

Common Ministry: An Invitation

On December 12, our wardens, several vestry members, and two clergy traveled to Procter to take part in a workshop about common ministry. “Common ministry” is the term Bishop Breidenthal is using to speak about the ministry we share as baptized Christians. Like many of us, our bishop believes that the authority and responsibility for ministry must be broadly shared and that the barriers between our congregations and the surrounding world must become more porous and permeable, to promote cooperation and invite others into the risen life of Christ.

Good Shepherd is one of seven congregations who’ve been invited to participate in an exploratory program over the next two years. Our invitation reflects our bishop’s belief that we are already taking steps in the right direction. In the program, we would receive assistance from experienced consultants in developing a vision and a mission strategy tailored to our context, as well as lay and clergy leadership teams to implement that strategy. At the December vestry meeting, those of us who went to Procter shared our perceptions of the program, which were very positive. Our vestry has decided that it is time for the whole parish to enter into an intentional period of spiritual discernment about whether or not we want to participate. This would involve a lot of time and energy over the next two years. My sense is that we would get out of it at least as much as we put in. There is no monetary cost to Good Shepherd, since the program is fully funded by a grant.

The vestry realizes that we all have many questions that need to be answered before we can make an informed choice about Good Shepherd’s participation. Ultimately, the whole congregation must make the choice about whether or not to participate at the annual parish meeting on Sunday, January 24. The bishop expects to hear back from us by the end of January. We have therefore arranged for several opportunities to learn more, which are detailed below. It does seem that we need to address two questions at the outset. First, what exactly is common ministry? Second, how, if at all, does it differ from total ministry and other programs that may have been tried before?

In answering these two questions, we need to avoid a one-size-fits-all approach. Common ministry will look different in a large urban parish than a small rural one. Good Shepherd is a diverse, county-seat parish, with responsibility for ministry on campus and strong traditions of community outreach. We can still afford clergy and, arguably, some staff, but we have struggled in recent decades to live within our means. Each congregation has its own context, its own distinctive assets and gifts, and its own mission priorities. We are being asked to adopt a community organizing model that doesn’t force the lived reality of Good Shepherd into a preconceived plan, so much as it begins with the people and facts on the ground, in order to help us transform our practice of ministry in certain broadly defined directions. In no particular order, these directions are (1) greater lay participation in decision making and ministry at every level; (2) decentralized models of ministry to promote greater spontaneity in the context of shared responsibility and accountability to one another within the Body of Christ; (3) emphasis on regional ministry, sharing of clergy, and cooperation within the Episcopal Church; (4)

greater emphasis on ecumenical and interfaith cooperation; and (5) elimination of barriers between Church and world.

In many ways, this is similar to what is often called “total ministry.” One difference is that common ministry in Southern Ohio will not emphasize locally trained clergy. Our bishop believes that each congregation, even those without resident clergy, must have access to seminary trained priests, who help the bishop connect the congregations to the wider Church and ensure accountability to the particular Christian tradition that we have received as Episcopalians. These priests are to exercise their ministry as “theologians, entrepreneurs, and community organizers.” Deacons will function chiefly not within the congregation, but out in the world. Another difference, which may better reflect the reputation of total ministry than its reality, is that common ministry is not something we are forced into because we can’t afford a full time priest. Rather, it is a way for congregations of all sizes to be more faithful to the vision of ministry found in the New Testament and the Book of Common Prayer. We are not parceling out the functions of the priest to various laypeople. Rather, we are calling people and priests together into the shared work of the Gospel. No one has ever done Christian ministry alone. The call of Jesus to ministry is always a call to play a specific role within his Body, the Church. The New Testament does not speak of the “priesthood of *each* believer (individually),” but of the “priesthood of *all* believers (together in community).”

It will take us two years and some very deliberate work to discover exactly what this tendency will mean at Good Shepherd. None of us—not the rector, not the vestry, not any individual parishioner—knows in advance what will emerge from the process. Like any change effort, our success will be in direct proportion to our shared sense of urgency, the resolve of our leadership, and the degree of buy in this process generates. Our hope, between now and the annual meeting, is to learn enough for us all to be able to embrace the overall direction and the opportunity we are being offered. In the meantime, here are several ways that you can help Good Shepherd seek the wisdom and guidance of the Holy Spirit.

- 1) Pray. Pray for guidance and wisdom. Pray for openness to the Holy Spirit. Pray for the mission and ministry we share and for those outside our walls whom God would have us serve. Pray for each other. Pray for our vestry and clergy. Then pray some more.
- 2) Read and study for yourselves the printed materials about common ministry that the bishop sent to the senior wardens and rectors of invited congregations. We will put several copies in the narthex, by the glass doors, for those who would like a copy. We will also distribute electronic copies.
- 3) Ask members of the vestry and the clergy about common ministry. We don’t necessarily agree with each other about what it means, but we are excited by the opportunity to explore further. People who were present at the Procter meeting include Matthew Adeyanju, Anne Braxton, Paul Clever, Jack Flemming, Sharon Huge, Elizabeth Sayers, Fr. Steve, and me.

4) Attend one of two meetings to discuss common ministry with your fellow parishioners. We will do some bible study, have some time in small groups, and have people who have read up on the program available to answer questions to the best of our ability. **One such meeting will be on Sunday, January 10, after the 10:30 Eucharist.** That day is the Feast of the Baptism of Our Lord. We will reaffirm our Baptismal Covenant, and the homily will explore the ministry we all share in Christ. **Another will be at the home of Julie Nehls (16 Cable Lane, 593-6877), with coffee and dessert, on Thursday, January 14 at 7 p.m.**

Again, please don't hesitate to contact me or any vestry member with questions you may have about common ministry. I could not be more excited about it. God bless Good Shepherd and the ministry we share.

In Christ,

The Rev. R. William Carroll, Rector

[Back](#)