



Bishop Mariann Budde: The Early Seasons of Ministry

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The following reflection on early seasons of ministry is adapted from a sermon preached by The Rt. Rev'd. Mariann Budde in the Diocese of Washington.

The beginning of a new season in ministry is a unique moment in the life of a congregation. There is so much to learn and to do, so many tasks and responsibilities that are part of the congregation's life. There are assumptions and expectations on both sides of this new relationship. There are challenges and opportunities, some that you had anticipated and others that will surprise you. Honestly, it's hard to know where to begin. Yet it's also a time that follows a lengthy period of prayer and discernment on both sides. Over many months, you've tested what it might feel like to share a life of ministry together, resulting in a call extended and accepted.

Now you are here. God willing, there are many years of ministry ahead of you. Not everything that needs to be addressed can be addressed at once. What is most important in the this initial season life together? What comes first?

1. Relationships

The first task is always relational and organic. It takes time for one who has been selected as a spiritual leader to become the leader. There is no shortcut for the kind of relationship building that is the foundation of every healthy church. St. Paul, using an image from the natural world, writes of being grafted into the life of a community, as a seedling is grafted into a larger plant. You need time to get to know each other—as a congregation, you need to become accustomed to your new rector's voice in the pulpit, her or his way of leading. She or he needs to come to know and love you enough to determine how best to lead.

2. Gentle, Courageous Ministry Evaluation

If only we could do nothing else in the first two years but get to know each other! But you are not a community on hiatus. Ministry is on-going: there are decisions to be made, priorities to set, budgets to manage. You need to be about that necessary work and yet also use the gift of this time for the second important set of tasks in this season: gentle, courageous ministry evaluation.

In these first months and years, it's helpful to cultivate a kind of dual vision, where you're paying attention as best you can to what's happening *and* a larger sense of purpose and calling behind at the same time. One author on leadership defines this kind of vision as distinguishing what you see when you're dancing on a dance floor from what you see from the balcony looking down at all the dancers, one of whom is you. The dance floor is his image for jumping right in together for the work at hand; the balcony for the kind of vision you see only from a distance, when you step back, even in part of your mind, as you're still out there dancing. We need both perspectives, he says. In the first year or two of a new ministry, it's especially important to both actively engage and save a little bit of time and energy for reflection and evaluation. (Ronald Heifetz and Marty Linsky, *Leadership on the Line: Staying Alive Through the Dangers of Leading* (Harvard Business School Publishing, 2002)).

A Methodist minister in Herndon, VA, Tom Berlin, suggests a simple method for cultivating this kind of dual-vision, and that is to invoke what he calls the two most powerful words for leadership: *So that*. Those who learn to use these two words, he says, will discover a way to clarify the intended, fruitful outcome of every ministry endeavor. (Tom Berlin and Lovitt H. Weems, Jr, *Bearing Fruit: Ministry with Real Results* (Abingdon Press, 2001))

There is a lot of biblical inspiration for this kind of thinking. Once you start looking for them, you see the words so *that* throughout the Bible:

“Let your light shine before others” Jesus said, “*so that* they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven.” (Matthew 5:16)

“For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, *so that* everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life. (John 3:16)

“Do not be conformed to this world but be transformed by the renewing of your minds” writes St. Paul in his letter to the Romans, “*so that* you may discern what is the will of God—what is good and acceptable and perfect. (Romans 12:2)

Let me give you a practical example from one pastor’s experience with a congregation that had for many years hosted a Vacation Bible School. He asked all those gathered to organize the upcoming summer’s VBS to complete the following sentence: *Next summer our church will have a vacation bible school so that...*

At first very few people wrote anything at all, struggling to come up with the purpose of the Vacation Bible School. At last one person shared what she wrote: “Next summer our church will have a vacation bible school so that the children of our church will experience a vacation bible school.” “Are there more possibilities?” the pastor asked. Another chimed in: Next summer our church will have a vacation bible school so that our children will experience church as fun.” The pastor’s thought was, “I’m not sure we need a curriculum for that.” After some time and deeper reflection the group came up with this: “Next summer our church will have a vacation bible school *so that* our children will come to know and love God more and that we will reach children in the community with God’s love whom we have not reached before.” (Story told in *Bearing Fruit*.)

That was a purpose they could get inspired to work to accomplish and invite others to join them. It was also one that could afterwards be evaluated on the basis of fruitfulness: did the children of our church have an experience of love? Were we able to reach children in the neighborhood? If not, why not? What might we do better next time? For the purpose was no longer to have a vacation bible school. That was a means to end. If the means no longer served that ends, they were free to consider something else. *So that* helps shift our focus from the activities of our church toward their intended outcome, one that can be measured in terms of fruitfulness.

3. *Weathering a Storm*

The third task in the early season of ministry is perhaps the hardest: weathering a storm together. I don’t know what the storm will be, and unless you’ve already experienced one, neither do you. But I know that one is coming, because they always do. There may well be more than one.

Remember this: *how we handle ourselves in a storm has a greater lasting impact than the storm itself*. There’s no choice, when the storm comes, but to go through it, but if you can all keep in mind that how you handle yourself through it matters more than the storm itself, you will cultivate enough emotional space for needed prayer and reflection—and when the storm passes, because it will—for evaluation. What did we learn about each other? About ourselves? What mistakes did we make? How did Christ reveal himself to us in the storm? How might we plan for the future so to avoid the conditions for that kind of storm to resurface?

4. *Deepening Our Relationship with Christ*

There is one last task I’d like to mention, saving as it were, the best or most important for last:

In these early years, I urge you as your bishop and friend, to devote yourselves to deepen your relationship with Christ and create at least one new avenue or endeavor exclusively devoted to that endeavor in your common life. Please think as creatively and broadly as you can, *so that* as many people at your parish grow deeper in a loving relationship with Christ as are able. I’m not talking about another evening class for your 10 most devoted attendees, but rather a comprehensive, multi-faceted approach that will reach as many of your community as possible.

I am persuaded that the future vitality of all our congregations, depends on that kind of spiritual renewal and commitment to a deep, transformative encounter with God’s love as revealed to us in Christ. For without it, we are running on our own energies, and our energies aren’t enough. We create a church in our image, for our purposes, according to our preferences, rather than seeking to be his faithful witnesses and doing what he asks of us in this time and place.

I have all sorts of ideas for how to go about this, and there are others who can be of help. And surely the Holy Spirit is hard at work among you, placing this yearning in your hearts, and that all manner of ideas and possibilities are bubbling up within and among you. Pay attention to them. Give time and energy to them, *so that* you might draw closer to Christ, hear his unique call for each one of you and as a community, and have something of spiritual value to invite others to share. And don’t imagine that you are doing this alone. We are all in this holy work together. Now is our time, *so that* the Church we love may take its humble, fruitful place in God’s mission of reconciling, healing love.

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