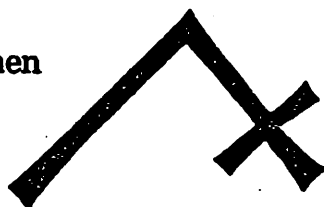

Ministry of All the Baptized

by Maron Van

A great despair settles into a congregation when it becomes evident that the ordinary comfortable way of worshipping God is slipping away, and it seems there is nothing anybody can do about it. The area industries have down-sized or left. Jobs are scarce and there are fewer and fewer people left to pay the bills. What was once a large vigorous membership has dwindled, and even generous pledging cannot provide enough funds to pay a full-time seminary-trained priest, even if all other needs are sacrificed. How do we sustain a worshipping presence if we have to cling with despair to the remnant of what we once were? If we must worship with a different supply priest every time, and even then not every week? If we have no joy? If we have only the determination to hang on, and no hope?



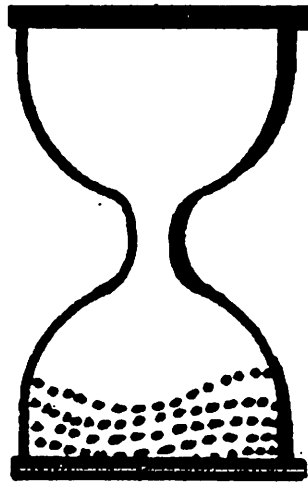
Will we believe it when we hear there is another way of worship? That we can call forth qualified people from within our own congregation to be priest and deacon? Only when it is our last resort. Only when we still have the determination, but no hope of becoming again who we once were. It is determination and God's grace that gives congregations enough courage to make such a total change in the traditional way of doing business under these circumstances. It also takes a bishop willing to try new possibilities and encourage new ideas.

Several congregations in the Diocese of Northern Michigan have made the choice to do ministry in a new way, sustaining and even giving new life to their common worship.

In May 1996, I travelled to the Diocese of Northern Michigan in order to attend one of their biannual Visitor Weekends. I went to see for myself what mutual ministry really looked like and felt like. And I went to bring back this experience to the Diocese of Oregon's task force on Ministry of All the Baptized. I was not alone - there were six of us from Oregon at the weekend, but each of us had a unique experience. Together we were able to gain a richness that each of us could never have had as individuals.

I experienced the feelings of the people who gathered in Michigan. As forty-three of us came together in Marquette, we began to tell each other why we had travelled from Maine, Kansas, New Zealand, South Africa, Vermont, Oregon, and New York for this visitors' weekend. Many

said they were facing the need to find a way to keep their beloved home church together without the help of a seminary-trained priest. Others were already making do with infrequent Eucharist because they could only afford a priest once or twice a month. "I don't know what we are going to do" was expressed many times. Some came with their priests whom they would be able to pay for only a few months longer, searching for a way to keep their churches alive. Some of us were there because we thought this idea was important, although we knew that to embark on such a change could not help but present difficult challenges. I could not honestly say I perceived much confidence about the future as I heard the different stories. It was as if people were clinging to a thread of hope that this new way of ministry would solve all problems quickly and without undue stress.



It was a well-planned and executed weekend. We heard wonderful, honest stories from ministry teams about the adoption of mutual ministry in parish life. These teams now had the role of leading their congregations in worship.

It was in Newberry, where I was the guest of the congregation Saturday evening and Sunday at worship, that I heard part of the story I'd like to share with you. I heard the rest of the story from Bishop Tom Ray. It illustrates how a congregation can move from despair to joy.

There was a time in Newberry when the priest lived in the vicarage right next to the church. All Saints' Episcopal Church had used it as the vicarage for a long time. It had never been used for anything else. Then their priest retired, and as they had been struggling to meet their financial obligations because of shrinking membership, they knew they would not be able to hire another full-time priest.

It was not a decision they wanted to make, but eventually the congregation agreed to become a mutual ministry congregation. It took several years for this to happen. There were problems with the process, and it was harder than they thought it would be. All those years the vicarage stayed empty.

"Why didn't they sell it?" I asked. Bishop Ray laughed, and said it was a symbol of hope that they could return to the old way of doing church - the one with a seminary-trained priest living in the vicarage.

But as the mutual ministry team and rest of the congregation began to see themselves as a fully worshipping community, they saw that

they no longer had the wish to return to the past. They had new life, perhaps more than they had ever had.

No, they didn't sell the vicarage. They offered the use of the house to the Salvation Army. Through that group, it would be used to provide free short-term housing to families who had had a house fire, or to those who needed a place to live while they saved some money and began to recover. Many families have been able to make a new start because of the vicarage.

Mutual ministry is abundantly alive in Newberry!

Maron is a deacon at Resurrection, Eugene, and a member of the Department of Christian Education. She is deeply involved in mutual ministry issues in the Diocese.

