

Answers to Four Questions: The Rev. Andrew MacBeth

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.

I began to learn early in life that every part of the Body of Christ has its own unique calling and ministry. As a child, I was part of a still-vital urban parish in a declining Northeastern industrial town. When I was eleven, my family moved to south Florida where we joined a rapidly-growing mission congregation. It was a great church to grow up in, because everyone's gifts were needed—even those of young teens. I must have set up close to a million folding chairs and eventually taught Sunday School for younger kids, along with performing more traditional teen activities like acolyte service.

My first paid job in the church, back in my college days, was as the choir director for a rural Disciples of Christ congregation. We were not sophisticated musicians but we made a joyful noise unto the Lord! I also received a lot of loving nurture from members of the choir and congregation. I then served for a year as youth ministry director for a large urban Methodist church, an experience that opened my eyes to the reality of racism and our lack of vision in failing to respond to the ways the neighborhood around the church had changed.

After seminary, I served an affluent resort-town church in Florida and enjoyed helping a congregation of mostly retired people raise up a significant ministry to families with young children and teens. I also got to do the groundwork for a new mission congregation which is now a thriving parish. From there, I moved to the Midwest, to continue my education and youth emphasis, this time in an old inner suburb of Cleveland. My first experience of being a rector was about thirty miles from there in a struggling county-seat town on the edge of Lake Erie. There, we forged a strong identity in our commitment to “stay in the city” (though we were a former industrial town of just 15,000), and found that our social outreach ministry and high-quality education programs attracted many new members.

One of my most memorable experiences in ministry took me outside my native culture altogether. During a sabbatical leave, I spent several months as the Episcopal pastor of a primarily Athabascan community on the Yukon River in the interior of Alaska. Here I had the privilege of learning how to do ministry in a setting where everything was new to me. Within my first three days, I was invited to help prepare a body for burial, build a coffin from scratch, and cook wild game (including beaver) for the potlatch.

In Virginia, I ministered to military families for the first time, mostly Navy fliers. I learned to respect their willingness to commit to a congregation quickly and make a real contribution in their typically brief stay. I also buried more young men than I care to remember.

My present ministry has once again required me to learn to operate in a new culture—as part of a large, wealthy Episcopal Church in a setting that is urban, southern, and poor. What a privilege

it has been to build powerful relationships with city leaders and the pastors of primarily African-American churches, and to discover ways our church can provide a meeting place where diverse people can encounter one another in safety and hospitality!

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.

Over the years, the wonderful old downtown church I currently serve has started many of the most vital social service ministries in our city. Three and a half years ago, however, we realized that it was time to look anew at the needs of our downtown neighborhood and the people who live there. I persuaded the parish leadership that it would be best to do this assessment not alone but in cooperation with the other downtown churches with which we had a relationship. Even if this made the process more complicated, we came to believe it would pave the way for some real shared ministry.

We began by putting together an ecumenical team that would interview about thirty agencies serving the urban poor to discover what needs were being well met and where the gaps were. We discovered two major gaps and one of them—providing newly-homeless people with access to the services they needed—seemed like something we could work on together.

Within a year, we and our partner churches had opened the Hospitality HUB, a service center that provides people who are homeless—or in immediate danger of becoming homeless—a way to find the help they need. One of our church's buildings was renovated to house the program. A director was hired, volunteers were trained, and we opened our doors about a year ago.

We have been involved in a constant process of learning. At first, we wanted to try to meet every need. Gradually, we learned that if we wanted to help those who really wanted to begin the journey out of homelessness, we had to focus on them, not those who just wanted to enjoy coffee and air conditioning. This was hard for us. We learned that many people could not access the services they needed because they did not have the necessary identification cards, so we started a program to help people obtain birth certificates and state ID cards.

At every step of the way, we have proceeded collegially. Although this has taken a great deal of energy, we believe the effort to work ecumenically has been very worthwhile. We are now in the process of helping the HUB to become an independent 501(c)3 organization. We will continue to be involved—as board members, volunteers, and the organization's landlord and largest contributor. But all this progress is a reminder to us that it is time to discern a new ministry. For our parish, the next effort could involve using our highly accessible downtown location to host educational events for the wider church. For the ecumenical group, our challenge might be providing emergency housing for women with teenaged children. But we will see—this is something we will discern together.

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?

This month I am preparing to teach a course at the local Presbyterian seminary. Because it is the only mainline seminary in the city, it has become an amazingly diverse place, with a student body that is close to 50/50 black and white, representing about thirty different denominations, including a few Episcopalians. The course I will teach is called “Pastoral Care and the Pastoral Rites.” It will assist students in looking at how we offer pastoral care in connection with baptisms, funerals, weddings, and other sacramental rites of passage. What excites me about the course is something that has been a theme of my ministry – the chance to bring together the practical and the theological.

One way I love doing this reflective work is with parents—looking at how their parenting does and does not embody their Christian values, how it is or is not working. One reason I have always enjoyed working with teens, especially younger ones, is their willingness—if they trust you—to try to look honestly at themselves. I love trying to pass on the habit of mind and heart that says to them: “What did you experience? I wonder how that felt to you. I wonder where God is in this. Is there anything you think you might do differently the next time?”

I am an amateur musician. I currently sing in a small community choral group and sit in on bass or banjo with a local blues band whenever I get a chance. I think what I enjoy most about this is the sense of connection and cooperation I feel in those moments when the music “comes together.” I recently spent HOURS coaxing, scheduling, and rehearsing a group of talented teens who led the music on a special Sunday in our church. Afterward, I wondered why I was willing to work so hard on this. I think it was because I could see that the kids relished this chance to give tangible expression to their faith. It was also an opportunity to affirm them in a ministry I think will keep them connected with the Church in years to come.

Preaching is another area of church life in which I love to bring the practical and theological together. A sermon is successful when it helps us to connect our daily life and ministry with the Biblical stories and theological themes that can and should inform our life. I have heard few bishops who seemed to be good preachers—a tragic problem since this is the primary means by which many people will know them. I think the trouble is that although the bishop may be well grounded in Bible and theology, he or she does not really have much idea what is going on in the lives of the individuals and congregations being addressed. We need to change this!

I love working with adults who are growing in their understanding of ministry. I have experienced this most in EFM groups, Cursillo teams, Bible study groups, and diocesan groups committed to evangelism or stewardship consulting.

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?

As a teenager, I had a powerful sense of just how wonderful our Episcopal tradition was and I was deeply puzzled as to why we did such a poor job of sharing it. My adult life in the church has not resolved this question for me. I still have an “unscratched itch” to discover better ways to share the gifts we have been given.

One of our gifts is the Book of Common Prayer and our strong sacramental tradition. I love the fact that a big cathedral liturgy for hundreds and an intimate early morning Eucharist are both based on the same liturgical core. Our Prayer Book gives us the clear center we need if we are going to innovate without losing our identity. In a former parish, we designed a “village service” that offered simple, newcomer-friendly worship in the parish hall at the same time a more traditional service was taking place in the church. This service grew to over a hundred worshipers without hurting the service next door, partly because what people were learning in the village service was directly transferable to what we called “big church.”

Another gift is that the mixture of Protestant and Catholic elements in our history helps us appreciate the ministry of many different churches. I have loved being the president of our Downtown Churches Association. I am also involved in a couple small clergy groups that bring together church leaders as diverse as our local Catholic bishop and the woman pastor of a black Pentecostal church.

I love our beautiful church buildings, large and small. I also believe our relationship with our property sometimes impedes our ministry. Buildings, organs, and stained glass are a means to an end, not an end in themselves. As much as these things support my relationship with God, it is really the Body of Christ, the church as a community of believers, that I need the most.

I love the fact that Episcopalians celebrate the ministry of every member of the church. We have made progress in our efforts to strengthen lay ministry. However, we still have work to do—fully shared ministry is an ongoing challenge. Ironically, we do not care for our clergy as well as we should, either.

I enjoy being part of a church that embraces diversity. The leadership offered by gifted women, lay and ordained, has blessed my life in many ways. I enjoy being part of a parish right now where members yearn for greater diversity and are willing to work on it. My own relationship with God is stronger and deeper because of the people in my life whose race, gender, sexual orientation, or ethnic origin is different from my own.

I am excited about the way I see Episcopalians claiming their relationship with the Bible today. We are learning to value it as a source not of rigid revelation about issues but of ongoing transformation that prepares us for service. We are studying, praying, and growing as people whose life and ministry are grounded in Holy Scripture.