Liberating the baptized:
shared ministry in northern Michigan
by Marianne Arbogast

Yesterday morning, a new volunteer at the soup kitchen where I am co-manager asked me if I was a nun "or just a lay person." (Since I'm Catholic and female, that's the full list of options.) Attempting a smile, I replied that "we shouldn't say 'just' about ourselves." She looked puzzled, and I thought wistfully of northern Michigan, where I spent a weekend in May, where there's a bishop who actually dislikes the word "laity" as much as I do.

When I drove north last spring — past signs advertising "tourist and elk herd information," through miles of pine wilderness denser than any I'd seen — I knew that the Episcopal Diocese there, and its bishop, Tom Ray, were acclaimed for their solution to problems faced by the upper peninsula's tiny, isolated churches. I knew that they were replacing the traditional model — under which seminary-trained priests are called from outside congregations to minister to them — with a model that calls forth ministry from within congregations themselves. I expected to see teams of people in local parishes — some of them ordained as priests and deacons — filling roles that have traditionally been reserved to seminary-trained clergy.

But what I didn't expect to find — there or in any institutional setting — was an understanding and approach to ministry that I could feel at home with. I came away convinced that a lens is being ground in Northern Michigan which could throw critical questions — questions about church structure, questions about the very nature of ordained ministry — into new and sharper focus. Out of the praxis of communities which were oppressed *within* the church, a theology of ministerial liberation is emerging.

A transformation of consciousness

Like many of the churches in the 30-parish diocese, Trinity Church, Gladstone struggled for years simply to keep its doors open. The 40-some members who gathered each Sunday "were poverty-oriented," says long-time parishioner Carol Clark. Never able to afford a full-time priest, they survived by yoking with other churches to come up with a clergy salary. Still, the financial burden was heavy, clergy were underpaid and over-extended, and the congregation frequently found itself between pastors.

"We had a sense of inadequacy," Clark says. "We were always in debt; we owed the diocese so much money that we could never repay, and it never got any better."

Some Northern Michigan churches would go for months without the Eucharist. When Ray arrived in the diocese in 1982, he found on his desk a letter from two of them, imploring him to ordain a lay reader who had helped hold his parish together for many years. Under Ray's leadership, the diocese began a process of exploration which would transform it in unforeseen ways.

Today, Gladstone celebrates Eucharist twice a week. Clark, a retired nurse, and Ellen Jensen, an elementary school teacher, have been ordained to preside. With nine other parishioners, Clark and Jensen took part in a two-year formation process, and have committed themselves to serve as a "ministry support team" for Trinity. Pat Viau, who cares for his two pre-school children at home, is now a deacon; his wife Jan Viau, a special education teacher, coordinates priestly ministry along with Sue Jamison, another teacher. Five members take turns preaching, including Clark, Jensen, Pat Viau, Sue Ray (a nurse and a deacon), and Jan Buchman — who also serves as Trinity's ecumenical coordinator. Church treasurer Jenny Hansen has been commissioned to work with stewardship; pre-school teacher Amy Hall focuses on education; and Betty Kempf is coordinator of diaconal ministry. (Margaret Adams, a second diaconal ministry coordinator, died in June.)

> *I have no idea what 'ministry of the laity' means — except that somehow* that *ministry is considered inferior, unprepared, inadequate, inevitably second-class. I think you could wash all day and not clean that word up.*
>
> *— Tom Ray*

Rayford Ray serves as a regional "missioner" — a seminary-trained resource person — to Trinity and another congregation, each of them contributing 40 percent of their disposable income toward his support.

But what is happening at Trinity is more than the blossoming of "lay ministry" or the establishment of "team ministry," and certainly far more than the ordination of local priests. What is underway — and often overlooked by those outside — is a radical transformation of consciousness about what it means to be church.

Marianne Arbogast is assistant editor of *The Witness*. Artist Therese Denham is a sister of St. Joseph of Carondelet in Los Angeles, CA.

Office: 1249 Washington Blvd., Suite 3115, Detroit, Mich., 48226-1822. Telephone: (313) 962-2650. Fax number: (313) 962-1012.

"The change is so incredible," Clark says. "There's an energy, people are involved. Some of us were active before, but there's an ownership now. It's not only that it's our church — we're responsible for what goes on."

Rejecting clericalism

The language to express it is still evolving, and crucial subtleties can easily be missed. Trinity has a "ministry support team" — *not* a ministry team. The diocese emphatically rejects the notion that some Christians are "providers" and others "consumers" of ministry. The team's role is to develop "mutual ministry," engaging the gifts of everyone in the congregation.

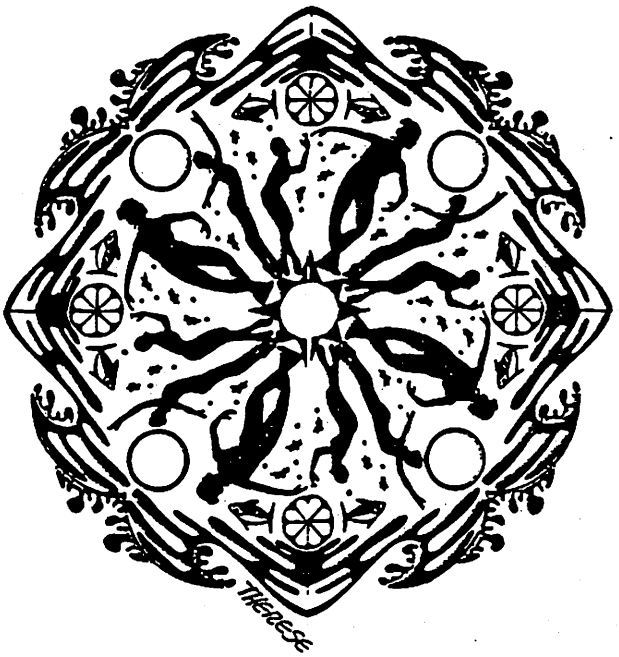
Though the diocese follows church discipline in "ordaining" to some ministries and "affirming" others, there is little practical distinction, and the ordained are accorded no special standing.

The diocese has altered its constitution to grant every baptized member of the diocese a seat and a voice at convention. Clergy are no longer automatic delegates and votes by orders have been abolished.

Local ordinations can be used to "maintain clericalism by saying we can get indigenous priests, and then dumping on them everything we have dumped on seminary-trained priests," says Jim Kelsey, a diocesan missioner who has played a key role in the development of the new model. "That's not what we're talking about in this diocese."

Liberation of the seminary-trained

Rejection of clericalism does not mean a devaluing of theological education and professional expertise. In eight years, the diocese has doubled the salaries of its full-time, seminary-trained missioners, using up its working capital in order to avoid burdening congregations. But the missioners' role is vastly different from that of a priest-in-charge of several yoked churches. For one thing, they are not "in charge" at all; more significantly, they need not even be ordained. They bring not ministry, but ministry resources — background in Scripture, theology, church history, liturgics and spiritual counseling — to local communities. A missioner might be asked for help preparing a sermon, planning an educational program, or facilitating conflict resolution.



Therese Denham, CSS

Manuel Padilla, who grew up in Northern Michigan and returned there after seminary to serve as a missioner, feels that his greatest challenge is "facing and dealing with the destructiveness of the traditional system. The expectation that the congregation could run off the energy of one individual, the belief that someone has to come in and take care of us — overcoming that is difficult."

Parishes have typically dealt with dysfunction through "triangulation," using the priest as a buffer to avoid dealing with conflict, Padilla says. "Without a priest to manipulate, people have to talk to each other. It breaks down all the old power structures in a community."

Tom Lippart, formerly a full-time rector in Escanaba, now serves as missioner to two churches. He has experienced the change as a liberation.

"I felt before like I was filled with all this theological education and no one was interested," Lippart says. Now he is frequently consulted — but someone else is called when the boiler breaks down.

"Right away I could see what was happening for him," Peg Lippart, his wife, says. "We had this team, with people taking responsibility, and it spread things out beautifully. When you're 'the' minister in charge of it all, you can't do it all, but the expectation is that you should."

Congregational liberation

The liberation experienced by congregations is equally dramatic.

With their budget no longer consumed by clergy salary and the upkeep of a vicarage, Gladstone parishioners have discovered a new range of possibilities. "What now goes for outreach — we hardly had that much in the whole budget a few years ago," says Helene Merki, the church's 93-year-old organist.

While others concede that she may be exaggerating, all agree that outreach has increased tremendously.

"This little community does so much in the community, it's phenomenal," Rayford Ray says. Trinity members are involved with Habitat for Humanity, a domestic violence shelter and a prison, where they lead services for inmates.

"It's rare to find someone who just sits in the pews anymore," Clark says. "We're more aware now — we have time and energy to focus on community needs."

She speaks of an enhanced sense of community within the congregation and with others in the diocese.

"The trust level has grown," Clark says. "We get to know each other on a different level.

"I've grown and been stretched doing things I never believed I could have done, but instead of being a burden, it's a joy. There's support within our community and from the diocese, and nobody has to do it all."

Gladstone parishioners tell of a visiting bishop who implied that their model might be good as a last resort, but asked whether, if they were given $3 million, they wouldn't go back to the old model.

"We told him we'd give it away," said parishioner Maria Maniaci.

"We can't go back," Clark says. "Once there's life, how do you roll over and play dead again?"

Currently, ten of the diocese's 30 churches have opted to pursue mutual ministry development, but others — even some which can afford a full-time rector — are exploring the possibility.

"For many the point of entry is finances," Kelsey says. "But then people get creative, and open to new ideas, and what comes to life is delightful."

He cautions dioceses against doing it to save money; in Northern Michigan, the diocese has increased its spending to subsidize regional missioners.

And he stresses that it is "not necessarily a church growth strategy. Some will say, 'I'm sorry, but I didn't sign up for that.'"

But parish registers and diocesan balance sheets don't measure "the vitality in the life of the community," Kelsey says. "Mutual ministry is getting at the heart of what we believe God in Christ is calling us to do and be."

Few alternative models draw as much attention as Northern Michigan's venture into mutual ministry development. So numerous are the inquiries that the diocese has instituted semi-annual visitors' weekends, encouraging guests to come at a time set aside for hospitality and conversation. Guests at the May weekend included the bishop-elect of the Canadian diocese of Rupertsland, a Saskatchewan priest on sabbatical, the coordinator of the total ministry program of the Diocese of Olympia, an urban vicar from the Department of Missions of the Diocese of Newark and members of a rural Missouri parish.

The weekend was marked by lively discussion of both the brass tacks and the