

Answers to the Four Questions: The Rev. Michael Hanley

Question 1: In the diocese we have a wide range of church communities that are small, medium, large; suburban, urban, rural. Our churches also have a wide range of socio-economic and cultural backgrounds. Please tell us how you have entered into and joined differing communities and found a place of shared delight that enabled you and them to work together.

The challenge of new ministry is to begin with an open heart and mind, expecting God to be present. I believe God calls all Christians into ministries that provide a potential for growth and development as well as joy. When joining a new community, I have found it important to ask myself; what might God want me to learn in this new situation and what might God desire me to share with these new people? When leaving a community for a new call I, likewise, try to identify clearly what I have learned and what I was able to offer that community.

The churches I have served have taught me to love deeper than I thought possible, and to preach with care and attention. They have taught me the value of good administration and the importance of a genuine apology. They have shown me compassion and helped me to laugh out loud. In the midst of difficult situations, I have discovered redemption and resurrection. It continues to be a blessing to be in ministry.

In this variety of church communities - industrial, middle management and professional - I listened for how God called us to be together. In a suburban parish, I worked with lay youth ministers anxious that my being hired meant the loss of their ministry. I began by supporting their work and waited for the community's vision for youth ministry to grow rather than offering my own vision for youth ministry. In a small town parish, we were confronted with the need to trim some forty thousand from the budget in one year. I invited the vestry to consider a new method of building a budget during this hard time by putting each line item on an index card, putting them in the center of the table, and saying, "Ok, what can/must we afford?" In my current position, we continue to be challenged by the need to balance the wisdom of older leadership with the enthusiasm of new leadership. We work hard together to insure a healthy mix of both and find ways to invite all voices to participate.

A few practical methods I've learned for entering into community have included: 1. encouraging a Gospel-based discipleship form of Bible study at meetings; 2. ending each meeting with "Member's concerns" (a time to share what is on your mind about the meeting or about life in general); and 3. inviting parishioners to join me for mid-week bag lunches. Going deeper in conversation and listening creates a healthy atmosphere of trust that enables mutual ministry.

A sense of shared delight and common mission arise when all voices are heard and included in visioning for mission and ministry. Our common life in community grows best when we listen carefully for God's voice in our discussion. Discerning where God's spirit is calling is rarely a simple matter and so we listen, we ask each other questions, we pray. Then we move in

the direction that seems best to the community, always mindful of the possibility that we have taken a wrong step, always willing to stop, to reexamine and to walk in a new direction.

Question 2: Please describe an experience of leading or supporting a group of people to innovate a new ministry. Describe how the idea arose; the nature of the innovation, how the team came to consensus, implemented their plans and what the outcome was.

In my current parish, we have a long-standing Outreach Committee. The leadership has done good work with select projects such as Habitat for Humanity, a local food shelf, and refugee resettlement. They enjoy their work and see little reason to expand their ministry in new directions. The church is big enough to support more outreach and expanded ministry would attract new members and grow leadership. However, attempts to include new programs failed time and again. Attempts to add new leadership likewise failed. Those interested in joining the committee found it hard to fit in. Several simply quit trying to engage in the work of the committee.

The solution was to invite a new ministry area called “social action” to form alongside the existing outreach work. Beginning by sharing with my staff Arlin Rothauge’s concept of “parallel development,” I helped foster the notion that the ministry of the Outreach Committee was a good, important ministry and best left alone to continue its consistent work. By encouraging a few interested individuals, the staff and I were able to mark out new ground parallel to the existing work, enriching the parish’s ministry without diminishing the Outreach Committee’s longstanding gift to the community.

Our initial challenge was to come to consensus around how to attract parishioners to the work of social justice without creating unnecessary tension in the church as a whole. I helped the group brainstorm potential Sunday forum ideas and we agreed to invite opposing candidates for a state office to talk about the place of religion in politics. The forum drew a good crowd and the committee worked afterwards to invite interested parishioners to the work of social justice. We called forth and supported an excellent lay leader who worked hard to gather the group, to discern a few issues it could handle, and to see that follow-through occurred. My main roles were to support the social justice leadership and to see that their ministry was integrated with that of the Outreach Committee. I believe success was dependent upon gaining the support and cooperation of our existing leadership. By encouraging the groups to stay in contact with each other, we increased our capacity to offer ministry in the community in both the new and old areas.

Today, our Outreach Committee continues as before and our Social Justice Committee sponsors topical forums on Sunday mornings, works with several local community organizations on issues such as the building of solar ovens, volunteers at a First Nation soup kitchen, and invites the congregation to rethink issues of conservation and fair trade practices. This is the third year we have made Kivi loans in the name of the church community. Today, Social Justice is one of our

strongest ministries and many newcomers become interested in joining the parish due to our social justice involvement.

Question 3: As you reflect on your life, what do you deeply love to do and brings you great joy? Tell us what fuels your fire. Please share a story of a time when you felt deeply satisfied doing what you love to do? How does that inform and inspire your ministry?

I am an active person and enjoy engaging with all of life. I love learning about people and walking alongside them as they make their way through life. Perhaps that is why I have twice walked the 500 mile Camino de Santiago in Spain. Walking with fellow pilgrims for a month, with our only task being going from one place to the next, offers a unique relationship between people's souls.

In a similar way, walking with a congregation through its life is wonderfully satisfying. I am fascinated by what makes congregations grow, what diminishes them, and how people can be invited to consider what ministry God might be asking them to give their hearts to. I believe that how we walk through our days defines the faith we profess, and my fire is fueled by engaging the challenges we face as a community in Christ and as followers of Jesus. We face a vast array of societal changes that call on our best creative energies. How can we continue to walk beside a generation who grew up in the Church and who have been faithful members of the community and at the same time offer new life and new ways of being the Church to a vastly different generation? This is one of the most critical challenges the Church faces at this time.

Dioceses are also communities walking together through various challenges. Several years ago, it was my privilege to be the chair of a diocesan committee called the Fair Share Review Board. The task of the board was to review all requests for diocesan assessment relief and to make recommendations to Diocesan Council concerning the merits of each request. Some of my friends thought I was crazy for seeking this assignment but I really enjoyed and felt deeply satisfied by engaging the parishes and missions of the diocese in these discussions. On one particular Saturday we met with a church deeply suspicious of diocesan affairs. They felt estranged from diocesan life and were distrustful of a committee looking into their financial health. During the meeting, I listened, answered questions, and acknowledged the good work they were doing. In the end, the financial relief they were seeking was approved, but the money was far less important than the relationship. Through work on this board, I learned a great deal about the pressures congregations are under and I developed a deep sense of compassion for many good and faithful laypersons struggling to make ministry happen, particularly in small rural communities.

I am deeply satisfied by working to build strong parishes and dioceses from a unified sense of mission. That ministry is built up as we do the hard work of remaining in dialogue with each other, specifically on hard issues. I believe the central responsibility of dioceses is to support congregational life and ministry. While many other priorities deserve our time and

attention, nothing is as important to diocesan health as the building of strong, local communities of faith.

Question 4: What aspects of the Episcopal Church do you value and find life-giving? How do the Episcopal Church, its structure and practice, and our Anglican heritage call you deeper into your relationship with God?

I began my life as an Episcopalian with the words of the final prayer from Rite One in my ears. "...do all such good works as thou hast prepared for us to walk in." The sacramental life of the Church allows me to encounter God and find my place in God's mission. In my ministry, sacramental worship feeds my soul. I am privileged to prayerfully prepare for Sunday Eucharist each week and come to the altar ready to discover the Holy anew. In worship, through Word, bread, wine, and engagement with others, I learn to praise and to pray, I am challenged by listening to God's Word, and am offered forgiveness through the great love of God. I believe weekly liturgy to be wonderfully life-giving as it invites us all to join in furthering the reign of God in human history.

In the Episcopal Church, we reinforce this fundamental belief by creating structures that insure all are given voice and vote in the deliberations of the community. The joint governing roles given to laity and clergy embody the theology embedded in this sacramental life. The challenge, individually, is to discover our ministries and to help others discover theirs. Knowing that God invites me into ministry enriches my relationship with God as it invites me to prayerful consideration of what God would have me do. Corporately, the challenge is to welcome the voices of all as we discern the call of God for the Church and to make decisions that build up the body of Christ in the world. Creating structures that invite all to the conversation insures a better chance that our decisions will serve the common good.

Our polity does not allow a few voices to rule while others simply follow. What a wonderful challenge we have been given by God to be people who listen deeply for the voice of God in another human being! How much better we are at coming together no matter our differences, when we respect the dignity of every human being. It has recently been suggested that our democratic process, with all its messiness, is the Episcopal Church's gift to the whole of the Anglican Communion. I hope this is indeed the case. In a world as diverse as ours, we can ill afford to limit God's voice to only those whose experience mirrors our own. It was in the voice of the stranger that Abraham found God's promise and that stranger's voice continues to challenge us to be God's hands and feet in a struggling world.