

Reimagining the Church in North Dakota:
Towards Communities of Discipleship through Incarnational Leadership

Executive Summary:

This report is grounded in interviews with bishops, transition officers, and priests from ten “similarly situated” dioceses: Alaska; Eau Claire; San Joaquin; Western Kansas; Vermont; Eastern Oregon; Navajoland; North Western Pennsylvania; Western New York; and Northern Michigan. Not all the dioceses researched have had a recent episcopal transition, but all have and are continuing to discern what models of episcopal and diocesan leadership best serve the Gospel in their context. Each interview began with three questions authorized by the task force that invited reflection of the *viability* of the diocese in light of different leadership models, but the content of the conversations pointed towards reflection on how different leadership models impact the *vitality* of the diocese. Based on the information provided in the interviews, despite the initial focus on the *viability* of “similarly situated” diocese, the focus of this memo shifted to models of diocesan leadership that best resource the participation in the reign of God in a particular time and place.

In short, it seems clear from the research conducted that the church is facing imminent change. The old models of church leadership seem to not serve all diocese equally. As Bishop Mark Cowell of the Diocese of Western Kansas says, “There is a change coming in the Episcopal Church. It will hit some of our dioceses – like Western Kansas and North Dakota – before it hits the moneyed diocese on the East and West coasts, but when their endowments run out, they will be looking to us to help them reimagine what it means to be the church.”¹ On the recommendation of Bishop Cowell, this memo explores in detail Bishop Mark Edington’s proposal for an “incarnational model” of diocesan leadership in light of comments made in the interviews. It considers in detail models of Gospel Based Discipleship, TOTAL Ministry, and Mutual Ministry, which have been implemented in dioceses that face similar challenges as North Dakota. The memo

¹ Appendix III, Interview with Bishop Mark Cowell, 6.

also considers how those dioceses have used such “incarnational models” of diocesan leadership to transform their challenges into opportunities to more fully embody the reign of God in their respective contexts.

From the interviews, four different models of diocesan and episcopal leadership emerged as alternative models to the traditional episcopal model. Each of these models seem to respond differently to the needs of the diocese, with the part-time bishop focused more on sustaining the *viability* of the diocese, in particular providing a more traditional episcopal presence in the face of limited resources. The other models – the multi-jurisdictional bishop, the episcopacy by council, and the transitional assistant bishop – all in different ways reach for a more “incarnational model” of diocesan leadership that seeks to collaborate with congregations to more fully embody the reign of God. These are models that seem to prioritize the *vitality* of a diocese as God’s expression of the Gospel in a particular place. No one model seems to offer a complete solution for North Dakota. Indeed, some of the models could be used in conjunction with one another. For instance, a transitional assistant bishop model could be implemented for a set time for the specific purpose of continued discernment, reconciliation, and/or preparing the diocese for a transition in diocesan and episcopal leadership models. Additionally, the episcopacy by council model could utilize the other models (part-time, retired, bivocational and/or multi-jurisdictional) at the same time to provide a more responsive episcopacy for the challenges and opportunities that face North Dakota.

Whichever model(s) this Taskforce discerns is best for the Diocese of North Dakota, what is clear is that *God is doing a new thing in his Church*. This process of discernment and transition offers North Dakota an opportunity to participate in that new thing and to become ambassadors of God’s redeeming work in the church and in the world. The work ahead is not easy, nor should it be undertaken lightly. And, yet, given the feedback from the interviews conducted, it is clear that

North Dakota is not alone. Other dioceses are facing many of the same challenges as we are, and they have found ways to transform their challenges into opportunities to more fully embody the Gospel in their time and place. As Bishop Rayford Ray says, “Out of what appears to be our weakness comes our greatest strength,” a Gospel message indeed!² Perhaps most importantly, the Constitution and Canons of the Episcopal Church are not shackles that limit the ministry of a diocese, as they are so often characterized. Rather, they offer the structure within which the Diocese of North Dakota might reimagine itself structurally to best cultivate communities of discipleship. By reimagining its episcopate incarnationally, North Dakota can model for the entire church a way to more fully embody the reign of God in its own time and place through deep listening and participation in God’s work of reconciliation.

² Appendix III, Interview with Bishop Rayford Ray, 13.

Introduction:

In the Spring of 2019, Bishop Michael Smith resigned from the Diocese of North Dakota. In part due to financial concerns, the Standing Committee determined that, rather than begin a search for a new bishop, the diocese would benefit from a period of discernment on the models of leadership that would best equip the diocese to serve the Gospel in its context. Bishop Keith Whitmore was called as an Assisting Bishop, pursuant to Title III, Canon 12, and presides over the sacramental responsibilities of the episcopate, while the Standing Committee remains the ecclesiastical authority for the diocese.³ As part of the discernment process, the Standing Committee appointed a Racial Reconciliation Taskforce and a Diocesan Discernment Taskforce to begin the work of discernment necessary for the diocese to reimagine itself to better participate in God’s mission in the world.

Framing the Issue:

The initial scope of this inquiry was to gather data from “similarly situated” dioceses that demonstrates how they negotiated challenges and opportunities to reimagine and restructure their episcopate to accommodate limited resources and ministry leaders (lay and ordained).⁴ The questions posed to the bishops, canons, and priests interviewed were as follows:

1. In your most recent Episcopal transition could you talk about how you looked at diocesan sustainability in terms of supporting leadership (small number of diocesan leaders – lay and ordained – doing large amount of work) and being sustainable financially?
2. Did you consider the pros and cons of funding a Bishop’s position given a small number of congregations and clergy?

³ Title III, Canon 12(9)(m), Episcopal Church. *Constitution and Canons: Together with the Rules of Order for the Government of the Protestant Episcopal Church in the United States of America*, Otherwise Known As the Episcopal Church: Adopted and Revised in General Convention, 1789-2018. New York, New York: General Convention Office, 2018

⁴ “Similarly situated” dioceses were determined to be those dioceses whose Average Sunday Attendance (“ASA”) was comparable to that of North Dakota.

3. What advice do you have for ND as it tries to discern what God is doing during these changing times?⁵

As I began to review these questions, I realized that limiting the inquiry to dioceses determined to be “similarly situated” by Average Sunday Attendance only provided a partial picture of the challenges and opportunities in North Dakota. I began to conduct research into the financial picture of other dioceses to determine whether pledge and plate revenue and non-pledge and plate revenue should be accounted for in determining what dioceses are “similarly situated” to ours.⁶ Still, the gathered data could not account for other factors that make our diocese unique, such as its expansive geography and its diverse populations.

During my interview with Bp. Sean Rowe, the Keynote Speaker for the 2019 Diocesan Convention, it occurred to me that, perhaps, I was asking the wrong questions. Rather than focus our inquiry on diocesan viability – which, according to Rowe, leads to a defensive posture and forces people to double down on their best attributes to avoid criticism – the better question, he suggests, is “What is the best strategy to maximize the impact of the Gospel?”⁷ Bishop Sean Rowe of the Dioceses of Northwestern Pennsylvania and Western New York – two dioceses in two different states and two different provinces – remarked in an interview with *The Living Church* that their model “is not only about sustainability ... at what point do we say, ‘What’s best for God’s mission in the world?’ Instead of, ‘How do we keep what we have?’”⁸ This framing of the question, he suggested, invites us to create safe space where open and honest dialogue can take place. Within that space, *we can discern the two questions at the heart of our discernment process:*

- 1) What interests are we protecting with our current institutional structures; and, 2) How do those

⁵ Appendix I, Initial Data Memo to the Diocesan Discernment Taskforce.

⁶ Appendix II, Supplemental Data Memo to the Diocesan Discernment Taskforce.

⁷ Appendix III, Interview with Bishop Sean Rowe, 9.

⁸ Editor, *The Living Church*, “Two Diocese, Two States, One Bishop,” Oct. 9, 2019. <https://livingchurch.org/2019/10/09/two-dioceses-two-states-one-bishop/>, last viewed January 31, 2020.

interests maximize the impact of the Gospel in our context, if at all?⁹ This approach, says Rowe, allows us to set aside structural models that do not maximize the impact of the Gospel so we might reimagine those models to help us better embody God’s reign in North Dakota.

Methodology:

This report draws on interviews with conducted from December 18, 2019, through January 31, 2020 with seven current bishops of eight “similarly situated” dioceses, one former bishop of a “similarly situated” diocese who is now an archbishop in the Church of Canada, and two priests, who have been involved in episcopal transitions. A report of those interviews is attached as Appendix III. An executive summary of those interviews is attached as Appendix IV. This report further draws on the Constitution and Canons of the Episcopal Church, as well as other sources cited in the Bibliography.

North Dakota’s Challenges and Opportunities:

Statistical Data – Membership and Resources:

The challenges of the Diocese of North Dakota are not unique. Pledging and Average Sunday Attendance (“ASA”) are down in most every diocese in the Episcopal Church. Indeed, the trends in the Episcopal Church reflect a trajectory of decreasing engagement in American Christianity, more broadly. As a recent Pew Research Poll revealed, more than one quarter of the U.S. population (27%) identifies itself as “spiritual, but not religious,” while less than half (47%) identifies itself as “religious and spiritual.”¹⁰ Five years earlier, 19% of the U.S. population viewed

⁹ Appendix III, Interview with Bishop Sean Rowe, 9. This willingness to question all our interests to determine whether the advance the Gospel seems to echo Bishop Mark Edington, in *Bivocational*, where he calls for “a willingness to interrogate everything that creates a distinction between ordained and lay ministry, to evaluate them against the standards of necessity and efficacy, and to give up those distinctions that have come more from custom than from scriptural evidence or theological ground.” Mark D. W. *Bivocational: Returning to the Roots of Ministry*. New York, NY: Church Publishing, 2018, 35.

¹⁰ Lipka, Michael, and Claire Gecewic. “More Americans now say they’re spiritual but not religious,” Pew Research Center, Sept. 26, 2017, <http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2017/09/06/more-americans-now-say-theyre-spiritual->

itself as “spiritual, but not religious,” and 59% identified itself as “religious and spiritual.”¹¹ Whatever the reason for the shift from away from religion to spirituality (and whatever responsibility American Christianity bears for that shift), it is clear that traditional models of church organization and leadership are not working. In the Episcopal Church, some dioceses can prop up their old models with well-funded endowments and defer structural change, for the time being at least. As Bishop Cowell suggests, dioceses like North Dakota are on the cutting edge of a reimagined Episcopal Church, even if by virtue of necessity.

According to the Parochial Report data from the Episcopal Church, the Diocese of North Dakota had in 2018 an ASA of 617 and had 284 pledging units.¹² While not the lowest diocese in either category, North Dakota ranks in the bottom five Dioceses in the Episcopal Church. It should be noted at the outset that Parochial Report data is not conclusive. The ASA, for instance, is self-reported by each congregation to the diocese, which in turn files it with the Executive Council of the Episcopal Church.¹³ Likewise, Canon 6 of Title I provides that, in the Parochial Report, the rector or priest in charge shall report “the total number of communicants in good standing,” which is designated as the ASA.¹⁴ A “communicant in good standing” is elsewhere defined as those communicants “who for the previous year have been faithful in corporate worship, unless for good cause prevented, and have been faithful in working, praying, and giving for the spread of the Kingdom of God.”¹⁵ Under this definition, youth who attend weekly programs at a congregation are excluded from ASA, as are members of the reporting congregation who attend funerals at

[*but-not-religious/*](#), last viewed Jan 28, 2020. Of course, this data accounts for all religions but certainly demonstrates trends reflected in American Christianity.

¹¹ Lipka and Gecewic, “More Americans.”

¹² *Parochial Report Results*, The Episcopal Church, <https://episcopalchurch.org/research/parochial-report-results>, last viewed Jan 28, 2020. Attached as Appendix IV.

¹³ Title I, Canon 6, Episcopal Church. *Constitution and Canons*.

¹⁴ Title I, Canon 6, Episcopal Church. *Constitution and Canons*.

¹⁵ Title I, Canon 17, sec. 3, Episcopal Church, *Constitution and Canons*.

another church. Also excluded would be members of another church attending funerals at the reporting congregation. In some communities, this definition would exclude as many as one hundred weekly participants in the weekly life of a congregation.

With respect to the financial data captured by the Parochial Report, that data focusses primarily on “pledging units,” not reporting giving. Dioceses with congregations whose parishioners contribute by plate rather than pledge may appear to have significantly less financial commitment from its membership than dioceses with strong stewardship drives. For instance, Navajoland shows no pledging units, but it raises \$22,933 in plate offerings, which indicates regular giving by its members. It should also be noted that, although its pledge and plate totals are also in the bottom five dioceses, North Dakota’s average offering per communicant is on par with more highly resourced diocese and is significantly greater than neighboring South Dakota. This data suggests North Dakota is building on a culture of giving within its congregations and is doing more with less than other “similarly situated” dioceses.

Geographic and Demographic Factors:

And yet, data alone cannot determine which dioceses are “similarly situated” to North Dakota; it provides only a partial picture. Indeed, there are many other factors that impact the challenges and opportunities the diocese faces as it moves into a new chapter of its participation in God’s mission in the world. Beyond members and resources, North Dakota has an immense geographical footprint that can often isolate congregations. With congregations on the borders of Minnesota, Montana, South Dakota, and Canada, and everywhere in between, it can be difficult for members of those congregations to gather and build community across the diocese. Geography also poses a challenge to any bishop who intends to visit every congregation in the diocese during the year. And yet, with the challenges posed by the diocese’s geography, there are opportunities

as well. At the 2019 Convention, while geography was often mentioned as a challenge to ministry, it was also noted that the rural cultural of the diocese creates space for a deeper, more intentional spirituality that is hard to locate in a heavily populated, urban setting. As Bishop Pat Bell of the Diocese of Eastern Oregon recognizes: “The greatest gift of an expansive geography is rural people, smaller congregations, simpler, more close-knit communities, with less division and more gravity in the places that unite. There is life and vitality in identifying with one another and a common commitment to share the good news of Jesus and to foster intellectual and spiritual life in conservative communities.”¹⁶

Another distinct feature of the diocese mentioned at Convention (and mentioned by several bishops interviewed for this report) is the diversity of the diocese. The comments at Convention about the diversity of the diocese demonstrate how our diversity serves as both a challenge and an opportunity. When asked to name the “greatest strength” of the diocese, one table (of mostly Native lay delegates) named diversity as the greatest strength of the diocese. I response, a non-Native priest spoke for his table of non-Native clergy and laity, “I hear you on diversity as our greatest strength, but we believe our greatest strength is that we are not *overtly* racist.” Obviously, while diversity can be a great strength, it can also invite covert – often unacknowledged, even unrecognized – racism. In North Dakota’s case, the opportunity and challenge of the diocese’s diversity seems to be rooted in historic trauma suffered by both Native and non-Native communities across the state’s history. In *400 Years: Anglican/Episcopal Mission Among American Indians*, Owanah Anderson, onetime director of the Episcopal Church’s Office of Indian Ministry, describes the historic relationship between North Dakota’s Native and non-Native communities: “Prejudice toward the territory’s 8,000 Indians was rampant among land-hungry

¹⁶ Appendix III, Interview with Bishop Pat Bell, 7.

settlers; a climate of latent hostility prevailed across the plains and was especially keen in the communities bordering the five reservations.”¹⁷

While few would describe current attitudes in the diocese as exhibiting “latent hostility,” equally few would deny the persistence of a pernicious prejudice that has long been woven into the history and culture of the diocese. As recently as 1997, Anderson recognized that “within the diocese tension between native and non-native communicants still exists.”¹⁸ Since then, the Episcopal Church’s high-profile visibility in the DAPL protests on Standing Rock Reservation has brought some of these tensions to the surface.¹⁹ Whatever the reason for these tensions, or their resurfacing, reconciliation must happen for North Dakota’s diversity to become an asset and not a liability. Once the diocese can move forward with the work of reconciliation and transform its diversity from a liability to an asset, that diversity can then be a catalyst for the diocese’s work of discernment and reimagining its role in the embodiment of God’s reign in North Dakota. Bishop Bell recognizes that the gifts of North Dakota’s Native communities help guide the diocese’s discernment process and ultimately transform the diocese: “[I]f I were there, I would explore with [the Native community] what a new [leadership] model looks like. I would invite them to challenge our model. Is there something from their community that could help us break out of the Western models that no longer serve places like Eastern Oregon and North Dakota?”²⁰

¹⁷ Anderson, Owanah. *400 Years: Anglican/Episcopal Mission among American Indians*. Cincinnati, Ohio: Forward Movement Publications, 1997, 132.

¹⁸ Anderson, *400 Years*, 144.

¹⁹ Indeed, where many non-Native congregations are funded (at least in part) by revenue from the oil and gas industry, the protests may have become a flashpoint for the clash of interests of Native and non-Native communities in the diocese.

²⁰ Appendix III, Interview with Bishop Pat Bell, 7. Canon Lydia Bucklin echoes this sentiment in her comments: “What would it look like to ‘indigenize’ the diocese? What would it look like to reimagine the organizational structure in a way that is outside the Western model that the church is locked into?” Appendix III, Interview with Rev. Lydia Bucklin, 11.

What remains clear, however, is that the work reconciliation is inseparable from the work of discernment. Bishop Davis Bailey of Navajoland suggests that the “starting place for discernment” is the question, “What does it mean to be the Diocese of North Dakota with the diversity you have? Dig into your history to discover your story and learn how to tell it together. Explore where you have been, where we are now, and where we want to go. Own the past and its tensions, then look at where you are today, then discern together your hopes, visions, and desires for the future.”²¹ As Bishop Rayford Ray of the Diocese of Northern Michigan observes: “We all learn from the stories that we share. While our stories may differ, what we will find is that God’s story is always in the midst of our stories. If we can listen to each other’s stories, we will come to recognize God’s story is in the midst of us all and it is that story that binds us together. Especially do not discount the indigenous voice in your midst, because the white voice will have the power. Do not let the white voice overpower the indigenous voice, or let the white communities take over the authority that they have. In Northern Michigan, we are stepping back and being present and just listening and learning as the indigenous communities recover their voice”²²

Essential to the work of discernment is the ability to tell our stories alongside God’s story in our midst, because our stories shape the identities we claim for ourselves as well as the identities we assign to one another. In *Reweaving the Sacred*, Bishop Carol Gallagher describes the role of storytelling in discernment: “we often feel unable to tell our story as it related to the Jesus story. This dilemma is particularly true among congregations that are small or isolated; congregations that may have declined due to economic hardships; churches founded to respond to specific racial or cultural situations in very different times.”²³ As the bishops and priests interviewed have

²¹ Appendix III, Interview with Bishop David Bailey, 9.

²² Appendix III, Interview with Bishop Rayford Ray, 12.

²³ Gallagher, Carol. *Reweaving the Sacred: A Practical Guide to Change and Growth for Challenged Congregations*. New York: Church Pub, 2008, 2.

suggested in different ways, the Diocese of North Dakota is not simply discerning a new leadership model. It is discerning how God’s story is woven into the stories of the communities that make up our diocese. As Gallagher writes: “Our identities, both as individuals and as members of a church community, are intertwined with the identities of the communities where we live and of the people with whom we share our lives ... All of a people’s stories weave a strong thread that is also interlaced with the gospel story ... As Christians, the fabric that we share within our own tradition becomes part of our living identity in Christ.”²⁴ When we listen to one another’s stories, we can begin to recognize that God has been just as present in the stories of our neighbor as God is present in our own stories. This thread of God’s story that runs through the stories of our individual communities, then, becomes *our story* and shapes our identity as the Body of Christ in North Dakota. This is the work of reconciliation. It is also the work of reimagining who we are as God’s people in North Dakota and how we might organize our institutional structures to best embody the Gospel in our time and place.

While there seem to be a number of other factors that contribute to North Dakota’s uniqueness, what remains clear is that North Dakota is unique in ways that Parochial Report data cannot alone quantify.²⁵ These unique circumstances may at first appear to impede the diocese’s ability to more fully embody the Gospel, but they also present an opportunity to reveal the way God is uniquely at work in North Dakota. As I researched the ways other diocese have negotiated challenges similar to those in North Dakota, I did so with an eye towards how they reimagined those challenges as opportunities in order to be drawn deeper into the Gospel story.

²⁴ Gallagher, *Reweaving the Sacred*, 11.

²⁵ These factors may also include the resources allocated the diocese by General Convention to support Native ministry, the disparate impact of environmental industries (such as oil and gas) across different diocesan communities; and, the disparate impact of economic growth and loss across different diocesan communities, among others.

Emerging Models of Leadership in the Episcopal Church

In *Bivocational*, Bishop Mark Edington suggests that, in the Episcopal Church, the “basic assumptions of our business model are changing” and describes what he sees as a movement away from “institutional” models of leadership and towards “incarnational” models of leadership.²⁶ For Edington, the “Standard Model looks a lot like firm-based production. It is organized hierarchically in order to support centralized decision making.”²⁷ It is a model that has professionalized the priesthood as *the* provider of “spiritual services” to its consumers, the members of the congregation.²⁸

While some may describe the Episcopal Church as inherently hierarchical – and indeed its Constitution and Canons go to great lengths to construct the hierarchy of the institutional church – Edington suggests that the *replication of that institutional hierarchy at the local level (congregational and diocesan) does not help a community embody the Gospel*. In other words, hierarchy may be helpful to administer a church-wide institution, but at the local level, it can isolate ministry in the role of the priest and undermine the ministry entrusted to us through our baptismal vows. This ministry of the baptized is heart of what Edington describes as the “incarnational” model – a model that recognizes that, through our baptismal ministry, we become “like living stones ... built into a spiritual house ... a holy priesthood” (1 Pet. 2:5 (NRSV)).²⁹

Although Edington contrasts this incarnational model of leadership with the hierarchy of the institutional model, the Constitution and Canons of the Episcopal Church provide for the recognition (and, yes, even licensure) of the ministry of the baptized. The Canons specifically

²⁶ Edington, *Bivocational*, 8, 13. This resource was recommended to the Diocesan Discernment Taskforce by Bishop Mark Cowell of the Diocese of Western Kansas.

²⁷ Edington, *Bivocational*, 7.

²⁸ Edington, *Bivocational*, 7.

²⁹ Edington, *Bivocational*, 7.

recognize that *any* baptized persons may be called to serve as “Pastoral Leader, Worship Leader, Preacher, Eucharistic Minister, Eucharistic Visitor, Evangelist, or Catechist.”³⁰ For instance, any “congregation or community of faith” may have a Pastoral Leader who is the “*lay person* authorized to exercise pastoral or administrative responsibility in a congregation;”³¹ a Worship Leader who is the “*lay person* who regularly leads public worship;”³² a Preacher who is the “*lay person* authorized to preach;”³³ a Eucharistic Minister is the “*lay person* authorized to administer the Consecrated Elements at a Celebration of Holy Eucharist ... under the direction of a Deacon, if any, or otherwise, the Member of the Clergy or other leader exercising oversight.”³⁴

Here, the Canons provide the means by which *a local community of faith may conduct the administrative and liturgical life of a community of faith through the laity in their ministry of baptism*. As Edington recognizes, such a congregation must reimagine itself as a “*participant or stakeholder*” in the mission of God through the church, rather than a “*consumer or recipient*” of the spiritual services offered by the church.³⁵ As participants and stakeholders in the mission of God, discipleship becomes less transactional and more relational as a community begins to embody the Gospel of Jesus Christ in its own time and place, recognizing that “all of *us* ... are empowered in baptism to claim this ministry.”³⁶

1. Total Ministry Model:

Edington is not simply describing his own personal idea of what he believes the Episcopal Church should look like. He is describing how a number of dioceses have been organizing themselves in practice for decades. Indeed, the Episcopal Church describes this model as Total

³⁰ Title III, Canon 4.1(a), Episcopal Church. *Constitution and Canons*.

³¹ Title III, Canon 4.3, Episcopal Church. *Constitution and Canons* (emphasis added).

³² Title III, Canon 4.4, Episcopal Church. *Constitution and Canons* (emphasis added).

³³ Title III, Canon 4.5, Episcopal Church. *Constitution and Canons* (emphasis added).

³⁴ Title III, Canon 4.6, Episcopal Church. *Constitution and Canons* (emphasis added).

³⁵ Edington, *Bivocational*, 13.

³⁶ Edington, *Bivocational*, 19, 22 (emphasis original).

(or Mutual) Ministry. Beginning in 1976, General Convention began passing a series of resolutions that recognized “A model of pastoral oversight based on the development of the ministry of the whole church, lay and ordained ... [that] seeks to insure that the laity are able to exercise their ministry by sharing fully in the power and authority of the church.”³⁷ In 1995, Bishop Wesley Frensdorff of the Diocese of Nevada captured the essence of this movement in a poem entitled “The Dream,” in which he writes: “Let us dream of a church with a radically renewed concept and practice of ministry and a primitive understanding of the ordained offices. Where there is no clerical status and no classes of Christians, but all together know themselves to be part of the laos—the holy people of God. A ministering community rather than a community gathered around a minister.”³⁸

According to Bishop Cowell, the old “model is no longer functional. We must create a new model. We must teach the laity that they have value and control in ministry. There must be an adjustment in the roles of clergy and laity.”³⁹ Archbishop MacDonald, former bishop of the Diocese of Alaska recognizes that his implementation of such a model “built a radically decentralized community and realigned the church to more closely resemble a priesthood of all believers. This model was a recovery of the [early church’s] tradition.”⁴⁰ For Bishop David Bailey of Navajoland, his implementation of this “priesthood of the baptized” requires that “We must all, lay and ordained, preach and live our lives out of our baptism. Baptism is the first ordination! Diaconate, priesthood, and episcopate all augment and support the first ordination of baptism,

³⁷ “Total Ministry,” *An Episcopal Dictionary of the Church*, <https://episcopalchurch.org/library/glossary/total-ministry>, last viewed Jan. 30, 2020.

³⁸ Frensdorff, Wesley. *The Dream: A Church Renewed*. Cincinnati, Ohio: Forward Movement Pub, 1995, 7.

³⁹ Appendix III, Interview with Bishop Mark Cowell, 6.

⁴⁰ Appendix III, Interview with Archbishop Mark MacDonald, 1.

which is knowing Christ and making him known ... We must equip the laity to do the work of Christ! Everything else follows.”⁴¹

As Bishop Bell said of his work with “baptismal ministry” in the Diocese of Eastern Oregon, “We recognized the need to escape the consumerist level of church participation and invite people into a more mature vision of discipleship. In practice, members are being called outside the walls of the church to become the church in the world, not just ‘do church’ a couple times a week.”⁴² According to Bishop Bell, this model of ministry has allowed a lay pastor in his diocese – a Pastoral Leader, under Canon 4.3 of Title III – grow a dying congregation in a community of 1,200 people in rural Oregon to an attendance of 100 communicants on Christmas.⁴³

2. Gospel Based Discipleship Model:

This model of ministry has also been described as “Gospel Based Discipleship,” a model of ministry that Archbishop MacDonald implemented while bishop of the Diocese of Alaska to engage isolated congregations with limited resources in the life of the diocese. Under this model, Archbishop MacDonald “trained two or three lay people to lead services and gather once a week to provide pastoral care ... to distribute the [reserve] sacrament within their congregations ... [and] empowered lay people for healing prayer.”⁴⁴ Of this model, Gallagher observes, “In its simplest form, we engage the gospel through conversation and through community, inviting the Spirit to help us understand what God would have us do today, right where we are. All the gifts we have are from God and are identified in and through community ... we can see our gifts most clearly as we work together and rehearse together the Creator’s stories and look for insight as we discern

⁴¹ Appendix III, Interview with Bishop David Bailey, 8.

⁴² Appendix III, Interview with Bishop Pat Bell, 7.

⁴³ Appendix III, Interview with Bishop Pat Bell, 7.

⁴⁴ Appendix III, Interview with Archbishop Mark MacDonald, 1.

together.”⁴⁵ This model works, because as Bishop Ray observes, “Local communities are best equipped to identify their assets and resource their ministry because they know the work that God is doing in their midst.”⁴⁶

3. Mutual Ministry Model

Of all the dioceses surveyed, the Diocese of Northern Michigan seems to have most fully implemented this incarnational model of ministry with a robust Mutual Ministry program. According to Rev. Lydia Bucklin, the Canon for Discipleship and Vitality, the diocese went “all in” on the Mutual Ministry model, “transitioning our ordained clergy to serve as regional missionaries with locally discerned ‘ministry support teams.’ Lay leaders begin discernment for ministry locally, then laity and clergy are commissioned as a ministry team and commit to lifelong formation.”⁴⁷ Under this model, ordained clergy are not the source of ministry; locally trained laity are through “ministry support teams.” Ordained clergy are responsible for “help[ing] our communities get organized ... [and] honor[ing] and walk[ing] alongside” them in their ministry, while helping the lay-led ‘ministry support teams’ perform the more administrative tasks such as like parochial reports and liturgical planning.⁴⁸ For the Diocese of Northern Michigan, going “all in” on Mutual Ministry was not simply about structural decentralization. It was also about financial decentralization. Each congregation is part of a regional mission and contributes 40% of its pledge and plate offering to support the work of the regional mission.⁴⁹

Bishop Ray describes the Mutual Ministry model as “empowering the people of each community to be who and what they are and honoring the local gifts of each community. Our

⁴⁵ Gallagher, *Reweaving the Sacred*, 15.

⁴⁶ Appendix III, Interview with Bishop Rayford Ray, 13.

⁴⁷ Appendix III, Interview with Rev. Lydia Bucklin, 11.

⁴⁸ Appendix III, Interview with Rev. Lydia Bucklin, 11.

⁴⁹ Appendix III, Interview with Rev. Lydia Bucklin, 11.

formation is not simply identifying the local priest or deacon and sending them out; it is learning within the context of the community. We are creating ministering and learning communities that honor the culture of a local place and live into God’s mission in their midst.”⁵⁰ For Bishop Ray, a new model of leadership in Northern Michigan is not just about a program to ensure the viability of the diocese; it is “about the life and learning of the community ... [so we can] be witnesses outside our community to the work of the Gospel in the world. We are talking about the total transformation of these communities, not just rearranging chairs on the deck of a sinking boat.”⁵¹ Like North Dakota, the Diocese of Northern Michigan has communities with “very different understandings of who and what they are and what their gifts are [and] [s]ometimes these understandings conflict. The key is story sharing and relationship building. It is about growing together in a way that connects these communities to each other and the diocese. God’s story in their midst is what brings these communities together.”⁵²

A Survey of New Models of Episcopacy:

Almost all the bishops and priests interviewed agree that North Dakota’s process of discernment is fundamentally about discerning a leadership model that best expresses the work God is already doing amongst God’s people in North Dakota *and* the work God is calling the people of North Dakota to participate in going forward. As expected, between bishops there are be different models of episcopacy suggested. Of the four models suggested, some seem to be more a response to the question of diocesan viability (in light of shrinking ASA and limited resources), while others seem to be more focused on empowering discipleship and helping the diocese more fully embody the Gospel in its context. Among all the models suggested, however, there seems to

⁵⁰ Appendix III, Interview with Bishop Rayford Ray, 12.

⁵¹ Appendix III, Interview with Bishop Rayford Ray, 12.

⁵² Appendix III, Interview with Bishop Rayford Ray, 12. Bishop Ray’s approach seems to mirror the approach advanced by Bishop Gallagher in *Reweaving the Sacred*.

be (in varying degrees) a move away from the traditional Institutional model – if for no other reason than diocesan viability – and towards what Edington describes as a more incarnational model. It seems that a move towards incarnational models of leadership has nurtured the vitality of these diocese and empowered the ministry of all the baptized, cultivating communities of discipleship.

1. The Part-time/Retired/Bivocational Bishop

Perhaps the most common example of a non-traditional episcopacy is the part-time bishop. This model of leadership takes shape in a number of different ways. It can look like the retired bishop who serves a diocese in a part-time capacity and lives outside the diocese, or even outside the state. Bishop Bell of the Diocese of Eastern Oregon was elected bishop as a retired priest after the diocese decided to go to a “half-time bishop.”⁵³ Although he lives in Oregon, he actually doesn’t reside in the diocese, but his proximity allows him to spend “far more than 50%” of his time serving the people of Eastern Oregon.⁵⁴ In the case of Bishop Jay Lambert of the Diocese of Eau Claire, he lives in Florida with his wife when not performing his episcopal functions in the diocese. He conducts business remotely by cell phone and Zoom conference calls. As he notes, “A part-time bishop is different from a bi-vocational bishop. I am retired and have already earned the retirement benefits I am using to offset my bishop’s salary. A bi-vocational bishop must be called to do both professions and must be accountable for his responsibilities to both.”⁵⁵

As Bishop Lambert emphasizes, this model allows the bishop to draw on other pensions to offset a lower salary: “I am retired military, and retired from church after 31 years, and draw SSI. I earn the Church Pension maximum (\$39k), in addition to my military retirement and SSI benefits.

⁵³ Appendix III, Interview with Bishop Pat Bell, 7.

⁵⁴ Appendix III, Interview with Bishop Pat Bell, 7.

⁵⁵ Appendix III, Interview with Bishop Jay Lambert, 2.

The diocese provides me a house, so the total package is \$55k.”⁵⁶ While the cost-savings of this model might appeal to a diocese that is concerned about financial viability and wants to maintain a more traditional model of episcopacy, both Bell and Lambert recognize that there are few candidates who can meet the qualifications needed to fill this model: a retired bishop with at least one pension, and if through Church Pension Group then with 30 years of service as a priest; old enough to collect the pension(s) and perhaps even SSI; but not too old to meet the mandatory retirement age of bishops (72). There seems to be a small window of years in which a priest might be able to collect a pension (and SSI) before having to retire. It is no surprise, then, that both Bell and Lambert recognize that their diocese are not sure how to proceed upon their retirement. Lambert, who retires in November 2020 says his “diocese is undecided about staying with the current model or possibly sharing a bishop with another diocese. There will likely be a vacancy for at least 6 months.”⁵⁷

Another variation of the part-time bishop model is the bivocational bishop. This is the model that Edington advances. It is also the model that the Diocese of Western Kansas adopted when it called Bishop Cowell. Bishop Cowell was the first “dual-role bishop” and the Diocese of Western Kansas had to seek approval from then-Presiding Bishop Katharine Jefferts Schori before he was consecrated. Bishop Cowell worked as a city and county attorney, while serving as rector at one of the two churches in his diocese that still had a rector. He was also the President of the Standing Committee when the bishop abruptly left office, and the diocese called him to serve as bishop. He saw no reason to change his model of ministry, so he remains a city and county attorney, and in his words is “[s]till stuck doing some of that [law].”⁵⁸ In addition to serving as

⁵⁶ Appendix III, Interview with Bishop Jay Lambert, 2.

⁵⁷ Appendix III, Interview with Bishop Jay Lambert, 2.

⁵⁸ Appendix III, Interview with Bishop Mark Cowell, 5.

bishop and as city and county attorney, Bishop Cowell also presently serves as the rector of two parishes. In his words, “when I was called to be bishop, I saw no reason to change that model. So I am a lawyer, a primary rector of two parishes, and a bishop. I do this because I love these people. I love this community. I don’t do this for the money. I’d make more money practicing law.”⁵⁹

Bishop Cowell demonstrates one more variant of the “part-time bishop” model: the bishop who also serves as the clergy in one or more congregations in the diocese. As bishop of Alaska, Archbishop MacDonald recognized that his primary role was that of a pastor on communities of faith and their ministers (lay and ordained). For Archbishop MacDonald, “a bishop must be boots on the ground and act as priest for many small communities. It is critical for bishop to take this responsibility seriously and personally accept responsibility to provide pastoral care when and where needed. *The bishop’s role is a pastor not a prince!* As bishop, I did many funerals, marriages, baptisms, especially in small communities with no dedicated priest. The diocese had to change its expectations about the role of a bishop. But that is what it takes to make the model work.”⁶⁰ Predictably, not all bishops share Archbishop MacDonald’s view. Bishop Lambert notes, “being a bishop is a different calling than being a priest. It is like an orange shoved into a pear. Only 20% of role of bishop is the same as a priest (the sacramental). This model was tried in Alaska, where the bishop served as dean of the cathedral. He hired an associate to run the parish, but other congregations felt there was favoritism.”⁶¹

None of these models of a part-time episcopacy would require amendment of the Canons.

⁵⁹ Appendix III, Interview with Bishop Mark Cowell, 5.

⁶⁰ Appendix III, Interview with Bishop Mark MacDonald, 2 (emphasis added).

⁶¹ Appendix III, Interview with Bishop Jay Lambert, 2. It is unclear what Bishop Lambert meant with his reference to oranges and pears, and he was not pressed on the matter.

2. *The Multi-jurisdictional Bishop*

A second model of the non-traditional episcopacy that seems to be gaining more traction is the Multi-jurisdictional Bishop. Bishop Rowe of the Diocese of Northwestern Pennsylvania and Western New York is, perhaps, the only example of this model of episcopacy. As Bishop Rowe describes it, “The idea was to take two dioceses and have one staff. Eliminating the duplication allows us to create new capacities – to be able to do more social justice work, plant new congregations, put more resources into redevelopment and the sustainability of current congregations. We estimate this will free up maybe three quarters of a million dollars annually for such projects.”⁶² Of course as Bishop Rowe readily admits, this model does not always work; he tried it with the Diocese of Northwestern Pennsylvania and the Diocese of Bethlehem, and it didn’t work.⁶³ The key to this model, he says, is to create the space to ask questions like, “What are we doing at the administrative level? Why are we running the diocesan administrative structure this way? What value are we providing?” We must scale the administrative structure to meet the local needs of the diocese. We must ask, “What is the purpose of a diocese? What does a diocese need to do to support the work that is done locally? What is the value that is brought? How do we stop thinking about diocesan legacies, or individual kingdoms and start thinking about doing the work of the Gospel?”⁶⁴

Interestingly, this is the model that Bishop Lambert actually suggested for North Dakota: “Consider sharing a bishop with someone else, maybe a Suffragan elsewhere, like Minnesota. Minnesota could do better with a second bishop but is waiting until the election of a new bishop to decide the question. Could North Dakota go in with Minnesota to fund a Suffragan?”⁶⁵ Like

⁶² Editor, *The Living Church*, “Two Diocese, Two States, One Bishop.”

⁶³ Editor, *The Living Church*, “Two Diocese, Two States, One Bishop.”

⁶⁴ Appendix III, Interview with Bishop Sean Rowe, 9.

⁶⁵ Appendix III, Interview with Bishop Jay Lambert, 2.

the part-time bishop, this model might appeal to a diocese that is concerned about financial viability and wants to maintain a more traditional model of episcopacy.

The multi-jurisdictional episcopacy model would not require amendment of the Canons.

3. The Shared Episcopacy or Episcopacy by Council

Another non-traditional model for the episcopacy – hinted at in a number of the interviews and practiced informally in some dioceses – is the shared episcopacy, or an episcopacy by council. Bishop David Rice of the Diocese of San Joaquin actually uses the term “shared episcopacy” to refer to the way he runs his office: “I have two full time clergy, everyone else is half time. I found a canon who would plug in immediately – this is a shared episcopacy. We do our formation work regionally and do it ourselves, the bishop and the canon.”⁶⁶ While Bishop Rice’s idea of a “shared episcopacy” may look like only shared responsibilities – with the bishop retaining all the authority, Bishop Ray’s approach to Mutual Ministry in the Diocese of Northern Michigan looks more like a shared episcopacy in practice, or an episcopacy by council. He says, “I believe in a shared episcopacy. There is no real difference between me and any other clergy, or even any other laity in terms of carrying out my responsibilities for the episcopate. It takes us all working together as ministers for the Gospel to fulfill the role of the episcopacy.”⁶⁷

Of course, this model could look a lot like a bishop operating part-time by sharing the responsibilities with his staff – or in the case of Bishop Ray with his clergy and laity, or it could look like something very different. A number of those interviewed suggested reaching out to the Native communities in North Dakota to invite their suggestion for alternative leadership models from their context.⁶⁸ Again, as Bishop Patrick Bell says, “[I]f I were there, I would explore with

⁶⁶ Appendix III, Interview with Bishop David Rice, 5.

⁶⁷ Appendix III, Interview with Bishop Rayford Ray, 12.

⁶⁸ Appendix III, Interview with Bishop Rayford Ray, 12; Interview with Rev. Lydia Bucklin, 11.

[the Native community] what a new [leadership] model looks like. I would invite them to challenge our model. Is there something from their community that could help us break out of the Western models that no longer serve places like Eastern Oregon and North Dakota?”⁶⁹ What would a model of the episcopacy look like where there are members of the clergy within a diocese who are lifted up to shoulder *together* the pastoral responsibilities of those congregations?

Such a model could look like Bishop David Rice’s model of a bishop and a canon, or even Bishop Rayford Ray’s model of a bishop and priests that organize and support mutual ministry teams. Or, it could look like something the church has not yet seen. It could look like a diocese that raises up three clergy (or even non-clergy) to share in both the responsibilities and the authority of the episcopacy. A triumvirate (council of three) of three diocesan clergy could rotate amongst themselves the responsibility of sacramental function of the bishop in addition to the canonical authority. Should there be a lay person on the council, they could certainly help organize and support mutual ministry teams at a local level around the diocese. Such a model might function, in practice, as an episcopacy by council. As with other models of “part-time bishops,” there would be efficiencies as the clergy on the council maintained their congregational responsibilities, but there would also be a broader reach of the episcopate to provide pastoral care across an expansive geographical footprint, while decentralizing and localizing the power and authority of the episcopate. If paired with the Mutual Ministry Model, such a localized episcopate could offer a model for incarnational and relational discipleship that invites congregations to reimagine themselves as a “*participants or stakeholders*” in the mission of God through the church, rather

⁶⁹ Appendix III, Interview with Bishop Pat Bell, 7. Canon Lydia Bucklin echoes this sentiment in her comments: “What would it look like to ‘indigenize’ the diocese? What would it look like to reimagine the organizational structure in a way that is outside the Western model that the church is locked into?” Appendix III, Interview with Rev. Lydia Bucklin, 11.

than a “consumers or recipients” of the spiritual services offered by the church, to use Edington’s terminology.⁷⁰

A shared episcopacy model would not require amendment of the Canons if implemented as Bishops Rice and Ray describe. An “episcopacy by council,” on the other hand could require canonical amendment, unless implemented with two Suffragan Bishops, under Article I, Canon 2.4, who would serve alongside the Diocesan Bishop. If a lay person is chosen to serve on the council, additional canonical changes may be required.

4. The Transitional Assistant Bishop

The final model of non-traditional episcopacy suggested in the interviews is what I am calling a Transitional Assistant Bishop. Unlike a Diocesan Bishop, an Assistant Bishop is hired by the Standing Committee for a time certain.⁷¹ In dioceses like North Dakota, which are in transition but have considerable work to do to prepare for a new model of leadership, it might seem prudent to allow the Standing Committee to hire a bishop for a time and purpose certain to prepare the diocese for the transition. Occasionally, for dioceses in transition, an outgoing bishop is unwilling or unable to do the work necessary to prepare the diocese for transition. The inability of the diocese to ask the hard questions and do the hard work of reimagining its leadership models *before* a new bishop is called sets both the diocese and the new bishop at a significant disadvantage. Instead of moving with the diocese towards a fuller incarnation of the Gospel, the new bishop must build trust and capital to prepare for the restructuring that has been deferred until after her tenure.⁷² Such delay comes not only at the time and expense of the diocese, but also at the time and expense of a fuller proclamation of the Gospel.

⁷⁰ Edington, *Bivocational*, 13.

⁷¹ Title III, Canon 12.5(a), Episcopal Church, *Constitution and Canons*.

⁷² Appendix III, Interview with Bishop Sean Rowe, 10.

According to Bishop Rowe, a transitional Assistant Bishop in North Dakota could come from within the diocese: “Resist the urge to conduct an episcopal search in the next five years. Look within your diocese for a leader who can guide your communities through that work of reconciliation and discernment over the next 5-7 years. Find someone who is a known commodity, who knows the diocese, is known by the diocese and has love for the diocese and people. Find someone who is willing to perform the canonical role of bishop while continuing work as a priest for a time certain. That person could conduct regional confirmations and guide the work of reconciliation and discernment, all while managing responsibility for local congregations. That person would need assistance, obviously, but with clergy and laity organized, it can get done.”⁷³ Bishop Rowe continues: “Such a proposal would buy the diocese time to do the hard work of reconciliation and discernment, while positioning the diocese for a potential transition. If the work of reconciliation and discernment falls through, after five years or whatever time period deemed necessary, the diocese can decide to stay with the old model ... and nothing is lost. In fact, the diocese will have gained a deeper understanding of what its story is, what its call is, and what its path forward is. And, the diocese will have done that work at a savings to the diocese.”⁷⁴

Such a proposal would recognize, as Bishop Bell observes, that “[w]hat is most important in a bishop is finding someone who will love us and challenge us. How do we find the right person, regardless of credentials? Could it be a lay person that we bring through the process? *Can we find someone who loves us and this place more than being a bishop?*”⁷⁵ Indeed, such a model might provide a bishop who, like Bishop Cowell, serves for the love of the people and the community, not for the love of the episcopacy or the love of money.⁷⁶ In Bishop Cowell’s case, finding

⁷³ Appendix III, Interview with Bishop Sean Rowe, 10.

⁷⁴ Appendix III, Interview with Bishop Sean Rowe, 10.

⁷⁵ Appendix III, Interview with Bishop Pat Bell, 8 (emphasis added).

⁷⁶ Appendix III, Interview with Bishop Mark Cowell, 5.

someone who loved the people and the community was more important than finding someone who appeared (on paper anyway) to be the most qualified candidate: “I read for orders. That is how far this diocese was willing to go to reimagine the model. It is not rethinking how to make the same old model work – we have to rethink the model from top down.”⁷⁷

A transitional Assistant Bishop model would require amendment of the Title III, Canon 3.12(b) to follow the words “An Assistant Bishop may be appointed from among the following:” with an additional section (4) “Priests who otherwise meet the qualifications for Bishop and who have been selected by a Diocesan Standing Committee to serve for a time certain as a Transitional Assistant Bishop; provided that such a Transitional Assistant Bishop shall have all the responsibilities and authority conferred by the Constitution and Canons of the Episcopal Church for the term of the episcopacy.”

Concluding Thoughts:

The Diocese of North Dakota faces challenges, but these are challenges that some dioceses have already faced. These are also challenges that *all* dioceses will one day face. North Dakota has the opportunity to discern what models of diocesan and episcopal leadership best empower its communities to more fully embody the Gospel in their contexts. The interviews have suggested four different models that are alternative to a traditional episcopate. All these models can be structure to empower the ministry of the baptized, but for any of these models of episcopal leadership to accomplish that goal, it must also be paired with a new model of diocesan leadership that invites congregations to reimagine themselves as a “*participants or stakeholders*” in the mission of God, rather than a “*consumers or recipients*” of the spiritual services.⁷⁸ If we reimagine diocesan and episcopal models of leadership incarnationally, as other dioceses have shown, the

⁷⁷ Appendix III, Interview with Bishop Mark Cowell, 6.

⁷⁸ Edington, *Bivocational*, 13.

Diocese of North Dakota can begin to cultivate communities of discipleship and more fully embody the Gospel in our context. That is our great hope and our great promise.

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