

Call, Mission, Morality, and Knowing Our Stuff

**Presented by Bonnie Anderson, President
The House of Deputies
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It is a great pleasure for me to be here with you at this gathering of, what I think of as, THE HOME TEAM. You are the HOME TEAM because your work is of primary importance to The Episcopal Church –actually, important to the very soul of The Episcopal Church. Your work is of primary importance to people you will never know and their lives will be positively affected by your ministry.

As you probably know, the MDGs are the #1 mission priority for The Episcopal Church. Our Church is increasingly committed to end poverty, and the MDGs both empower and challenge us to new ways of participation in God's mission. You as the ERD network have a rare opportunity to assist the Church in their mission call. Now is the time, the Church is ready.

I think that to do a good job as the HOME TEAM, you have to know three things:

- You have to know about your call
- You have to have your own bottom line for mission morality and,
- You have to know your stuff

So first the Call:

I wonder, do you see your work on behalf of ERD as a ministry? Are you responding to a CALL? Although I am fairly certain that you have the connection between the ministry you do on behalf of the world's poor and those who suffer from the effects of natural disasters, both here and abroad, firmly in your mind and heart, I would like to take a few minutes to remind us all of the promises that we make each time we renew our baptismal covenant. Because, that is where this connection is held.

You, by the very fact that you are here, a representative of ERD in your own diocese or seminary, have likely heard a call to this important ministry. You could have said "yes" to any number of things to do on behalf of God's church, but you said "yes" to this particular call. Your duties are not only on behalf of people around the world whom you will never see or know, but on behalf of the people of your diocese. For it is those people who are your constituents and it is your pleasurable, but often difficult responsibility to bring the people of your diocese to new understandings of their own baptismal promises and then encourage them to take action because of the promises they make.

The baptismal promise we make to seek and serve Christ in all persons, loving our neighbors as ourselves is the promise that changes our lives and, hopefully, changes the lives of those who we serve. That promise to love our neighbor as ourselves certainly begs the question, so "how do we love ourselves"?

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Loving our Neighbors as Ourselves:

When asked that question in our Baptismal Covenant, we answer, “I will with God’s Help.” So, the way I figure it, if I am to love my neighbor as myself, first I have to know how I love myself. So how do we love ourselves? In this time in the Western World of “it’s all about me” we may be tempted to think of loving ourselves in terms of things like: “go on, get a massage, you deserve it”. But I am talking way more about the basics here. I can tell you some of the ways that I love myself. Basically by making sure I have good health care, good food to eat, a safe and comfortable place to sleep at night. I love myself and I love those close to me by making sure I am well educated, that my children and grandchildren are well educated, that we are all comfortable (cool in the summer and warm in the winter – to name the basics.) I love myself by putting lotion on dry skin, reading poetry, listening to music, going to museums. The list goes on and on. So having said that, so having thought about and enumerated the ways in which I love myself, doesn’t it just make sense that once we truly understand through careful thought, how we love ourselves, and then we promise each other and God that we will love our neighbor as ourselves, that we **MUST** do something about it?

It seems to me that you are the ones who obviously cannot sit still. You are the ones who have possibly heard the call and have said, “yes”. You are the ones who know that once you make a promise and really understand what that promise means, for you, you have to follow through. So that being said, I wonder what kind of obstacles you face in this work?

Mission Morality:

As I travel around the Church, I find that there is a pervasive sense that “face-to-face” relationships have to be developed before the faithful response to our Gospel and Baptismal Covenant call to Love our Neighbors as ourselves can truly be addressed. It sometimes appears that people are frozen in a posture of non-action because they can’t find a child to sponsor, or don’t know how to arrange for a “mission trip” to build a school. This worries me.

I am worried about this because I believe this way of thinking is not only paralyzing, it falls short of what we are called to do. I worry, and this is sometimes hard for us to hear, that this way of thinking is more about making ourselves look good and feel good than truly loving our neighbors as ourselves. In fact, often the motivation is to love ourselves more, pat ourselves on the back, and let others know how wonderful we are so that they will love us more too. If our neighbors benefit, that is good, but there is a lot of “it’s all about me” wrapped up in it. I worry because once that face-to-face relationship is established there can be an underlying sense of dependency and an imbalance of power. I worry that the ones who are the “givers” the “doers” may lose interest and never, ever understand the kind of damage that can be done by a project abandoned – including deep relational damage not to mention an incomplete project that others need and were counting on.

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I also worry about the “footprint” that is left after the mission trip party is over, after the “mission trip” ends and the travelers hop on the plane, handing over their expensive boarding passes (the total sum of which could have gone a long way to assist the people they are leaving) and the others are left behind to clean up.

I recently visited a diocese and had dinner in the evening with the bishop and the deputies. I asked them how or if they were involved in responding to the baptismal covenant and the great commandment to Love our neighbors as ourselves. An enthusiastic response from five out of nine people at the table was about their yearly mission trip to a place in South America. In great and proud detail I was told about a cinderblock community center construction of about 600 square feet. I learned that the project was a long-term one and was still unfinished after four trips over three years made by twelve people each year. I was also told a story about one of these trips where the bishop, during an afternoon walk in a nearby village center, had seen a young boy shining shoes. The bishop had gotten on his knees, taken the rag from the boys hand, and had finished the shoe shining task for him, handing him the payment from the man with the newly shined shoes. I was told that by the time the bishop had finished his shoe shining task, a large crowd had gathered around to watch. While the story was being told, the four deputies who had not been on the trip looked on admiringly at the deputies telling the story and at the bishop who sat with his head bowed during the telling.

This story scared me. First it scared me because it stayed in my mind with the subtitle “What is wrong with this picture?” It scared me because I knew I had to retell it and use it as an illustration of how I think we misinterpret the great commandment and it is scary to bring this up because it is hard to fault well-meaning Episcopalians when so many people in the world take no proactive action at all. What comforts me is God, who defines the morality of mission and keeps prodding us to figure it out.

I think we are called to not only respond to the great commandment, but to do so with deep understanding that comes through prayer, worship, trial and error and being in community. This loving our neighbor as ourselves is the most important work we will do in our lives and we must bring to it all that we have been created to be. This ministry is like so much of what God asks of us – dangerous, requiring thought and prayer and community, but still dangerous, but with the amazing potential to bring us closer to what we are called to be as the people of God.

And a “p.s.” on this part – I think it is natural and good for us to want to be in relationship in our mission call. But maybe we are looking in the wrong place for the relationship. Why don’t we build the face-to-face relationships with the people in our own diocese and use the people who are in close proximity for support, understanding and focus for our response to the Gospel. Why don’t we develop communities in our parishes that meet regularly to truly become a people of mission? Perhaps through that community, writing the check will be an act of love and a response to the mission call achieved through common worship and our baptism.

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That brings me to my third thing the HOME TEAM has to know: We have to know our stuff. We have to be able to talk about relevant realities in this work. We have to know the answers to the questions that are raised about what mission really is. Is it to bring the Good News of God's reconciling love to all people. Or is it about DOING the work of God in the world and that through the DOING, God will be known?

About the "Mission" question:

The Hindus have a poem which serves to remind the faithful of that elusive balance between the two sections of the Law. "If you would give your flowers to the god on the altar/Give your flowers to the man on the street/ And the god on the altar will get them." It is so simple but so hard to remember.

First and most important is to remember that we are called to do God's mission. The mission of reconciliation in the world belongs to God and we are God's vehicles for that, charged by our baptismal covenant. According to the gifts given to us, we are to carry on Christ's work of reconciliation in the world.

In the words of the Anglican Consultative Council at their 6th ACC gathering in Nigeria in 1984:

"Jesus has come to proclaim the good news to those who are economically disadvantaged, He has come to proclaim liberty to those who are socially and politically disadvantaged, He has come to heal those who are physically disabled and to set at liberty those who are morally and spiritually disinherited. In this work of Jesus' mission, special attention is given to those who are on the periphery- the poor, the captives, the blind, the oppressed, etc. In Luke's Gospel, Jesus shows special concern to those hated and virtually ignored by the rest of the community- eg. Tax collectors, Samaritans, Gentiles, and sinners in general. He also takes special interest in the plight of women."

The balance between proclamation and service is an important one for us to maintain and it is important that we, as a Church, and as individuals, committed to our call to Mission, not be divided between proclamation and service.

We have to know about sustainable development. ERD is about capacity building, gender empowerment and environmental sustainability and is working on behalf of the Episcopal Church to achieve the MDGs.

About Sustainability:

I don't believe that our Church truly understands what sustainable development is and why it is the right answer to the question, How do we love our neighbors as ourselves.

Now comes the hard news, I think it is our job to explain sustainability to our constituents, to our diocese or our seminary. Why? Because ERD is OUR organization. ERD is EPISCOPAL Relief and Development. Individuals and congregations and even dioceses cannot do sustainable development. But the Episcopal Church has an organization that does - ERD.

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This is a point that needs to be repeated and made clear over and over again in your dioceses. The Episcopal Church has to get over the notion that it isn't ministry to just write a check. We need to develop the local Episcopal community to understand why it IS important that we DO write the check.

The big question is, Do we really want to END poverty or do we want to just get credit for unsuccessful attempts? We have to teach our constituents, the people of our dioceses and seminaries about sustainable development and we have to let them know that it is the only way that there will be an end to world poverty. You are going to have to take it upon yourselves to develop an explainable concept of sustainability. That can be a slippery slope from what I have read, but if you understand the nuances and the questions about "sustainability", perhaps it is a good discussion point for your constituents – the people of your dioceses. If we all had a better grasp on sustainability and came to our own understanding of it, we would more fully appreciate the work of ERD. Each ERD program achieves one or more of the MDGs.

What will this take?

First we have to remind people of their baptismal covenant and the great commandment and we have to remind them of their promises in the Baptismal Covenant. They have to know, to believe, that loving our neighbor as ourselves is the most important thing we will do in their lives.

Next we have to teach them about sustainable development and why it is the way to end poverty. We have to raise the questions about sustainability, what it means, and get people talking about it and learning about it for themselves.

Finally we have to show them that ERD belongs to God and to us and that ERD is The Episcopal Church's best bet for keeping up our part of the bargain – the baptismal covenant.

How do we love our neighbors as ourselves? One important way is to use our resources to help our neighbors make a lasting difference in their own lives.

It is just what we do, because we promised each other and God that we would.

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