

*Transformation in the Episcopal Church:  
Leadership Development and Beloved Community in the 21st century*

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Christianity (indeed all religion) is centered on transformation. God dreams of a renewed world of peace and justice, a dream realizable only through transformed human hearts and communities. We preach salvation through death and resurrection, continually dying to what is ungodly and seeking rebirth in the way of Jesus. As Athanasius put it, God became human in order that we might become divine. New life only comes through transformation. The church has long proclaimed that reality as *ecclesia semper reformanda est*. In the last century Karl Barth popularized the understanding that ‘the church is always being reformed.’<sup>1</sup> As the church, and as members of the body of Christ, we can only keep to the way of Christ if we’re willing to die and be reborn, over and over and over again.

The church exists for the mission of God, moving toward that dream of a healed and just creation. Together we seek that dream in liturgy, theology, and praxis – doing and being, living and praying, and reflecting on how it’s going. When the body discerns a new or renewed direction, and intentionally engages it, we variously meet resistance, fear, excitement, and incompetence or impotence. Think about a New Year’s resolution to start exercising; or a Lenten vow to pray every day.

There’s always tension between conserving what has seemed good or just in the past and expanding into potentially life-giving newness. That conflict or tension is part of the beginning of our story in the Garden of Eden. There’s always risk in choosing the new, and learning to choose wisely is key to a transformed life. No choice means no growth, and no way of moving toward the Reign of God. Yet choosing is never enough. Free will means we can choose, but we never manage to make only right choices, and the options rarely lead to the fullness of the will of God. We try and fail – yet with the support of others, we fail a bit less often. That’s how and why 12-step groups work, it’s why we make confession, and it’s why accountability in community is vital to all sorts of human attempts at transformation.

This nation began and developed in a climate of radical transformation, asserting that human dignity required equality, freedom, and the possibility of abundant life for all people. We still struggle toward that vision of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness for all people who dwell in this land, yet a long series of legal and cultural transformations has brought us closer to that dream. We started with a system that basically only recognized white, free land-owning men as capable of choosing the direction of this new nation. Then the franchise was extended to men who weren’t landholders, taxpayers, or born in the United States; slaves were freed; women gained the vote nearly a century ago; children slowly began to receive rights to education and humane working conditions independent of their families<sup>2</sup>; LGBTQI persons are slowly being accorded equal rights and dignity; gender equity is slowly being normalized in law and custom; and we are beginning to affirm the urgency of stewarding the non-human creation on which all our lives depend. None of these transformations is yet complete – slavery, discrimination, and abuse abound, yet the arc of the moral universe IS bending toward greater justice.

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<sup>1</sup> And sometimes added *secundum verbi dei*, ‘according to the word of God’

<sup>2</sup> Yet the United States is the only nation which has not adopted the 1989 UN Convention on Rights of the Child

As a community charged to be ‘in the world, but not of the world,’ the church has engaged transformation along with the nation and the wider world. While the church at times has led transformation toward God’s justice, it has also – often – lagged. Church leadership is a prime example. It’s been a long time since this church first ordained African-American and Native American men, yet the ordained leadership still does not adequately reflect congregational membership. Absalom Jones was made deacon in 1795 and priest in 1802; Enmegahbowh deacon in 1859, priest in 1867. The first of those clergy were almost always limited to serving in congregations that looked like them. With one bold exception in 1946<sup>3</sup>, we didn’t let women represent us as deputies at General Convention until 1972. The Anglican Communion’s status quo made it unthinkable to ordain a woman until Bishop Roland Hall had no one else to send to congregations in occupied Macao. Florence Li Tim-oi was ordained in 1944. Once the Communion found out, the upset meant she wasn’t recognized again as a priest until Hong Kong ordained two more women priests in 1971.

Yet this church made some very significant changes in the colonial era, changes that still haven’t come to other parts of the Anglican Communion. Not having a bishop here until after the Revolution meant Confirmation was never celebrated. Members decided in community when individuals were ready to receive communion; today, confirmation is still required in most provinces of the Anglican Communion. The shortage of clergy here meant that lay leadership was exercised in novel and essential ways – lay clerks led daily offices and preached; vestries governed and chose their clergy; churchwomen raised funds and formed children; and in some places, colonial governments made ecclesiastical decisions. The church in these United States developed in circumstances in which adaptation was essential to survival. That’s one kind of transformation.

We’ve struggled with some of the other kinds of transformation. There is a necessary and vital tension between conserving the best of what we have learned over centuries – what we usually call wisdom – and holding ourselves radically open to the Pentecostal reality of the movement of God’s spirit within and around us.

I noted briefly that Confirmation wasn’t practiced here during the colonial era, but as soon as there were bishops here, Seabury, and to a lesser degree, White and Provoost, encouraged confirmation even for those already admitted to Holy Communion.<sup>4</sup> Two centuries later, in the 1979 revision of the BCP, we collectively agreed that admission to Communion was understood in the early church as a gift of baptism, and therefore we should practice accordingly. Now some are wrestling with whether or not formal water baptism is still normative. The tension and conflict that attend transformation rarely disappear until the next challenge emerges.

The bishops of this church began to wrestle openly with the variety of human sexual orientation and identity in the early 1960s. We certainly aren’t finished with that work, and resistance will likely continue for years to come. At the same time, the recognition of the image of God in people of all genders and orientations continues to expand – and the church is increasingly affirming the possibility that godly lay and clergy leaders come in a variety that echoes God’s people.

An example. TEC has about 3000 deacons – a major increase from 50 years ago, when there were fewer than 200. They are mostly grey haired and collecting Social Security, and more than half are women. That robust growth indicates how important their ministry has become. Yet only a third of them are under 72, and about 20 are younger than 40. Few are gainfully

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<sup>3</sup> Elizabeth Dyer of Missouri was seated

<sup>4</sup> Phillip Tovey, *Anglican Confirmation: 1662-1820*. Routledge: 2016

employed by the church. The vocations of deacon and priest are markedly different, yet we still see priests vesting and functioning as deacons in the liturgy, even when deacons are available. Some dioceses still don't encourage or ordain deacons. We have made some progress in building distinctive formation processes for deacons, yet we still have a long way to go. Formation programs in most places are expensive and time-consuming, and difficult for people in earlier adult life to justify and negotiate. Think family, career, and student loans in the context of honing the gifts necessary for what is usually a non-stipendiary ministry. Yet consider the impact younger deacons might have among millennials, homeless youth, college campuses, music scenes, pubs, and pizza parlors. I increasingly believe that we might adopt aspects of what I first heard from a colleague in Machakos, Kenya.

Bishop Kanuku told me that he looks for leaders in new congregations, and designates them as evangelists. If they gather a community for worship and service, he licenses them as catechists. The ones who grow and organize the community will be ordained deacons, and if the community continues to grow and thrive, he'll find another catechist and send the deacon off to Bible college. When that one graduates, he'll be ordained priest. Proven transformative leadership is blessed and put to work. The understanding of diaconal ministry in Kenya is not quite like ours, but the method bears consideration. We could identify millennial leaders with hearts for justice work, bless those gifts, and continue the necessary formation while they're serving as diaconal ministers and leaders.

The Diocese of Connecticut is doing something like that, sending young adults out as missionaries to discover and engage what God's already doing in the neighborhood

Consider that we baptize on the basis of God's promise in a person who is reborn into a community of formation. Confirmation does the same. Ordained ministry is not radically different, and we've already recognized that by requiring ongoing formation for each ordained minister. We should do the same for all the baptized.

The other major transformational reality in ordained leadership has a parallel with the work of deacons. This is a set of adaptive changes that reflect changing realities in the church and society but also seek to recover the evangelical urgency of the early church. In the US part of TEC, the average congregation has 55 people in church on Sunday.<sup>5</sup> A congregation that size rarely needs the ministry of a full-time priest. Today, only 58% of priests are compensated full-time for active ministry in one continuing Episcopal context. We are seeing an increasing number of bivocational and non-stipendiary clergy, which is actually a recovery of more ancient tradition. Paul was a tent-maker; Jesus made his living early in life as a *teknon* – a carpenter or stone mason. Earlier clergy made a living by farming, or from the gifts of parishioners, and in some parts of the Communion, still do. We're also seeing more continuing service by retired clergy, more interims, and more clergy who serve in part-time, intermittent, and multiple-context positions.

The current patterns across the US part of TEC reflect regional history and cultural differences – the Northeast has an abundance of clergy who serve more than one congregation; the South still has a preponderance of one priest serving one parish full-time; the Midwest has lots of bivocational clergy; and the West has more congregations served by supply clergy and clergy who are non-stipendiary or solely employed in secular work. We also now have several bishops who are part-time and/or bivocational: Western Kansas, North Dakota, Eastern Oregon (a pattern seen in the early church). We have a growing number of congregations served by Lutheran or Moravian clergy, and some Episcopal priests serving our full communion partners.

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<sup>5</sup> [https://www.episcopalchurch.org/files/1\\_episcopal\\_domestic\\_fast\\_facts\\_and\\_fast\\_facts\\_trends\\_2013-2017.pdf](https://www.episcopalchurch.org/files/1_episcopal_domestic_fast_facts_and_fast_facts_trends_2013-2017.pdf)

The Episcopal Church beyond the US exhibits a remarkable variety, with few deacons, lots of non-stipendiary and bivocational priests, and priests who serve multiple congregations. The Church in Europe is increasingly indigenizing, with worship opportunities in the local languages as well as English, and significant partnership with the Old Catholics.

One of the most significant challenges in this environment is about effective education and formation for all Christians. Clergy formation has been seminary-focused for the last century and more, and has recently become cost-prohibitive for many aspirants and their dioceses. When clergy are ordained with seminary debt on top of college debt, they are increasingly unable to serve part-time or in poorer communities. The emerging ability of a few seminaries, like VTS, to support the cost of formation will expand the church's ability to deploy effective clergy in a greater variety of contexts. Local and part-time educational programs, like diocesan schools and the Iona school of Seminary of the Southwest, are also expanding those possibilities.

Yet leadership in Episcopal congregations is shared between clergy and laity, and there is a growing recovery in understanding that every baptized person has gifts for ministry – some in the world and some in the church. Adequate and life-long formation for all people is essential. Opportunities like EFM, Stephen Ministry, study with ecumenical and other religious partners, and local discipleship groups – and Bp Curry's *The Way of Love* – offer a great deal toward that shared leadership. There is an evangelical gift for all when gifts for ministry are being exercised in daily life as well as in Sunday worship. That understanding is changing how we think about and function in worship, education, service, pastoral care, and congregational development – and in some ways it is a reflection and developmental consequence of the experience here in the colonial era.

We may be closing congregations in some places, but we are also opening them, in creative and surprising ways in response to the yearning or brokenness of the world around us. What does that look like in your neighborhood? We keep hearing about the disconnectedness of many people from meaningful friendships or community. Smart phones and the internet are great, but can also distract from face to face encounters that are necessary to building lasting relationships of vulnerability and growth. Many people are on the move, without roots or support systems in a wider community. Homelessness is growing; and fewer people know their neighbors. The level of verbal violence is at least one result – for we do not have the necessary range of relationships across communities to sustain constructive conversation in the midst of difference.

Some church plants begin with that challenge. St. Lydia's dinner church started in Manhattan several years ago as a gathering of young adults cooking dinner together. Over the years it has become a worshipping community of Episcopalians, Lutherans, and others, (dinner church Sundays and Mondays; waffle church one Sunday morning a month) and a co-working space that includes spiritual grounding.<sup>6</sup> It claims the mission of “working together to dispel isolation, reconnect neighbors, and subvert the status quo.” Lest that last one scare you, note that we will never see the fullness of the Reign of God if we're satisfied with how things are right now.

Named by the participants, “The Church of Right Here, Right Now in Ocean Beach” meets in the courtyard of San Diego's diocesan office on Wednesday evenings for a service of word and communion. It was started by a deacon to serve neighbors, including the homeless. It's one element in a range of services offered to the community through the week: meals on

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<sup>6</sup> <http://stlydias.org/>

Wed nights and Sat mornings; medical services; an address and mail distribution three times a week; clothing; showers; and connection to veterans' and other social services, including housing and employment.<sup>7</sup>

Garden Church formed around rotting compost and has become worship space in the midst of vegetable gardens, recycling neighborhood food scraps to fertilize those vegetable plots, and sharing a meal together.<sup>8</sup> It's also built community across economic strata – and a vision of the Reign of God once again as earthlings in a garden.

St. Luke's in San Diego<sup>9</sup> is a restart in a neighborhood where many Sudanese and Congolese refugees have resettled. The building has been there for many years, but the congregation had dwindled to a dozen or so Anglos. Today the congregation is led by a clergy couple sharing vicar duties and a vestry that's 3/4 Sudanese. They have moved their service times to permit a Nazarene congregation of college students to use the space between St. Luke's services. They share the wider campus with several community service organizations, providing assistance to refugees and the homeless for job training and employment counseling. They're upgrading the kitchen to commercial use to train culinary workers, primarily the resettled and the formerly homeless. Another group has planted a vegetable garden on part of the property, and distributes food weekly. It's a remarkable example of entrepreneurial leadership and what is often called Asset-Based Community Development. Community organizing is a central part of the congregation's shared ministry.

St. Lydia's, St Luke's, and Garden Church are sharing the good news of God's love in concrete and intimate ways, and they are transforming communities by listening deeply to what God is up to and what people are yearning for. It's reconciling transformation, bringing people together with what is needed for abundant life.

Congregations and church planters in many places are thinking about coffee as well as food. Mother Alyse started a coffee shop at VTS as a student – called the Flamingo – and I think the Dean followed with the pub café called 1823. Hospitality is central to good news – Jesus ate and drank and made festival with all sorts and conditions of people – and growing numbers of congregations are hosting meals for the neighborhood as ways of reconciling and transforming their communities. A number of cathedrals are removing pews so they can welcome a variety of celebrations, from yoga mass to wedding dinners. Medieval cathedrals were on the city square and directly involved in the full range of life in the city – market day, feast days, and shelter for pilgrims and the lost. Part of our task is to meet Jesus where he already is, in the community around us – to discover him in strangers, to join in his reconciling work, and to celebrate the emergence and growth of beloved community.

Some are turning their lawns into vegetable gardens and food forests, hosting regular farmers' markets, sharing food with the hungry and those who live in food deserts. Jubilee Park in Dallas<sup>10</sup> offers cooking classes and nutrition education, teaching how to fix unfamiliar foods on a budget. Others offer not only 12-step programs but encourage fitness and health for the whole person, all while building community among people who were once strangers. There's a congregation not far from here that has partnered with others to clean up and care for its local watershed. Some start preschools to provide holistic child care and a curriculum grounded in God's love for everyone, starting with 'all the little children.'

<sup>7</sup> <https://edsd.org/episcopal-church-center/>

<sup>8</sup> <https://www.christiancentury.org/article/first-person/growing-garden-church-food-scraps-and-compost>

<sup>9</sup> <https://www.stlukesnorthpark.org/>

<sup>10</sup> <https://www.jubileecenter.org/> St. Michael and All Angels, Dallas, was a co-founder

Our partnership in God's mission yields the peace that comes with reconciliation, justice, and the healing of division and inequity. In this season as a church, we're focused on God's mission through the Way of Love and engagement with racial reconciliation, creation care, and evangelism. The good news comes in many forms, and the first task is to see and hear the brokenness and division of the world and discern where and how to engage it. The second part begins with awareness of the gifts we've been given – buildings, expertise, partners, and dreams. That strategic discernment is called community organizing or Asset-Based Community Development or something else – but they all share the goal of offering the gifts present in a community into that community's brokenness and yearning. That is precisely what Jesus did in his ministry and with his life: healing, feeding, teaching, dying and rising.

Sometimes the possibilities are surprising. The Diocese of Rochester held its recent diocesan convention in a Muslim social hall, asking hospitality of another faith community and building bridges and partnerships in the process. What about the solidarity of hundreds of faithful people with the Lakota community at Standing Rock? Or the deep connections built over many years between the Diocese of Virginia and South Sudan, including the congregation that worships here at 2 pm?

That kind of transformation even happens up the road in Washington, as the Office of Global Relations helps to gather Episcopalians and others from both sides of the aisle for prayer, breakfast, and an occasional conversation with the Presiding Bishop. There's a group of women senators who meet regularly for prayer and conversation across the aisle – and, I'm told, similar men's gatherings.

Reconciliation is perhaps the deepest and fullest kind of transformation – and it is urgently needed in the world around us, in the Capitol, in every part of this nation represented there, and with all the other residents of this fragile earth, our island home. Your take on that here at St. Paul's is “to shine as a light in the world to the glory of God,” healing the brokenness, illuminating the darkness, reconciling the world to God's dream of peace. Be transformed, and you will be a transforming blessing to this world!