

INTERIM MINISTRY IN AN EPISCOPAL CHURCH: A LUTHERAN PERSPECTIVE

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On a warm evening in August of 2006, a recently retired ELCA bishop met with the Vestry of a suburban Philadelphia Episcopal Church to discuss the possibility of a Lutheran minister serving as their *Interim Rector*. A delightful blend of cordiality and incredulity marked the conversation. For the Vestry this was a giant-sized version of ... *We've never done anything like this before!* The former bishop, having been in administrative work for twelve years, was equally challenged by the prospect of leading a relatively large Episcopal congregation.

I was that retired bishop. Having served the Lutheran Synod that embraces the same territory as the Episcopal Diocese of Pennsylvania, I knew the region well. Prior to my election I had served a congregation in the same area, and my wife and I resided only twenty minutes from the Episcopal congregation. My former colleague, the Episcopal Bishop, shared my enthusiasm for the ecumenical agreement, *Called to Common Mission*, that yoked the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America and the Episcopal Church. Together we had launched a number of creative endeavors, including a shared mission director, a joint Lutheran-Episcopal campus chaplaincy at a large Philadelphia university, and a cooperative Latino mission. So I was delighted to take our ecumenical commitment to a new dimension.

Once I was able to convince the Vestry that their congregation (St. Peter's Church in the Great Valley, Malvern, PA) was not being punished for something by this unusual proposed interim minister, the leaders opened up to the idea of a Lutheran pastor serving them. We had a wide-ranging conversation, which seemed to assure all but one member of the Vestry that this was a plan that would work (one Vestry member never could overcome his sense that my "orders" were invalid and he would never receive the Eucharist at a service when I was the celebrant).

The congregation that I would serve had already contracted with a transitional consultant, a person with significant experience in leading congregations through the search and call process. This was a great relief for me, because I was aware that the process of calling a new rector in the Episcopal Church was quite different from the protocol I followed in our Lutheran synod. While an interim minister is not to be directly involved in the call process, I was appropriately concerned that even the most general advice I might give concerning process could be faulty. This consultant provided a firewall for me.

Once the Vestry agreed to my appointment, I moved carefully into this new responsibility. I was helped considerably by the welcoming spirit of the congregation and by the strong support of the associate rector, an enthusiastic, fairly new priest, who had served the congregation for about

two years by the time I arrived. The members of the congregation, trusting their Vestry, adjusted quickly to this novelty.

From the first few weeks I was aware of the fact that one cannot trivialize the difference in denominational traditions. While it is safe to say that “good ministry is good ministry” and there is much our two denominations hold in common, there are distinct differences. Coming to grips with the policies and expectations of Episcopal canon law was an ongoing challenge for me. Lutheran pastors have far more flexibility. Again, I was most fortunate to have a colleague priest, who could help me understand requirements and make sure that all things were done in a proper manner. An example of the kind of mistake a Lutheran could innocently make was my failure to realize that an Episcopal priest must receive the approval of the Bishop in order to conduct a marriage for a divorced person. No such permission is needed in the Lutheran tradition, where the local pastor has full authority to make such a decision without any consultation with the judicatory leader.

A joy and fear for me was conducting worship with the *Book of Common Prayer*. I have always enjoyed the beauty of Anglican worship, but the challenge of actually presiding at the Eucharist in a congregation that had a clear sense of what to expect was a bit daunting. The design of the altar book is quite different from the equivalent worship resource in the Lutheran tradition. The similarities between Episcopal and Lutheran worship are great enough to provide a distinct challenge in those places where there is a decided difference. Even little things like the words used in the actual distribution of the elements in the Eucharist are different. All of this kept me on my toes every Sunday.

Matins and Evensong sent me scurrying for a new cassock and surplice. In most Lutheran congregations an alb is the appropriate vestment for all services and a series of albs had served me well. I quickly discovered that the cassock and surplice that I had purchased in seminary had experienced some profound “closet shrinkage” and needed replacement. In my desire to look like the person sent from central casting, I also invested in a *tippet*, a stole that has never had a parallel place in the Lutheran tradition.

I have long believed that a major responsibility of an interim minister is to work with the elected lay leadership to strengthen their confidence, sharpen their insights, and allow them to be a source for optimism and hope as the congregation seeks to move forward during the transition. Most congregations face a sense of letdown or discouragement when a beloved rector leaves. The congregation I was serving had just completed a three-million dollar plus construction project, which created a beautiful new all-purpose building. The Alban Institute can cite statistics on the number of clergy who leave shortly after the completion of a major project of this kind, but the people of St. Peter’s were shocked that their Rector would resign within six months of the ribbon-cutting, especially with a considerable unpaid balance on the project.

One of the things I had to do right away was to provide support as members dealt with their profound sadness over the loss of a highly competent spiritual leader. The underlying issue was a level of disappointment toward him, which initially they were not able to express. As I gained the confidence of the people, many of them were able to articulate their varied emotions, an

essential activity in a healthy transition. I helped them to understand why priests resign and how the congregation is so much more than its spiritual leader.

Within the first three to four months of my serving I was challenged to select a new Rector's Warden. I was initially reluctant to do this. In the Lutheran tradition the Congregation Council, the equivalent of the Vestry, elects the lay President of the Congregation. But I was told that St. Peter's expected the Rector to choose the Rector's Warden. They did not want a time-honored tradition to be compromised. So I picked the next Senior Warden, a selection that surprised many leaders. The person I chose provided inspired leadership at a critical moment.

A characteristic of my approach to parish ministry has always been pastoral visitation. So as I got started, I scheduled 6-8 home visits a week. Initially the people were puzzled. Many had never had a Rector visit their home. I learned that parish visitation was not common in this congregation, but I was warmly received nonetheless. Everyone has a story and each congregant loves to tell it. I think my initial visitation played a tremendous role in my acceptance as their interim Rector. My wife and I are used to entertaining and so we also hosted the Vestry and spouses at our home during a weekend mini-retreat.

As a Lutheran I think I was able to bring some new perspective to two vital dimensions of the congregation's life. One was evangelism, something of a "dirty word" in Episcopal congregations I soon discovered. We formed a Task Force on "New Members and Assimilation," a kind of euphemism for evangelism, and pulled together some valuable recommendations for warming the welcome at St. Peter's and following through when people expressed interest in the church.

Since I arrived in the midst of an extremely low profile fall stewardship program, I helped them to think creatively about stewardship. The congregation had a long commitment to a "fund-raising" model for the annual appeal. With creative lay leaders, I was able to encourage St. Peter's to use Herb Miller's *New Consecration Sunday* program with its emphasis on giving in response to God's goodness. The use of this new program encouraged a dramatic increase in financial commitment.

I thought that the encouragement of this new stewardship emphasis was a good example of effective interim ministry. They were challenged to try something new, experience a sense of joy in accomplishment, but I did not establish a program that could be a burden to the new Rector. I resisted the initiation of other programs (like a small group emphasis), because I felt that the new Rector should determine whether such an undertaking was appropriate.

Lutheran congregations traditionally have some form of Lenten midweek observation. St. Peter's had once done something like that but had abandoned it in recent years. My colleague and I launched a wonderful "Lenten soup supper" series that brought a number of folks together for fellowship and a spiritual emphasis.

I enjoyed my time of participation in both our local Deanery meetings and the Episcopal Interim Ministers Association. I was warmly received at all levels of my diocesan participation and I tried very hard to be present at all special meetings. When I deemed it appropriate, I shared my

thoughts, but I definitely kept myself separated from some of the controversies that were swirling around the Diocese. I always considered myself a guest and never chose sides on critical policy issues.

My twenty months of service to an Episcopal congregation were a great joy. Since we do not have “bishops-for-life” in the Lutheran tradition, my serving helped me ease back into being a parish pastor once again. My wife and I felt very much at home within that community of believers and we have developed some wonderful friends there. When my term of service ended, I totally separated myself from the congregation and did not set foot on the property until the installation of the new Rector, who specifically invited me to participate and be a chalicist. The rector has subsequently invited my wife and me to participate in the life of the congregation in any way we would like. I believe my time at St. Peter’s, a Lutheran pastor serving an Episcopal congregation, was a mutual blessing.