

One Body, One Spirit

Introduction to Total Common Ministry At St. Hugh



For in the one spirit
we were all baptized
into one body.

1 Corinthians 12:13

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Background

Actor and comedian George Burns, who was born in 1896 and died in 1996 at the age of 100, saw during his lifetime the invention of the telephone, the automobile, psychotherapy, nuclear physics, the radio, the airplane, television, vaccines for polio and smallpox, dishwashers, space travel, the computer, and cellular phones, among other things. He lived through the Spanish-American War, the First World War, the Roaring Twenties, the Great Depression, the Second World War, including the dropping of atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, the development of the UN, the Korean War, the rise of Rock and Roll, the Cold War, the Kennedy assassination, women's liberation, the Vietnam War, and the first war in Iraq. Most notably, through all of this he never lost his sense of humor.

We are living in a time when things are changing very rapidly, much more rapidly than ever before in known history. The world our grandparents lived in does not exist anymore. Even the world our parents prepared us to live in has changed so as to be almost unrecognizable. We are living at a time of paradigm shift. Paradigm simply means "world view." What we have come to learn during the past 100 years about ourselves and about the world has changed our understanding of human beings, who we are, how we function and what we are capable of, as well as our view of the universe and our relationship to it.

Total Common Ministry (TCM) is a response on the part of the church to this changed world. TCM is a "new" way of being the church that is in some ways a return to its roots -- the church of the First Century. The basis for TCM is a number of theological and spiritual shifts that in part arise from what we know of the church that came to life immediately following the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

"There is one body and one spirit, just as you were called to the one hope of your calling, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is above all and through all and in all. But each of us was given grace according to the measure of Christ's gift. Therefore it is said, 'When he ascended on high he made captivity itself a captive: he gave gifts to his people'"

The gifts he gave were that some would be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, some pastors and teachers, to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, until all of us come to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to maturity, to the measure of the full stature of Christ." Ephesians 4:4-8

These are the words of St. Paul, speaking to the church at Ephesus in the first century A.D. At its beginning, the Christian Church consisted of small worshiping communities no bigger than St. Hugh. These groups of faithful, ordinary people were the seeds from which the Church as we know it grew. There were no seminaries in the first century. No one had to go to school to become a minister. They had no church buildings but met in whatever space they could beg or borrow. Sometimes it was in people's houses. Yet Paul tells these small groups of early Christians that whatever gifts they have to be apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors, teachers, or preachers are sufficient and that all are called to ministry according to their gifts. Two thousand years later we can see what became of this small beginning.

Our faith in God's continued grace assures us that, in the same way, our community is gifted with all that is necessary for us to do God's work in this place. "There are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit. There are varieties of services, but the same Lord. There are varieties of activities, but the same God who activates all of them in everyone." (I Cor. 12:4-5) Our work here depends on each one of us recognizing and acknowledging our gifts (both our own and each other's) and putting them to work as we find ourselves called by God.

How do you begin to recognize your gifts? Start by looking at your personality, your heart, and your experiences. Are you an extrovert or an introvert? Do you like to study or do you prefer physical work? Are you self-expressive, expressing openly what you think and feel, or are you self-reflective, thinking before you speak and restraining your moods? What learning experiences have you had? What do you already know how to do? What do you enjoy doing? In what areas do other people ask for your help? We recognize God's call to use our gifts when the gift meets a need.

Some Spiritual Gifts

The gift of Intercession is the ability to pray persistently for others. The gift of Healing is the ability to bring physical or emotional healing into another's life through prayer. The gift of Encouragement or Exhortation is the ability to bring out the best in others, or to care for others in a way that builds their courage and motivates them to follow Jesus. The gift of Wisdom is the ability to understand God's perspective on life situations and share these insights in a simple, understandable way. The gift of Leadership is the ability to bring out the best in others in their service to God -- the ability to set vision, motivate, equip, train or set an example of service in order to draw a group to reach a goal. The gift of Administration is the ability to communicate clearly, to manage people well and organize programs and ministries effectively. Other gifts (among many) include Prayer, Giving, Mercy, Serving, Teaching, Listening, Writing, Evangelism, Hospitality, Helping, and Music. These are only a few of the possible gifts God gives. When God wants a work to be done God raises the gifts in the community for that work. Using our gifts always makes us feel energized. Our gifts recharge our inner batteries. If we feel persistently heavy

laden, or tired, or bored with a task, it's a sign that God is calling us in some other direction.

Authority and Ministry

In the traditional church as we have known it, authority to function comes from the rector, vicar, or priest-in-charge. It is a hierarchy of authority that can be diagrammed as a triangle, with the ordained person(s) at the top. The priest-in-charge can delegate authority but ultimately all responsibility comes to rest with him or her. We could say it is a community gathered around a minister. This structure reflects the hierarchical world view which is common in our Western European culture.

A diagram for authority in Total Common Ministry is more like a circle with God at the center. Each one of us is called by God to use our gifts as we share in the work of the church. Our authority to minister comes to us from God through our Baptism. Each one of us, through God's call, ministers through our gifts. We are a community of ministers gathered around and centered in God.

In a traditional church, the Canons of the Church assign to the priest-in-charge the role of oversight in "spiritual matters" and to a Vestry or Bishop's Committee the role of oversight in "temporal matters." Oversight simply means keeping an eye on how things are going and responding accordingly. Of course, these two roles are not mutually exclusive. In fact, they overlap. Just as in individuals, the life of the spirit in community expresses itself in temporal ways, and our temporal life influences our spiritual life. The spiritual life for both individuals and communities is a journey of growth in faith as we seek to align our temporal lives with our spiritual beliefs.

Applying this insight to our church structure brings us to the realization that the Circle of Ministries, our general oversight body, as well as our other more specific ministries, have both spiritual and temporal aspects. Other ministries include Administration, Altar Guild, Coffee Hour, Education, Evangelism, Episcopal Church Women (ECW), Fellowship, Finance, Mutual Care, Outreach, Building and Grounds, and Worship and Liturgy. Some of these areas deal with things that are clearly more temporal, such as Finance; some are clearly more spiritual, such as Worship and Liturgy, and Mutual Care. St. Paul tells us there is no hierarchy of function in the Body of Christ. All our ministries are equally important in the function of the Church as Christ's body in the world.

Since we are organized as a gathered community with God at the center, rather than as a community under a hierarchy, there is no one at St. Hugh who assigns tasks. All our work is done when gifts respond to needs. Every one of us, as a member of the community, is called to exercise oversight, to help identify needs, and to use our own gifts and/or call upon others' gifts to respond to needs.

With this new/old way of being the church, it is necessary to learn new ways of working together. Old habits of communication, which were formed in a church or workplace with an authoritarian, hierarchical structure, may not work as well in a circular structure.

Decision Making vs. Discernment

A common method of making decisions in the traditional church (as well as in our society at large) is to debate the issue. Each participant comes up with his or her best arguments for or against. Eventually the one with the strongest argument wins. Those on the losing side may feel unheard and disappointed.

Our work in a God-centered community relies on discernment rather than decision-making. In discernment we do our best to understand what God is calling us to do. Discernment can only come from grounding in scripture and prayer, both individual and communal.

Each of us is called to listen in prayer to the voice of God within, to come close to God, and be guided in the ways that are good and holy for our own lives. We know God is close when we encounter the fruits of the Spirit, which are love, joy, peace, patience, courage, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. (Gal. 5:22) God always gives the ability to do what God wants done. When we encounter fear, anger, doubt, apathy, impatience, obsessiveness, jealousy, or resentment, we might ask ourselves what God is calling us to let go of.

We are also called to turn our individual and collective prayer to God's will and desire for our community. Each of us sees a unique piece of the picture. Each of us is called to share what we hear God saying to us and to listen to what God is saying to others about our community. The same guideposts are used in communal discernment as in individual discernment. The presence of God is marked by love, joy, peace, patience, courage, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. When we have wandered off God's path we encounter fear, anger, doubt, apathy, impatience, obsessiveness, jealousy, and resentment.

When we use prayer and discernment to arrive at a decision, often creative solutions and new combinations of ideas arise which no one had thought of before. Everyone's contribution is part of the solution. It is important for everyone to be heard, even the quietest person in the room, as the Holy Spirit speaks to each of us in a unique way. In a discernment process often the best things to do become obvious to everyone.

This method calls for new communication skills, especially for those who are skilled at and enjoy debate. The art of listening is especially important. Good listening includes letting each person finish what they are saying before responding. Only one person speaks at a time. Allow a moment or two of silence after each person speaks. Look behind the

words to identify emotions being expressed. It is necessary to cultivate some patience for good listening.

In a hierarchical structure some voices are held in higher esteem than others, but in Total Common Ministry, just like in the story of the blind men and the elephant, each of us has a valuable piece of the puzzle. In speaking, a good guideline is to start all sentences with the words “I think...” or “I feel...” When a person is done speaking, allow a couple of seconds of silence before responding. It is hard for us all to change the habits we have learned over many years in the traditional church and in our culture, but God’s love draws us closer to God and to one another as we become a people of discernment.

Abundance and Scarcity in Discernment

Are we human beings or human doings? Many of the messages we receive from the world teach us to think about ourselves as “human doings.” The world is all about “What’s your gross national product?” “How do the numbers look?” “What have you done for me lately?” The world teaches us to think about ourselves as “human doings” rather than human beings.

One of the foundations for this philosophy of “doing” is a world view based on scarcity rather than abundance. Sociologists have found that people who lived through The Great Depression had a higher level of fear in their daily lives than those who didn’t. More surprisingly, their children’s level of fear was even higher. We are of the generation whose attitudes toward money and goods were formed by the “knowledge” that resources are scarce, conservation is the highest priority, and hard work is our only way to avoid disaster. In the extreme this becomes workaholism, the compulsion to be always working.

But we don’t have to do anything for God to love us. All we have to do is “be.” God created the man and the woman, made in God’s image, and declared, “This is good.” This was before we had done anything.

Jesus’ promise to us is of abundant life through the Holy Spirit (Jn. 10:10). The abundance of the Spirit is an abundance of love, peace, joy, hope, courage, inner strength, and the gifts of the Holy Spirit. Ministry is about sharing the abundance of God with one another. It is the inner light that shines through what we do that makes it God’s work and not just another program. We can trust God to give us everything we need to do the work that he wants us to do. When we try and try to “do” and don’t find abundance forthcoming, it may be God is saying “No, not that,” or “No, not now.”

Total Common Ministry and God Talk

By “God Talk” I mean the words we use to talk to and about God. As we seek to draw closer to God and to one another, we find that our relationship with God has been

influenced by the hierarchal and male-centered world view of our history. Our working relationships, our social relationships, and our spiritual relationship with God, have all been influenced by our world view, which sees power as proceeding from the top and being delegated down. This can lead to a sense of passiveness as we wait to be “told what to do.” Language in which God is addressed as Father, as King, or as Almighty Judge, puts God at the top of the power triangle handing down love, mercy, and justice from on high to us human subordinates. These images of God are not wrong or bad, and there are times in everyone’s life when we may call out for help, asking God to come into our lives in just these ways. But God is not limited to these images or these ways of being with us.

God came to the disciples as Jesus, a friend, teacher, and companion. God is mother in Deuteronomy when God declares, “You forgot the God who gave you birth.” (32:18b). God is Wisdom, also called Sophia. I John 4:16b says, “God is love and those who abide in love abide in God and God abides in them.” There are many ways to think about God and many ways to speak about God.

We must begin by acknowledging that all language fails in the face of the transcendent Mystery who proclaimed to Moses “I AM who I AM.” God is not a human being or a creature. But God is personal in the definition of “having the qualities of a person rather than of a thing or an abstraction.” Theology tells us that God is “One in three persons.” Although Jesus of Nazareth was a human being and plainly a male, as the risen Christ, Jesus wore the face of every kind and condition of humanity, male and female, old and young, red, yellow, black, or white. The English language fails to provide us with a personal pronoun for “a person” like this. God cannot be defined as a “he” or a “she” or an “it.”

In Total Common Ministry, as we seek to make a spiritual space for all to come close to God and for all to use their gifts, we find we must expand our vocabulary of God talk. Every one of us is called to grow into the image of God. Women and men, children and adults alike need to be able to look into the face of God and see themselves.

Gender language is not the only issue. The language of our tradition steers us towards the transcendence of God, (Almighty King, Heavenly Father) but our God is also immanent. Immanent means in all times and in all places. Our God is not just above us in heaven, but within us, among us, behind us, before us, and beside us. God is not only our Almighty King, but also our Friend and Companion. We are not only God’s subjects, but also God’s Beloved.

In John 12:32 Jesus refers to his death on the cross. He says, “When I am lifted up from the earth, I will draw all people to myself.” If we are to draw all people to Jesus and to St. Hugh we must make room for differing points of view. Some of us have more traditional ways of expressing our spirituality. Others seek to speak to, with, and about God in new words. Somehow we must find a middle way that respects both. Without abandoning

traditional language, we must be friendly toward new ways of expressing our faith and worship. Our goal is for all of us to come closer to God in our prayer and worship and to grow in God's image.

In Total Common Ministry it is important for each of us to know that God is not just over us, but also beside us, behind us and within us. In the words of our Prayer Book, faith is knowing that "God's power working in us can do infinitely more than we can ask or imagine."

The Call to Total Common Ministry

The call to Total Common Ministry is not always easy to follow. At times we may feel impatient. We may feel unsure of our direction. We may feel out of control. We may make mistakes. There are times when we may wish we could bring back that authority figure to tell us (or, more likely, somebody else) what to do and to fix it if something goes wrong (and maybe to take the blame).

But it is always amazing to see the Spirit of God at work in our midst, to see gifts emerge from the congregation when needed, to feel the love of God that draws us together and fills us with energy and caring for one another and for God's work. Even when there is disagreement, God's gifts of forbearance, patience and forgiveness, keep our community strong. During my years here at St. Hugh, I have learned that, even in these changing times, God's Spirit working in us can do infinitely more than we can ask or imagine, when we "wait upon the Lord."