

Together, we have overcome many challenges as we have worked to come together as an Ecumenical Shared Ministry.

First congratulations to all of you for looking forward rather than staring into the rear-view mirrors of our two faith traditions. Painful as it has been sometimes, I think that we have all come to realize that we can no longer do things the way we have always done them. Even the wider ecumenical conversations at the higher levels of our two denominations are much more positive and encouraging than they have been in decades.

As we have heard from both Rev. Adam Hall and Bishop Stephen London, the church is in a time of great transformation. And both those local leaders have expressed their sincere joy at our vestry and council commitment to forge a new way of being church here in Vegreville. In other words, joy in our intentional choosing of a different path forward rather than simply closing our respective Anglican and United church doors.

But now the hard work really begins. Yes, we have a signed ESM Agreement, and we all know that document will undergo changes as we move forward. However, that is no longer our principal focus. We need to drill down to some of the more basic nuts and bolts of what we hope to really become as a church — a church that worships as one congregation yet still wants to continue embracing the varied traditions of our two different denominations.

I think that means we need to try and answer the following three questions:

1. **Who are we?** — In other words, what does our church DNA tell us about who we are? (Another way of thinking about this question is what makes our church unique and distinct from all the other churches in Vegreville?) Yes, we are Anglican and United, but what else makes us distinctive? What are our real gifts and talents? Are any of those gifts and talents being overlooked or under used? Conversely, are any of the things we are doing, need to be re-examined; maybe even let go of?
2. **What is our context?** What is the local context and the spiritual needs of our congregation and our wider community? What can we do better in terms of worship to meet those needs? Also, what changes or updates need to be addressed in this beautiful building. I realize we cannot afford to do much right now in terms of building upgrades, but that doesn't mean we should not be developing a longer-term plan. Some spaces here are under used or barely used at all. Are there potential partners in our community that could make use of some of the space(s) and therefore

help contribute to the ongoing costs of keeping the building both open and relevant to our times. And I don't say that lightly. I am sure each of us has experienced a poor or less than helpful good long-term outcome because of significant or major changes or renovations that were decided upon and done in the spur of the moment.

3. **Why are we doing this?** We may have started out to address the obvious financial needs of two congregations: St. Mary's had a building and a minister but simply could not afford to upgrade the building and meet the required modern building codes, so they made the painful decision to sell their building. Vegreville United had a much more functional building but had to make the tough choice to lose their minister due to the increasingly higher costs of keeping their building open. With the major work of those decisions behind us, I think we now need to hammer down our own combined mission—our mission right here in Vegreville. Specifically, what is God calling us to do? After all, 'calling' is the sweet spot of ministry that comes from practical due diligence and prayerful seeking. This is the action part of our ministry that connects our DNA and context in a unique and powerful way.

Naturally, I know we cannot fully answer all these questions today, but I want to challenge you all to begin thinking and praying about them. But I would also like to hear some of your initial thoughts or concerns this evening.

As for me, I'm discovering that the core values of both our traditions align quite well. I am enjoying the challenges of learning the ins and outs of United Church polity and especially the opportunity to discover new worship styles. Of course, I know I've made a few mistakes, and I don't always get things right, but I appreciate how everyone has been so supportive. Thank you. (BTW: You won't want to miss the First Sunday of Advent service.)

Finally, I propose that we have a day of round table conversations sometime early in the New Year. We could meet on a Saturday, say, 10:00 AM till 3:00 PM and tackle these questions together. (I will even personally provide a light lunch for everyone.) Or we could do it on the first Sunday of February at our potluck lunch. Either way, we want to encourage all parishioners to participate. Their voices are important too! I believe now is the time to develop a new mission plan — a plan that moves us forward ever more committed to strengthening our shared ministry because friends, we are not the same as we were before.