

SHARED MINISTRY AND THE FUTURE OF THE METRO NEW YORK SYNOD

by Dr. Richard O. Hill

For many years I have been deeply concerned about the future of our Lutheran churches in the Metropolitan New York Synod. Although Lutherans have been in the Metropolitan New York area for almost 400 years, in our own generation we are seeing a marked decline in the vitality of many churches, especially (but not exclusively) those located in the five boroughs.

Evidence of this decline can be seen in their own statistics (when they are willing to make them available). Membership, giving, worship attendance, and the numbers of baptisms and confirmations in these congregations have been rapidly going down, even in suburban churches where the rate of decline is even more alarming. What does the future have in store for the churches of Synod? A frightening scenario with many congregations reaching a crisis point around the same time and each one separately deciding to close their doors and turn over their assets to the synod? Since 2001, such a trend has already begun to emerge.

Beginning in 1995 and over the next ten years I attended a two-week seminar held each August in Oxford, England. While there I have learned a great deal about how the Church of England and the Anglican Communion around the world have been addressing a crisis not much different from ours. In 2013 I spent three months visiting in settings where Shared Ministry is being developed and practiced—a month in the UK and in several places across the U.S. as well.

Ironically, the Anglicans have learned how to rely upon a very basic Lutheran concept as a means for re-vitalizing their churches and renewing commitment to the Great Commission. They have made the “priesthood of all the baptized” the central doctrine that governs the life of the church. They do this especially in areas where there are few ordained clergy available. They call it “Total Ministry,” “Local Ministry,” “Shared Ministry,” and “Ministry of all the Baptized.”

This new form of ministry is really not new at all. In fact, it is the way the New Testament Christian community functioned, and the way Christians understood their roles prior to the “clericalization” of the church that relegated the laos to the status of second-class church members. I envision a synod where pastors and people have learned how to empower each other for their “proper ministries” in the church and the community and genuinely share ministry in collaborative teams. Some congregations have dwindled so much already that they may not even be able to muster the resources to make such teamwork possible. In those cases, they should look for ways to work with other Lutheran churches and ecumenical partner churches around them by forming collaborative working relationships between churches. By creating Total Ministry “parishes,” pastors and leaders open up many new possibilities for renewing and re-vitalizing their ministries. This is done quite effectively throughout the U.K. and in other countries as well.

Total Ministry/Shared Ministry/Collaborative Ministry/Local Ministry is not the same as “yoking” churches together to pay one pastor. Rather, it is a creative collaborative style of

ministry, where the gifts of all the baptized are identified, affirmed, and used to expand the range of possible ministry opportunities.

In spite of our Lutheran commitment to the priesthood of all believers, Total Ministry will not be welcomed by everyone because it requires both pastors and laity to upset a long-standing, deeply-ingrained pattern of co-dependent relationships between pastors and people that allow pastors to be “in charge” provided that they are willing to allow themselves to become “burned out.”

Unfortunately, many pastors simply lack the experience and skills required to work effectively with lay people and other clergy. They actually prefer their “Lone Ranger” style of ministry, even if it means that their churches will have to die, and many lay people have been struggling in “survival mode” for so long that they prefer to merely “survive” as long as possible.

Over decade ago, our synod had a Total Ministry Development Team which was actively trying to tell churches and whole conferences about the possibility of shifting to the paradigm of Total Ministry while they still have the resources and the ability to do so. That team no longer exists, but I am still working on this project, and I am prepared to make presentations in any of the conferences of our synod. For more information about Total Ministry or for a bibliography of available publications, check out this web site: www.totalministry.net, or contact me at rohill@optonline.net