative efforts across denominations to bring together and build up youth in their Christian faith. Bronwyn Skov, Program Officer for Youth Ministries, tells the story of how an event co-sponsored by the Episcopal Church exemplifies these characteristics. Particularly poignant is the juxtaposition of emerging youth leadership with evolving seasoned leadership. Ms. Skov writes:

Faith in 3D was an ecumenical adventure in learning sponsored by the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship, the Presbyterian Church, and the Episcopal Church at Walt Disney World over Martin Luther King, Jr., weekend in January 2009. Each denomination had the responsibility of sharing its own tradition of worship with the hundreds of teenagers gathered. We Episcopalians (or “Episcopalists,” as the other denominations called us) were blessed to share the closing Eucharist on MLK Day. It was important to the young people planning and participating in the liturgy that we show our more exuberant celebratory side rather than our stereotypical stoic style of worship.

When one of our young men called to lead the procession as the crucifer began to dance to the drumbeat of the procession during a walk-through of the liturgy, he caught sight of our bishop, ceased to dance, and stood up straight and still, clearly waiting to be chastised for his irreverent behavior. Bishop Nedi Rivera from the Diocese of Spokane walked right up to him, put her arm around his much-taller shoulder, and declared, “You better dance

with that cross! This is a celebration and you have been called to lead us. This old bishop can keep up. You go!”

The beaming grin on that young man’s face as he led the procession amongst hundreds of his peers, dancing and lifting the cross high on Monday morning as we celebrated the life and ministry of Dr. King, was a sight to behold. I was thankful for the reminder that as we teach, baptize, and affirm new believers and those we are raising faithfully in our religious tradition, our liturgy and full participation in it is one of our most powerful tools for education if we seize the moment, and genuinely nurture the rich spirit of those whom we are called to shepherd and mentor.<sup>7</sup>

Programmatic evidence for the fourth mark of mission—to seek to transform unjust structures of society—includes the seeking out, encouragement, and sharing of exemplary efforts. Jubilee ministries, a program initiated in 1982 to advance the work of transforming unjust structures of society, is a prime example. Today the Church Center recognizes nearly six hundred Jubilee ministries throughout the Episcopal Church that reflect “localized responses to poverty and need, each making the vital connection between the talk of faith with the walk of faith through the members of their varied congregations or church institutions,”<sup>8</sup> Christopher Johnson, Program Officer for Domestic Justice and Jubilee Ministries, explains:

Working in the Church Center affords a responsibility and a perspective to affirm and promote an intentional response to systems of injustice that impoverish the lives of the people we are called to serve. Their experience of impoverishment often grows out of a lost sense of human dignity and self-worth. Unjust structures privilege those members of society with available resources over those in need of resources. Loss of privilege perpetuates conditions of dependency and need.<sup>9</sup>

Programmatic evidence for the fifth mark—striving to safeguard the integrity of creation and sustaining and renewing the life of the earth—includes governmental advocacy as well as seeking out best

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<sup>7</sup> Bronwyn Skov, e-mail to author, June 13, 2009.

<sup>8</sup> Christopher Johnson, e-mail to author, June 14, 2009.

<sup>9</sup> Johnson, e-mail to author.

practices in the areas of economic and environmental justice, and adapting them for use in the local context (such as the greening of congregations). At the Church Center, this work is primarily the responsibility of the Episcopal Church's Office of Government Relations in Washington, D.C., which plays a leadership role within the faith community's efforts to advocate for strong national energy and climate change-related legislation, and of Michael Schut, Program Officer for Environmental and Economic Affairs, whose work includes promoting an Episcopal response to climate change. Mr. Schut writes:

Some question the reality of climate change; others believe they will be spared climate change's impacts. There is no real debate about such questions on certain Pacific island nations or the river deltas of Bangladesh. Portions of those nations' low-lying regions will no longer be habitable, probably within 20 years, due to rising sea levels and increased storm severity—brought about by climate change.

With approximately 5% of the world's population, the United States emits about 25% of the world's carbon dioxide, the primary greenhouse gas causing climate change. So the people of the Diocese of Olympia passed a resolution at their last diocesan convention. Called the Genesis Covenant, the resolution calls for the diocese and its parishes to reduce their carbon emissions by 50 percent in 10 years. A task force is now leading an effort in five parishes to establish a plan to meet that goal. It's an ambitious pilot project meant to launch a similar effort throughout the diocese. I've been attending to and supporting this effort as well as coordinating the initial steps of a similar effort within the Episcopal Church: to assess its own carbon emission footprint, and determine the costs and savings (financial and in carbon emissions) associated with reducing that footprint by 20 percent by 2020 and 80 percent by 2050. . . .

Climate change is a global phenomenon with myriad local impacts: from lost homes to expanded ranges of insect-borne diseases; from increased rates of species extinctions to changes in rainfall and availability of fresh water. So for the church to assess and reduce its own emissions is an important part of addressing such local impacts.

It could be argued that this particular mark of mission, safeguarding the integrity of creation and sustaining and renewing the life of the earth, concisely states a significant portion of the overall mission of the church. After all, when we do that, we sustain and



renew humanity as well, we care for one another, because we are all related and all part of Earth.<sup>10</sup>

As our culture constantly shifts and the earth itself undergoes profound changes, today's missional leaders are challenged not only to stay current but to try to stay ahead of the curve. These three examples of contributions by Church Center staff illustrate how the programmatic or mission areas of the Episcopal Church Center can catalyze and facilitate leadership marked by the Anglican Five Marks of Mission, leadership whose purpose is to proclaim Christ's mission in today's changing world.

### *Conclusion*

At many church training events, it is common to hear participants say that it is time to think “outside the box” or that today's social context calls for approaches that are so far beyond the box that the box has been exploded and no longer exists. But perhaps what is called for is a return to the box.

This is not to suggest we should try to recreate the church of yesterday or ignore the realities of our current situation and the predictions of future trends. Instead, perhaps we should consider a return to the Christian “box” of the early church. Let us strive to remember our core Christian purpose—that our mission, as a church, is Christ's mission; that God is already at work; and that we are partnering with God.

After all:

We all are one in mission;  
We all are one in call,  
our varied gifts united  
by Christ, the Lord of all.  
A single great commission  
compels us from above  
to plan and work together  
that all may know Christ's love.<sup>11</sup>

It just isn't that complex.

<sup>10</sup> Michael Schut, e-mail to author, June 15, 2009.

<sup>11</sup> Words of a hymn written by Rusty Edwards, b. 1955 (Carol Stream, Ill.: Hope Publishing, 1986).

