

Theological Reflection for the House of Bishops – Tuesday September 21, 2010 – T. C. Ely

On Saturday you heard a little bit from me about the missional context of Vermont and what I perceive God is up to in our midst in one particular and important aspect of our life and ministry – our ministry to and with gay and lesbian couples. Today, I want to expand on that missional context and try to answer the question we were given for this session: “How are you making a Gospel proclamation in response to what God is doing in your context?”

The mission statement of the Diocese of Vermont is to: *Pray the prayer of Christ, Learn the mind of Christ and Do the deeds of Christ*. This Mission Statement is represented in the symbols on my Pectoral Cross. Christ is at the center of our life and mission. Our mission theology is that expressed in The Book of Common Prayer: We participate in **God’s** reconciling mission for the world. We understand that our participation in the *missio dei* emerges from our baptism and so the theme of baptismal ministry flowing from the Baptismal Covenant – the credal statement as well as the five questions – is a theme that saturates all we pray, teach and do. All of this lies at the heart of our proclamation and witness to the love of God, the crucified and risen life of Christ in which we share, and the unfolding work of the Holy Spirit in our midst.

The scriptural foundations for all of this are many and especially include:

1. Our Lord’s image of the vine and the branches in John 15, and Paul’s ubiquitous teaching about the Body of Christ.
2. The reality of our dying and rising with Christ, inviting our participation in God’s reconciling mission through the giving over of ourselves to the service of Christ as expressed in II Corinthians 5.
3. The invitation in the Creation narratives and elsewhere to be faithful stewards of all that God has given into our care and to see our stewardship in response to God’s goodness and abundance.
4. Our Lord’s invitation in Luke 4, Matthew 25 and elsewhere to ground our life and ministry in concrete ways that reflect our servant commitment to love God AND neighbor.
5. The modeling of our Lord’s own words and life of prayer, and that of the early church, for the grounding our life and work in the practice of prayer and community. I have in mind particularly John 17 and Acts 2.

The contextual reality in which we live this proclamation of the Good News, a part of which I described in my reflection on Saturday, is challenging indeed, although not dissimilar to that in which many in this room find themselves, and certainly one filled with opportunity.

The Diocese of Vermont is a small diocese in a mostly rural state with a population of 622,000 (according to 2009 statistics) – and much cattle. We have many small communities and hence many small churches. We are an older state in terms of the age of our population – the 2nd oldest in the US. We are a predominantly white state, the 2nd whitest in the US, I believe. We are, according the recent Pew study, number 1 in the U.S. with regard to those claiming no religious

affiliation. Our membership decline has mirrored that of our denomination as a whole, and we have not been spared the realities of economic distress, although our unemployment numbers are a bit better than the US average.

That said, we are a lively diocese with a deep commitment to baptismal ministry, mutual ministry and ministry in daily life. Over the last few years, the focus of our Diocesan Convention has shifted from legislation to formation, and this year our Convention will welcome Emily Scott from St. Lydia's Dinner Church in New York City as we explore some of the possibilities for "fresh expressions" in our worship and evangelism.

Many in our diocese have been reading and studying books related to the "emergent church," or "fresh expressions." One in particular – a book by Anthony Robinson titled *Changing the Conversation* – has been very helpful in a variety of contexts, including our recent diocesan mutual ministry review. In light of this interest, my observation is that God is up to something wonderful among us in the Diocese of Vermont and our response is to enter into the conversation with God and one another about how we will proclaim and live out the Good News of God in Christ in the midst of a changing world and changing church.

Some of the tools for the proclamation of the Good News of Jesus Christ going forward include our commitments to:

1. Explore and engage new and innovative opportunities for teaching and communicating the Good News of Jesus Christ to the people of Vermont, via an enhanced web site and other media options.
2. Extend opportunities for engaging in "fresh expressions" in our worship and outreach to seekers and members alike.
3. Develop community partnerships for more effective and efficient stewardship of our buildings and more dynamic ministries in our cities and towns.
4. Expand and improve diocesan properties and programs to be more effective in our ministries of spiritual formation, children's and youth ministry.
5. Encourage and model good environmental practices of conservation, efficiency and the use of renewable energy sources.
6. Continue our work of ministry development in congregations, working with new and renewed models of leadership and mutual ministry to help build strong and vital communities of faith that are incarnations of our mission statement.

There was a story on NPR this morning about the oldest living man in the United States. I think he is 107 years old and apparently in pretty good shape. When asked the key to his longevity he said something to the effect of "being open to change." Being open to change! God remains steadfast and faithful and calls the church to be adaptable to changing realities as we seek to "Pray the Prayer of Christ, Learn the Mind of Christ and Do the Deeds of Christ." Thank you for letting me share a bit more of our story.

The Right Reverend Thomas C. Ely