At 2:00 p.m. on March 23, 2009, I began a journey of discovery with a remarkable group of leaders in the Church of England. It started when Reverend Chris Jones picked me up at the Liverpool Train Station and invited me to join several clergy for an afternoon training. For the next three weeks, I witnessed the Pioneer Ministries sponsored by the Church of England’s Fresh Expressions agency, the Church Missionary Society and the Church Army. Via the hospitality of leaders in three dioceses, I witnessed transformative ministries in five metropolitan areas, as well as several in more rural areas. During this remarkable tour, I plied nearly everyone I met with a question: “If you knew twenty years ago what you know now about the impact of secularization on the relationship of English culture to the Church of England (and vice versa), how might you have prepared the institution differently for those emerging realities?” Most of the leaders I interviewed understood that I was not asking a rhetorical question, that I came to them eager to explore a perspective that might inform our leadership in the Episcopal Church. Of the 76 people I queried, I filled a notebook with the highlights of 42 conversations.

Here is the gist of what they shared: “Twenty years ago, we were unintentionally pushing our young people out the back doors of our churches – mostly through indifference to the gifts they tried to offer. The long term impact of that benign neglect is that we traded a generation of young leaders and artists and prophets for various attempts to maintain the status quo. Today, we are working on bringing new young leaders into our churches, but that’s not the same as nurturing the prophetic voice in community – training new leaders to cultivate community with a hoe instead of directing with the verger’s mace. That takes time to develop. It’s an art of ‘being in community’ that very few have ever experienced, nonetheless mastered.”

I pressed my conversation partners further and asked, “So then, how would you recommend that we Americans might respond to this hard-earned wisdom you’ve offered?” Their answers were straightforward: “Start now – don’t wait until you have this all figured out. Experiment joyfully and publicly with new forms of ministry that match the cultures in which you find your ministries. Fail early and fail often until you learn what works. Learn to trust the young prophets in your midst and don’t be afraid when the visions they share are out beyond your comfort zones. Be daring and be bold!”

Interspersed with these interviews were visits to ministries on the ground. One of the first ministries I witnessed in the Liverpool area was Oaks Church in Tanhouse, Skelmersdale. Before making any plans, Reverend Duncan Petty and his wife Ann took their time to get to know the community they felt called to serve. They discovered that there was a “need for building small, relational, supportive, stable groups with some sort of security for people whose lives are all over the place.” Instead of planning a traditional new church launch that gathered
the community on Sundays, they felt the call to be a 24-hour-a-day, seven-day-a-week community center of healing that offers hope to this largely unemployed and emotionally struggling community. In their words, they purchased “through sacrificial giving of ... members plus finance from sending church and elsewhere, a community house for blessing the locals through a variety of small groups.” Ministry in this unique neighborhood called for the service of a house manager and a youth and children's worker for 20 hours a week each. The diocese pays the rent on their home in the center of the community, and they are as embedded in this intentional community of outreach as a family can be. My time with them repeatedly brought me to joy and gratitude – joy over the incarnational presence they are offering and gratitude for the way they called me to reexamine my understanding of what it means to be a sacramental people.

What might be happening here with the Pettys? What is so different about the shape of this ministry? In Duncan’s words, they had to “leave behind their stereotypical ideas on what it means to offer ministry in community.” I could see clearly that what they were doing was best likened to a kind of spiritual “midwifing.” They went into the grinding poverty of that housing project to search out what the Spirit is birthing – one could say they walked around their new neighborhood as “archeologists of hope.” And they pledged to be present to that birth, to honor whatever the Spirit might be bringing to life.

I do recognize the cultural differences between the Church of England and the Episcopal Church, and I am aware that my perspective has been shaped by some very thoughtful leaders both within and outside of our Episcopal Church over the last 20 years. And yet, the Petty’s journey is a unique example of what I believe to be the future of midwifing ministry for all of us. I offer in this essay an urgent invitation to the Church to midwife the work of the Spirit in a world longing for reconciliation.

From Hospice Ward to Birthing Center

On my return to the United States, I immediately gathered a group of leaders in the Episcopal Church, as well as staff at the Episcopal Church Center. The point of our six conversations was to explore practical responses to my learnings in the United Kingdom to our US context. These leaders helped me reflect on my day-to-day encounters with both innovative and declining ministries across the Episcopal Church. I began to notice an awakening of sorts among many of our church’s leaders. There seems to be a new impatience with the old models of church and church leadership passed to us from the “inherited church.” Many of our church leaders are realizing that, for most of their careers, they have been offering a kind of hospice ministry to their congregations and dioceses. It is not just the flagging attendance and the graying of our denomination’s membership that push them to acknowledge the ennui of our beloved institutions. It is also the noted absence of fresh visions and dreams that would normally bubble up from our younger members. There seems to be a fresh hunger for the Spirit’s promise to give above and beyond anything that we can ask or imagine (Ephesians 3:20-21).

At the same time, there are also many leaders who are eager to maintain our structures and habits just a little longer. Many of them left their seminary experiences years ago confident that, if they just offered excellent ministry and relevant preaching, there was hope of reversing the declining trends, at least on a local level. Today, they faithfully and persistently make up for
declining offerings and pledges by working harder and longer towards a balanced budget and for their stipends. Their best-attended services seem to be those remembering the good old days – the High Holy Golden Days of the Church of Yesterday. There are others who are convinced that only a return to orthodoxy will secure God’s blessings on our ecclesiastical ventures.

It is not so difficult to understand how the Church arrived at this state of affairs. Even today, most of our seminarians are trained to coordinate the ministries of churches whose identities were cast in a pre-modern era, the earliest days of Christendom. (By “Christendom” I refer to the offspring produced by the official marriage of the early Christian movement to the Roman Empire.) Furthermore, most of our mainline denominations were assembled on a theological framework cobbled together at a time when the Church’s authority was granted by the state and the Church operated from the center of society. In those halcyon days, the leaders of our churches were seen as the keepers of all that is good and whole and Godly. It was their calling to bring God to the world – to introduce the Christian life to the “lost” out there. The world changed, but the calling has yet to be recast. And so, many leaders find themselves engaged in hospice care for denominations and churches in their latter days.

Rest assured, I am convinced that hospice ministry to declining congregations is desperately needed today. It is a challenging and significant ministry, primarily because it calls us to face our own mortality, as well as our (as yet unredeemed) addictions to certainty and insured outcomes. We all want to think of ourselves as resurrection people. Sadly, many of us are so eager to arrive at Easter morning that we skip over the trauma of Good Friday – primarily because we dare not look into the face of death, especially the death of our church, our diocese or our denomination.

Friends of mine who make a living as hospice chaplains tell me that, when a patient dies, the most difficult family member to engage is the one who hid away from most of the patient’s dying process, acting as though their loved one would eventually get better. Though perhaps not in such a morbid way, I believe many of our theologians and church leaders struggle with that same urge. It is simply easier to turn away from the death and dying process in our midst, to pretend we are still at the center of society and that the world still cares deeply about our educated opinion. The alternative – facing the loss of roles that once defined us, loss of control, loss of what might have been – is too much to bear BUT, is that not exactly what we need, at this moment in our life together?

For this reason, compassionate, loving and respectful hospice ministry for our churches is essential. In particular, those who care for parishes in long-term decline point out that institutions struggling with their own death and dying process exhibit a strong need for routine, predictability and a controlled environment. It is important to tell the “right” story – to preserve the sacred memories of the parish in its golden days and to maintain their structures. As a result, a key offering of this ecclesiastical hospice ministry is to appreciatively celebrate and preserve memories of the community at its best. In fact, faith communities (and even denominations) in this stage of their life cycle will often choose to carefully archive their memories, rather than creating new high points in their life together. One of the leader’s roles is to graciously and kindly midwife the community from the life they have loved into that community’s next life.
One may wonder why I have devoted such attention to this hospice ministry, when ultimately my reflections are offered for those who feel the Spirit’s call to midwife fresh expressions of all that She is birthing into our world. The two ministries often live side by side. In fact, birthing new ministries that emerge from within the inherited church could be likened to setting up a birthing center in the middle of a hospice ward. Some of the more powerful examples of this reality can be found in the homeless ministries sponsored within Episcopal churches. For the lack of funding and their own worship space, many of these fledgling ministries set up their services in the undercrofts of our downtown parishes, where there is public transportation available and accessibility for people with disabilities. As the more formal service upstairs is going out in peace to love and serve the Lord, helpers downstairs are setting up chairs in circles, with a table of fellowship in the center and musicians getting ready to lead worship with music from Africa, the Caribbean and from God-loving musicians who live on the street. Many are surprised to see folks who used to attend the earlier “upstairs” service. They now come to the later downstairs service because they also sense that the Spirit is birthing something new.

On any given Sunday, life for these upstairs/downstairs communities can get chaotic. Nicely dressed churchgoers on their way out may encounter musicians rehearsing more earthy and soulful music in the parish garden. Some of those musicians may be homeless; some are professionals grateful for the opportunity to come alongside a ministry that invites them to get real with issues seldom addressed in our more refined Sunday services. It is that sort of “mixing it up” that a birthing center in a hospice ward may require.

I was recently asked, “Do you think that it is possible or advisable to open such a birthing clinic in the center of our hospice ward?” My answer is, “It depends.” I think it depends on whether we can take responsibility for our real motives for tackling such a challenge. As many observers can attest, it produces a nasty case of cognitive dissonance when an “emergent” church planter claims to be midwifing new ministries of the Spirit, but their real motivation is to keep our denomination from dying by starting new churches with good form. At that moment our sneaky institutional narcissism emerges from the underbrush of our own marketing. With all my heart I believe that keeping the denomination alive is one ministry and midwifing the emerging work of the Spirit is another. Much of the time, we struggle to stay clear about the difference between the two.

Here, then, is the rub. It may be that many of us are trying to offer a midwife’s presence in the Spirit’s birthing clinic (the whole world), even as we are guided by hospice theology and Christendom practices. In other words, we get excited about the new work of the Spirit out there in God’s world, and then we try to bring it back to church so that we can label it, own it and then civilize it to match our culture. As a result, we may be missing the incredible beauty of our call to midwife the work of the Spirit in a world longing for reconciliation with God, humanity and all of creation.

Right now, I believe the Spirit is birthing aspects of the future that She has longed to make known from before time. I also sense that the Spirit longs for partners in that holy process of making all things new. Our highest calling may be to discover, midwife and then celebrate all that the Spirit is birthing in our midst as well as out there in the world. To take this new model for ministry seriously, though, we must face some daunting challenges.
Challenge #1: Make the transition from leaders prized for institutional expertise to leaders skilled in midwifing new forms of ministry

One trainer of midwives explained to me that, by the very nature of their work, midwives offer a covenant for presence, that is, they commit to being fully present to the one giving birth, to that which is being birthed, as well as to the actual birthing process. This wise woman impressed on me that the midwife cannot offer any guarantees, only a covenant. This is also a covenant for purpose: to offer every resource available for the sake of a complete birthing process. Finally, in her own words, the trainer insisted that this is also a covenant between the midwife and the whole family to fully participate in whatever happens.

Speaking practically, when an experienced midwife walks in to work with a mother about to give birth that day, her initial concerns are around some very specific issues. She asks the mother about the timing of her contractions. Her sensors are discerning the suitability of the environment; the supportiveness of the family, the mother’s mood and whether or not the baby about to come into this world is experiencing distress. In other words, she is pacing the process of this delivery and coming alongside. Unlike some of the busy doctors in our large hospitals, most midwives can afford to let the mother’s process set the pace of their interactions. This is an incredible model for new ministry today. If we were to adopt this way of being in the world – if we were to take on the role of midwife to the Spirit – we might be called to move into unfamiliar environments to sense exactly what it is that the Spirit might be birthing out there.

Would it not make a tremendous difference if we were to train our church leaders in the art and science of midwifery, as well as everything else we think they need to know? Imagine if we asked our clergy to consider the high calling of midwifing that which the Spirit is birthing in their respective communities? To speak of ourselves as incarnational communities would take on a whole new meaning. Instead of our rice paper communion wafers held up as the ultimate symbol of God’s presence, “that which is being birthed” might call us to prepare a sumptuous meal intentionally shared with strangers-now-guests. We might even hold up the stories of the Spirit’s in-breaking presence outside of church as evidence of Emmanuel, proof that “God is with us.” Such a shift would ask us to consider story-listening as an advanced level of evangelism – listening for evidences that God is at work, that the Spirit is birthing new life, that God is alive and well.

It is this very sort of evangelism that set up the birthing station known to many around the world as “Common Cathedral.” When Debbie Little-Wyman encountered people of the street loitering around the steps of the Cathedral Church of St. Paul in Boston in the 1990s, she eventually sat down next to them and listened deeply for their stories of hope and for signs of grace. Eventually, Debbie realized that not only was there a growing number of homeless people eager to join a community of faith – she also realized that she was being called to midwife that emerging reality.

It was initially a stretch for church leaders to recognize Debbie’s call to the priesthood or to see her gathering at a fountain on Boston Common as a viable congregation. Little did she know it, but Debbie was actually midwifing a ministry that would eventually become the birthing station for dozens more street ministries around the world. Today, when seminarians from various denominations visit her “Come and See” weekends to learn the nuts and bolts of
this birthing station ministry, it is common to hear remarks like, “I only wish that this is what I was learning in seminary, right now.”

The Church would be a different place if our seminaries taught these skills of community organizing, deep listening, transformational interviewing and action/inquiry. Within a generation, we might value birthing stations like the one Debbie Little-Wyman and Duncan and Ann Petty and many others have created every bit as much as our fine Cathedral ministries.

**Challenge #2: Get over the assumption that “emergent” and “fresh” are all about us**

Recently during a church conference, a colleague asked me, “What do you think is emerging, Tom?” At that very moment, the building’s fire alarm went off. While we were shuffling out to the safe zone, I helped a very pregnant woman down the steps. As we reached the parking lot, it occurred to me that, if we were to ask her, “What is emerging, Helen?” she might say, “Are you asking ‘Is my baby going to be a boy or a girl?’” In her experience, the word “emerging” refers to a process pointedly different from the way we banter the term about. She is clear that she is not emerging. Her doctor is not emerging. Her midwife is not emerging. In fact, it is the baby that is emerging. Yet, when it comes to our theological conversations, we like to think it is Mother Church that is somehow crowning and emerging. In other words, we would like to think it is all about us.

When we say emerging or emergent or emergence church, most of us tend to think that what is emerging is a new variation of Christendom or some new expression of church. In fact, based on my recent review of exactly 146 articles and essays in journals concerned with congregational development here in the US, I find an alarming incidence of church leaders and academics writing about “emerging church” as a means of revitalizing congregations in decline. The general outline of their argument goes something like this: We live in a changing world and the way to get young people to come to church is to try out new worship or new outreach (or maybe some combination of vintage worship and e-reach).

The strategy is highly problematic, because once again the inherited church is at the center. Please know that, if I sound critical of Christendom, it is because I am. By and large, Christendom is best at forming self-absorbed groups that foster anxious instincts around institutional self-preservation. We think we already know what it is the world needs from us, and we spend our time creating strategic plans to make that happen. Even Duncan Petty admits, “It is so easy to … run away with your initiatives instead of looking for what the Spirit is up to and going with that. We have, for example, just because we did it in more conventional settings, tried to run basics courses … before people were ready for them, and they duly flopped.” More and more of us are convinced that the Spirit is calling us to repent of the urge to impose our expectations on the Spirit’s work. The Oaks Church in England may never be self-sustaining and it may never reach parish status or fit limited definitions of a conventional church. At the same time, ministries like this deserve our finest leaders, our generous support and a fresh reverence for its capacity to transform all of us.

**Challenge #3: Get comfortable with working “out of bounds”**

A few years ago I came across this quote from Jürgen Moltmann:
Mission is not primarily an activity of the church, but an attribute of God. God is a missionary God. It is not the church that has a mission of salvation to fulfill in the world; it is the mission of the Son and the Spirit through the Father that includes the church. There is church because there is mission, not vice versa. The Church must not think its role is identical to the missio Dei; the Church is participating in the mission of God. The Church’s mission is a subset of a larger whole mission. That is, it is part of God's mission to the world and not the entirety of God's work in the world.
(Moltmann, 1977, p. 64)

Moltmann’s words are challenging to many of our leaders, lay and ordained. He is claiming that we do not have the franchising rights to God’s movement in the world. This also means that if we are to partner with God, we must give up the need to own what it is that God is birthing. On reflection, it seems as though followers of Jesus Christ have always struggled with the need to “brand” with our own logo whatever the Spirit is birthing. This has been a perennial issue for our established denominations.

With this in mind, the inclusion of the Acts of the Apostles in the Christian canon may actually be a great act of editorial compassion. We might think of this as a record of the first church’s bungled opportunities, fear, public feuds and failures – all logged for the encouragement and consolation of every follower of Jesus Christ since those early years. The Acts record is full of examples of Church leaders struggling to accept the Spirit’s ministry beyond their preservation mentality. This is most assuredly a record of the Spirit’s generosity – an overwhelming outpouring of divine love on all. It is also the record of a community that finally understood what it means to empty ourselves of our preconceived notions so that we might take on the form of the servant.

There is also an unsettling aspect to the Gospel records of Jesus’ teachings and practices. Over and over, we read stories where Jesus’ passionate spirituality trumps the dominant religious traditions of his world. The new communities that were birthed from Jesus’ followers had to burst through the restraints of their cultural and religious womb. They were often birthed by the Spirit with midwives who could not understand what it was they were witnessing. They expected God to show up in ways with which they were already comfortable, and God rarely obliged.

On my computer screensaver, I have a remarkable photograph I found online. The image is a picture of a moist mushroom pushing its way up through a thick patch of asphalt – unharmed. All around the emerging fungus are broken pieces of that stretch of parking lot, scattered like a jack hammer had torn them apart. Most people are incredulous when they first see the photo. From a spore buried under asphalt is birthed something so powerful that it can break up the very paths we create for ourselves. The question is, where might we see this happening in our churches today?

In the Acts 15 record of the Spirit’s birthing of a new faith community, those most reluctant to receive all that the Spirit offered were the insiders. We might even say their sacred cultural norms were the asphalt that the Spirit had to break up. The metaphor has its limits, but I believe it illuminates the challenges the established Church faces when the Spirit asks us to cast our nets from the “wrong” side of the boat.
Challenge #4: Let go of our insistence on conformity

The idea of midwifing the work of the Spirit may seem more comfortable now. You might even be a church planter starting out on your first walkabout to explore exactly what God might be doing in your new neighborhood. You commit yourself to openness and a genuine sense of curiosity. You pack up your clipboard and camera and head out into your world to spot what it is that you may be called to midwife. As you walk down Main Street in your neighborhood, a question occurs to you: “Might it be that the Spirit arrived here before I did?” After that initial query, others follow: “What kind of work might the Spirit have been doing in this community, prior to the arrival of my church planting initiative? Might it be that God was out here reconciling the world to himself before there were any church-sponsored faith formation classes or evangelism or discipling going on? How, then, might I come alongside and simply be present to and then celebrate the Spirit’s work?”

A key step in that direction would be to acknowledge that all theology is, in reality, indigenous. That is, theology springs up from the community in which it is experienced. It is formed in community and tested in relationship. In fact, we might say that theology, outside of philosophical pursuits, is relationship language – language that reflects the relationship of the individual and the community to the divine. If we take that claim to heart, we might loosen our ecclesiastical control mechanisms enough to make space for a community to design and lead worship and construct an organizational life that matches their culture and their theology.

Consider the following example of what such a process might look like in practice. Recently, I was contacted by a community organizer who had served on her diocese’s Executive Council for two terms. She and a team of friends had identified a neighborhood with particular unmet needs and had pooled their financial resources to start an after-school drop-in program for Latino and Hispanic children, as well as a weekend club for the Asian youth in the area. They opened their doors two and a half years ago and now have an average of 130 families attending their weekly parenting classes.

Recently they asked the parents, one by one, whether there was interest in starting a worship gathering based on the Book of Common Prayer but shaped by the community’s creative responses to the Spirit’s work in their midst. With the exception of two families, the response was an enthusiastic “Yes!” For the last eight months, they have gathered. They start each of their service planning sessions with the sharing of a meal and samples of people’s favorite spiritual music playing in the background. They then share stories of encounters with God at work in the world, and then explore participants’ best experiences with God, identifying common themes that consistently emerge. The evening session ends with prayers offered by the participants, often written for that evening’s gatherings.

This team of service planners has named their goal as “the creation of indigenous ritual that honors an Anglican way of being in the world by adhering to the shape of the Book of Common Prayer’s forms for worship.” Everyone has always been welcome to attend and participate in this process. They are now gathering commitments for a “First Sunday in Advent” launch date for this new worshipping community. The community leaders set the goal of having 250 people attend their first service. During the Prayers of the People, they will show video clips of stories from those present – stories of the ways they have encountered God in their
But then comes the risk. Recently, the two co-leaders approached their diocesan leaders with a rather novel request. They asked the bishop to help them find a priest who would contract with them to fulfill a priest’s sacerdotal responsibilities in their weekly service, and no more. They specifically requested a priest who would honor the order of service as the community had planned it (and as the bishop had pre-approved it). They will handle all of the other pastoral care responsibilities with lay leaders trained via the Diocesan School of Ministry. The priest will be “called” permanently, though contracted six months at a time and paid weekly for his or her Sunday ministry. The rest of the ministry will be managed by non-ordained leaders, primarily on a volunteer basis. They are still waiting to find that priest.

This is one of the more exciting examples of a creative response to a community’s real needs. It also offers a model of ministry midwifery where the priest is a member of the team, but not necessarily the leader. If we can let go of the need for conformity, indigenous ministries like this one could truly flourish.

Closing reflections

In the six months that have passed since my visit to the UK, I have spent hours and hours interviewing lay and ordained leaders in the Episcopal Church on video. My question has been: “How do you ‘smell’ God at work?”, which quickly becomes, “How have you learned to recognize when it is God at work that you are witnessing?” The answers have been breathtaking. It takes only a slight shift in attention to move to the question on which this essay has focused: “How have you learned to come alongside and bless the new life that the Spirit is birthing in the world around you?” After a few minutes of this heart-to-heart conversation, I often hear these words: “Why can’t I make this midwifing ministry my everyday calling?” That question is music to my ears.

Have you heard the Spirit’s call to distance yourself from hospice ministry, incredible and noble calling that it is? Do you wake up in the night with a longing to return to your first love for ministry, to glimpses of God’s daring hopes for all of us? It may well be time to head to the Spirit’s birthing center, because I believe now, more than ever, God’s dreams are longing to be birthed here in our midst. All that the Spirit quietly asks of you today is that you say “Yes” to God’s hopes emerging.

Reference


Notes

1 The ministry is referred to as Oaks Church in Tanhouse, Skelmersdale. More information can be found here: https://lccsecure.lancashire.gov.uk/ACS/findExtOrg/view/details.asp?intServiceID=504.
2 This is a metaphor used extensively to explain a way of being called for in the practice of Narrative Therapy. For more on this topic, see Gerald Monk, 1997, Narrative Therapy in Practice: The Archaeology of Hope, San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
3 This is a term used in the “Mission-shaped Church” report issued by the Archbishop’s Council in the Church of England. A downloadable version can be found at www.cofe.anglican.org/info/papers/mission_shaped_church.pdf.
5 For more information, read Duncan and Ann Petty’s reflections: http://www.sharetheguide.org/comment2.
Otto Scharmer’s *Theory U* offers fresh perspective on what this kenotic process might look like through the lens of a Process Consulting approach to organizational transformation. This is a very thoughtful approach to moving past “downloading” old habits onto new possibilities. See Otto Scharmer, 2009, *Theory U: Leading from the Future as It Emerges*, San Francisco: Berrett-Kohler.