

Celebrating the ‘circle’ of ministries

by Bonnie Anderson

Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit; and there are varieties of services, but the same Lord; and there are varieties of activities, but it is the same God who activates all of them in everyone. To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good.

—1 Corinthians 12:4-7

“Who are the ministers of the church?” asks the catechism in *The Book of Common Prayer*.

Between May and August, seven bishops have been or will be ordained and consecrated in the Episcopal Church, two more bishops will have been elected, and the consent process for two other bishops-elect will be underway. Thus, in the next few months, the church no doubt will publicly affirm changes in the ministries of 11 people.

The process of call, discernment and affirmation is experienced by the *laos*, the people of God, as we continually listen for God’s invitation to move toward using our gifts in new ways for God’s reconciling work in the world.

The orders of ministry (lay, diaconal, presbyteral and episcopal) make concrete and incarnate the call from God that is the basis of ministry. The catechism tells us that the “ministers of the church are the laity, bishops, priests and deacons.” It goes on to outline the specific ministries of each order. As is the case with these 11 people who have been or presumably will be ordained and consecrated into a new ministry, most of us also have experienced changes in our ministry during our lifetime. We discover formerly unrecognized gifts of the spirit (*charism*) within us and within each other. The knowledge and use of our unique charisms may call us into a new incarnation of our ministry. Some of these new incarnations may call us into another order of ministry, and some of these new understandings of God’s actions in our life may reconfirm and expand our call to our current ministry as a lay person, priest, deacon or bishop.

It has become fairly commonplace in the Episcopal Church to think of the ministries of laity, priests, deacons and bishops in a hierarchical way. A visual description of the hierarchy might be indicated by a pyramid, with the order having the smallest number of members — bishops — at the top. The

clergy — both priests and deacons — fill the hierarchical pyramid as it widens.

The laity support the pyramid as the numerically largest base. This model implies a certain erroneous order of importance and power in God’s church. We are “hierarchical” in the way human communities inevitably are. But, true to our teaching, tradition and polity as God’s Episcopal Church, laity, bishops, priests and deacons are called to live their daily ministries in a way that can be visually described as a circle where God’s gifts and God’s vulnerable servant-

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hood mark and guide each of our lives and our ministries.

Our baptismal vows call us all to the Christian life. Our individual charisms — the gifts we have been given — enable us to serve God in the world.

The holy people of God are followers of a vulnerable, servant God. In God, true power turns out to be the opposite of what the world considers to be power. Real power is subversive of not only those who claim power, but also the very concept of power itself.

As we are reminded by St. Paul, in a practice of equal exchange and honor, we draw upon the unique charism of each individual, whether God calls us as lay, diaconal, presbyteral or episcopal.

Each gift brought to the service of Christ is important, and God’s call to each person is equally worthy to be affirmed, used and supported by God’s church.

Through God’s call, the church is created and, as Harvey Guthrie, retired dean of Episcopal Divinity School, says, “finds concrete expression in those designated (ordained) in accord with tradition being needed to convene the sacramental community — and in the lay order being needed for that convening to take place.”

During our lifetime, God calls us in new and different ways to do God’s reconciling work in the world. Some of us will continue to be called into the ministry of the laity, according to the gifts we have been given. Some of us will be called to serve as priests and deacons, according to the gifts we have been given. Some of us will be called to serve as bishops — again, according to the gifts we have been given.

In Jesus the hierarchy becomes a circle, rooted in him and open to all Christians.

Canon Bonnie Anderson is president of the House of Deputies of General Convention.



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