

Gospel-grounded Church Leadership. A Case Study

Colleagues,

Paul Marshall is the Bishop of the Episcopal Diocese of Bethlehem, Pennsylvania. His seminary degree (1973) comes from Concordia Seminary in St. Louis. He once was a Lutheran. Primordially Lutheran, if the next sentence is really true. Namely, that way back in prep school—as I’ve been told—at the Missouri Synod’s junior college in Bronxville, New York, Paul and another seminary-bound whiz-kid, Barry Hong, spent their weekends not roaming the streets of Manhattan, but reading Erlangen (German!) Lutheran theologians.

Macerated in the wars of Missouri, Paul swam the Thames and wound up Anglican in its US format, the Episcopal Church-USA. Paul claims that he has the very last Master of Divinity degree document ever signed by Concordia president John Tietjen before he was dismissed from his office in the Missouri Synod massacre that eventuated in Seminex. How that happened is its own story.

Paul sends me the monthly Bethlehem Diocese newspaper. So I hear what he’s doing and saying. Couple of times already I’ve passed on some of his prose to ThTh readers.

Now and then I tweak Paul about his slide toward certain Anglican accents that muffle the Augsburg Aha! he once learned at Concordia, and I “splain” to him why Augsburg is closer to the original Biblical Bethlehem (the namesake of his diocese) than Canterbury is. Not only in geography, but in theology. He regularly parries my pokes with a poignant riposte and good conversation ensues.

I sent him such a caveat about one line in what he says below (guess which one it is) and what followed was just like old classroom days at Concordia in the 1970s. One more item: Paul is the only student I ever had who invited me to a bar at the close of a late afternoon class to continue discussion. He even paid for the martinis! The proper drink, of course, for discussing Luther's theology.

I think Bishop Paul's message at the diocesan convention in October is good old Augsburg. [Well there IS that one sentence!] With his permission I pass it on to you.

Peace and Joy!
Ed Schroeder

A sermon preached by the Rt. Rev. Paul V. Marshall at the Eucharist during Diocesan Convention on October 9, 2010.

It would not be completely accurate to call them terrorists, but the two men crucified with Jesus were by no means shop-lifters or jay-walkers. The word we are used to translating as "thieves" means something like brigands, bandits, or perhaps insurgents, seriously violent people, desperados. Rome was publicly torturing them to death that Friday as a message to other potential career criminals: resistance to the state is useless.

It is not often that we hear conversations among people who are being killed, so it is worthwhile to listen in. How could we not identify with the first thief? Reality had caught up with him, his future was zero. Tragically, he isn't getting it.

Do we? At what point in life do we realize that the limitations we experience in career and relationship may have something to

do with us? There is no one for whom it is not true that personality offers both possibility and limitation, and that some choices follow you. Some people are too frightened to face this, and our thief was one of them.

The first robber had not reached that moment of insight-he blames what is wrong in his life entirely on the outside. From the depths of his rage he lashes out at Jesus.

And who has not been there? Who hasn't been furious with God for something that has gone horribly wrong in their life, furious to the point of bitter rejection of the creator? Who doesn't know something of the robber's emotions about his fate? Who doesn't secretly know or half-know that things at work or at home would be different if they themselves had been different? Who do you blame for your personality defects?

A comedian once said, "My one regret in life is that I am not somebody else." I have often wondered about the pain beneath a joke like that. So the robber spits out his rebuke to Jesus. And Jesus, who is at that moment bearing the sins of the world in the most literal of senses, bears this outburst as well. Jesus, whom the gospels show us besting the best debaters of his time, just lets it go.

I wonder if we always realize that God's apparent silence when we challenge the universe or life itself is a kind of toleration, a non-engagement in what could only get worse. There are times when you argue and times when you don't. Job is an extraordinarily difficult book to read, and no explanation is satisfactory, but I wonder if God's silence through most of it is a species of kindness.

The second thief is in a different place. He has recognized that his life has caught up with him, and tries to shut the first one up. We don't know how that dialog turned out, but we hear from

him the words we will sing many times this noon as we pray for our dead, "remember me when you come into your kingdom."

That cry from the other cross is an act of surrender, and the second robber reminds us of another aspect of our being. After the rage, after running into the brick wall for the millionth time, what is there to say except, "Lord, have mercy?"

There isn't a lot of content in that plea, there are no explanations or apologies, or promises to do better, but there is the heart's cry that each of us who has survived the fourth grade knows, the cry for peace, acceptance, and an end to struggle. From Huckleberry Finn to Catcher in the Rye to The Great Gatsby, in William Shakespeare, Ernest Hemingway, and Iris Murdoch, there is a longing in us for things to make sense and come connectedly to rest. That longing may be sharply defined or just a vague groping after something more, but the second crucified robber gives it voice.

Unlike the first robber, he is ready for peace, and Jesus promises it to him, that very day. Each of these condemned gets what they can handle at the moment. Jesus takes the rage of the first robber, and responds to the plea of the second—all while he himself is dying. If we believe that Jesus was a real human being, really dying by the exquisite torture that was crucifixion, we might wonder why he didn't say, "can't you let a person even die in peace?"

Bruised, beaten, and punctured with spikes, Jesus is shown to us summoning the energy to care for the person on the cross next to him. To come to today's point. You and I already know that God can absorb our rage. You and I know that Jesus promises to share paradise with us. That is why we are here. These new prayers and lessons "For Forgiveness and Reconciliation" encourage each of us to discover new depths to which we have been accepted,

forgiven, and promised peace. And if we were about to break out into groups, the question I would offer is, But what about the person on the cross next to yours?

The Rt. Rev. Paul V. Marshall
Cathedral Church of the Nativity
Bethlehem, October 8, 2010

This has been a year of deeper connections for the Episcopal Church. In our part of the country it is especially joyful news that the two provinces of the Moravian Church have now entered into full communion with us, and that gift will be celebrated nationally in January of 2011. Additionally, for the first time that I know of, the Roman Catholic Bishop of Scranton will be preaching at St. Luke's in Scranton. Beyond that, we are planning a joint Eucharistic celebration with the Methodists for next fall, and of course, our relationship with the Lutherans continues to develop. For the first time, I have been able to receive a Lutheran pastor as an Episcopal priest by a simple letter of transfer.

These are the major indicators, but not the only ones, that Christian witness and service will in God's time regain united focus, that the world may see and know the power of the gospel. Canon Maria Tjeltveit is working on getting the leaders of the Lutheran, Moravian, Episcopal and Methodist communities to a meeting at the same time and place, so that we can begin to put some flesh on the structures of communion that have been erected.

Members of our House of Bishops and their spouses got to experience a new connectedness within our own church as we met with the fast-growing Coalición de Episcopales Latinos. The fastest growing demographic in our mainland dioceses, Latino

Episcopalians will bring us many gifts. For some decades now the church has benefited from the presence of the Union of Black Episcopalians, and it is my hope that the Coalición will similarly help us to eliminate barriers in our family and move into a future that celebrates the beautiful complexity of God's creation.

All of that said; let me speak to our own time this weekend. This is more of a working convention than we usually have. Consequently, things will feel different over the next two days. My address today is one-third shorter than usual and will not review the highlights of the past year. My sermon tomorrow morning will also be shorter, to allow more time for the morning discussion groups to operate. Our worship services will be more compact. There will be fewer lessons and hymns, and the usual processions of clergy, the United Thank Offering, and the Episcopal Church Women's gifts will not occur until next year.

So what is there for us to discuss? This afternoon we will discuss some of the points I am trying to make now, and tomorrow we will hone in more directly on the work of the Congregational Development Committee.

A Committee's New Ministry

A year ago in my address to the convention I expressed a desire for us to reinvent our efforts in congregational development. My reason was that the culture and the economy in NE PA have changed, with dramatic results for the life of the church. Each of us has a list of things that pinch us right now in the enterprise of being a church, but as a community we don't yet have a pattern of response for these times, and we particularly need a pattern that works from our strengths rather than one that remains fascinated by our perceived weakness.

My prayers were fully answered. A much-enlarged Congregational

Development Committee, led by Canon Charles Cesaretti and Fr. Scott Allen, went to work on the challenge I laid down with an enthusiasm that escapes my powers of description. Would the members of that committee who are here today please stand.

Every word of their substantial report needs our attention, but let me tell you what is particularly important to me as a pastor when I look over their work.

Faith in a Time of Anxiety

Decades ago C. H. Dodd observed that Christianity attracted followers in its early days because the new religion was an answer to the troubles of what he was the first to call an "Age of Anxiety." The world's situation was tenuous on almost every level, and multitudes came to find in the practice of the new religion gifts of peace, confidence, and joy for their lives.

We are back in that emotional territory. About the time I was born, Leonard Bernstein was writing his second symphony, which he entitled, "Age of Anxiety." Perhaps that says it all. It is surely unnecessary to give a detailed account of the anxieties our culture has been struggling with for the last sixty-five years. We also don't need to dwell on the extent to which churches and clergy can feel like failures when secular models of success are imposed on them-especially when they are forbidden to use many secular tools to attain that success.

Other writers on the ancient world have pointed out that in times when life was cheap, Christians distinguished themselves by the care of the poor and helpless, especially abandoned infants.

With this image of Christian origins as a calm and compassionate center in the anxious and violent world of the past and present in mind, I followed the committee's work. I was very grateful

for what I observed. Rather than funding yet another research project on what went wrong with the culture or the church, rather than asking which issues of the day could have been better dealt with, the Committee calmly and lovingly went out to talk to parishioners and their clergy about what does work. They consulted with what we might consider larger, wealthier, parishes and they also visited an equal number of parishes facing significant challenges. In all cases, they modeled the important skill known as “appreciative inquiry,” listening in an affirming way.

That is, they went as appreciative listeners, seeking to learn in each case what gives a parish cohesion, what it is proud of, and it how it assesses its strengths for future ministry. They wanted to know what parishes have to share with their neighbors in the diocese and beyond its community. You have their report, “From Risk to Opportunities” [R20], in your packets, and many of you have seen it before. Many of you have read the summary articles Ty Welles wrote for our diocesan newspaper as well. The committee was delighted at the many experiences of rich parish life that were shared with them. They formulated their recommendations with that memory in the forefront of their minds.

R20 Close Up

I want to make some observations about From Risk to Opportunities before you begin to work on it in your groups and back home. If you have read it, you know that the first and most important point to make is that From Risk to Opportunities is not another program that your vestry must somehow fit into the schedule of your church. From Risk to Opportunities describes a process for discovery and some organizing principles for what is already happening in churches. It describes a way of being that can shape us during the generation or so that it takes to make

permanent change in an organization. It is a gift we will leave to our children and grandchildren.

Using the Product

The process "R20" recommends is grounded before all else in prayer, both personal and corporate. Being in touch with God is nothing more or less than "using the product," and church life makes little sense without it. While prayer means many things, the committee is especially interested in prayer as openness to God in a way that gives "lightness and energy and excitement" to congregations. (R20, p. 10, quoting Reese) Living prayerfully delivers congregations from secular management styles and opens them to the direction of the Holy Spirit.

In this regard, I wish to repeat once more my core beliefs about Vestry meetings; many of you have heard them. The first is that the container shapes the contents: meetings should not take more than 90 minutes, and if they routinely do take longer, there may be a problem in the system. The second is that financial matters must come last on the agenda so that the focus can be on the parish's mission. The third is that leadership meetings must emerge from corporate prayer. If you look at our most energetic parishes, you will find without exception that the environment in which leadership meets is prayerful, most vestries attending to word and sacrament as well as sustained prayer. To help make this point, beginning in January we are re-shaping our Diocesan Council meetings in several ways, and one of them will be to deepen Council's life as a body at prayer.

Planning and Partnership

Back to the committee's report. Out of prayer comes discernment. In *From Risk to Opportunities* the hope is that concentration on our prayer life and listening to God will help each congregation focus on and celebrate what they do well, what they have to

share. From there flow questions of goals and planning for the near and long-term future. Planning in one sense means visualizing yourself as successful at some task, really entering that vision and enjoying it-and then asking what you did to get there.

Part of the planning process the committee has in mind here, especially for smaller congregations, is planning for partnership with others. That is hardly news, although we have room to grow in this department. What is new about From Risk to Opportunities for some of us will be the emphasis on parishes partnering not just with Episcopal congregations, but with our ecumenical partners and other groups as well. The full communion relations I have mentioned with Lutherans and Moravians, and the developing relationship with the Methodists, may well provide all partners with new possibilities for the future.

Those are my comments on the process, and you will want to read more about it in the report itself. However, I think that the committee's assumptions are worth examining as well. They assume that each of us is aware that our baptismal relationship to Jesus is one of discipleship, a relationship where our Lord gives each of us work to do for the life of the Church and its service to the world. Without that belief our expectations are limited. Church can no longer be for us something we occasionally attend, but is the community where we are nourished for and to some degree express our discipleship.

Transforming the Culture

The writers assume that we are able to live with reality, even if reality means doing without. This is another place where we have something to teach the culture. For example, the budget that the diocese will consider tomorrow is a seriously contracted one, and there are a number of staff positions we are

not filling because there isn't money for them. I do not say this as a complaint; I say it as a recognition of certain economic facts that cannot now be helped. A number of congregations have had to make similar decisions about staffing for the same reason. It may be a few years before improvement in finances reaches our level, and we have to unemotionally work with what is. It has never failed to be true that when one door closes another opens-if that is what you are looking for.

In circumstances and times like this it is vital to maintain hope, and as Nathan Duggan told us last spring, hope without a plan is denial. Hope without a plan is denial. We have the opportunity to show the culture what hope looks like when it plans realistically about using and preserving financial and human resources.

This observation about the important ministry of teaching the culture helps me keep to Anglicanism's famous middle way. For example, I am not driven by a daily need to get out there and be what is called "counter-cultural". Equally, I am not driven by a daily need to affirm business as usual at home or abroad.

What I do feel is that culture can be transformed by the witness and sweaty work of committed disciples of Jesus. Whether it was the sinking of the Titanic or the devastation of the First World War, or both, since the beginning of the last century it has been impossible for a literate person to expect inevitable and uniform progress morally or socially. However, as a follower of Jesus I have come to expect that in the moments where individuals or communities give of themselves as Christ gave, new life breaks through unstoppably. Those moments may not look holy except to those with eyes to see, but it is a special talent of the Holy Spirit not to look very religious, and nowhere does the Bible suggest that the Spirit only works through Christians-quite the contrary. One of our Eucharistic

prayers asks, "open our eyes to see your hand at work in the world about us." That is a subtle phrase, and will come to mind as you hear Sunday's gospel about the grateful leper. Those who so desire can and do see God at work.

Conversation

The committee also expects that we can be in holy conversation. Certainly we invite generous conversation with each other all the time, but as you read *From Risk to Opportunities*, you will see in it the invitation to each congregation's conversation with our perception of our past, our present, and our vision for the future. That call to us is as challenging as it is intriguing.

From my perspective, getting past and future together is not always an easy conversation to hold with others or within ourselves. If you are like me you may have to realize repeatedly that the church of my childhood or other favorite period, a church which I loved and which inspired me, is not coming back, although it has left many traces. There was an extraordinary amount of good about it, and some of that good has been lost while much has been preserved. But there has been other good emerging as well. If history teaches anything, it is that there will always be fresh vision into which we are invited to move, but always at a cost, cultural or emotional. It is o.k. for me to grieve what is gone as long as I ask the question, is what we have now adequate to who we are and how we serve the world?

What is Permanent

The crucified and risen Jesus Christ is eternal, as is his call, "follow me" and his presence with his people until the end. Just about everything else in response to him has adjusted to historical circumstance and the proddings of the Spirit in many and various ways. As I said a minute ago, the lesson of

Christian history is that the Holy Spirit continues to lead us into newness of life, some of it quite unexpected.

That is easy to say, and I know that there are some people who like change for its own sake just as there are those who find all change difficult, but generally we need to go easy on each other. One of the hardest verses in the Bible is “behold, I do something new.” (Is 43:19) Like many of you, I did not sign on for that: I signed on for personal security, control of my life, and good music. What I have learned, however reluctantly, is that the future I may have dreaded in 1970 turned out not to be such a bad place. The advantage of surviving major illness, in my case heart surgery, is that very little in life seems urgent, while much more in life seems important.

Avoiding Rumpelstiltskin

The result of my own internal conversation between past and future is that I am now mostly ambivalent about the church I once idealized, even idolized. I think that this is maturity, but it may be too soon to tell. I have found that if I expect perfection from the church, I will just go into Rumpelstiltskin mode when it fails that test of perfection, which it cannot help but do. On the other hand, I find that if I try be merely spiritual and to ignore the church in the hope that it will go away, God will send some incredibly gentle and loving saint across my path to remind me that “game over” has not yet flashed on the screen and that I must get back to work with my fellow disciples. What I have come to care about is not a perfect organization but a faithful organization, doing its best to serve Christ, limping onward to Zion. I have come to care about the present in a way that is informed by the past and invites the future. The present is our home address, and like most of our homes, there is room for improvement, and not all of it will get done before the family comes for the holidays. I am willing

to believe that I stand with St. Augustine in trying to cultivate a healthy ambivalence about the church, and about myself-we all contain that which is valuable and that which is not yet finished. The end-product is patience.

What this has to do with our present endeavor is this: there is a temptation to ask too much of the church, and to be crushed when our hopes are dashed by human reality. We are not here this weekend suddenly to fix anything, because there are no miracle cures or magic bullets. We can begin work over the years to make each congregation better and better connected, one step at a time, accepting our personal and organizational imperfections and celebrating God's rich gifts.

Killing George Herbert

The realities of the present are that all the baptized must work together and develop together in their discipleship. Let me say to my colleagues in the clergy that there is a book perhaps worth an afternoon's read. It is called, provocatively, *If You Meet George Herbert on the Road, Kill Him*. I did not write it. For those who don't know, Herbert was a poet who also wrote a book called *The Country Parson*, an idealized view of the perfect priest that has inspired and maddened Anglican clergy for centuries. To put it another way, it has become the seminarians' persecuting superego. I think that the title of the book about killing Herbert is an exaggeration designed to sell books, but the point is worth thinking about. The village parson who was everything to everybody dare exist no longer. In the first place it is not healthy-it is a little known fact that saintly Mr. Herbert died at age 41 after a whopping three years in parish ministry. The healthy part of moving away from Herbert is that by putting down most of the burden, we make room for others to pick it up, to their souls' joy. In the second place, we do not want parishes where everyone is dependent on the priest for

emotional support-that reflects not a theology, but a diagnosis.

Here is where those of you who are teachers may offer something. Teachers know that if you ask a class a question, you may have to be prepared to live through twenty very long seconds of silence before someone suggests an answer. That is not always easy. In the same way, if you as a priest or parish leader say that you can no longer manage a certain parish task, it may take a while before someone else picks it up, but if the task is essential to the life of the parish, somebody will take it on.

So what we hope to see more and more is partnership in parishes, partnerships among parishes, and partnerships with our ecumenical companions, not expecting too much yet expecting everything as God gives it. We are called to act realistically, sharing the load, and integrating our traditions and our future into today's church.

Questions

This address does not have a stirring conclusion, because that is for you to develop in your groups. The committee is providing your table leaders the following questions for you to discuss, so as the Dean says, "don't write this down."

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS (and make your own)

- What was the most useful part of the bishop's address for our parish?
- How does our parish live a life of prayer? How might we deepen the experience?
- How is the "management style" in our parish marked by "openness to the Holy Spirit?"
- How does our parish presently maintain conversation with both its past and its future?

I ask that you go to your groups now, dropping off your ballots

as you go.