

Some Reflections on the Role of Missioner

by Charlie Piper¹

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Dear Catherine,

Thank you for your note concerning "where do I start" becoming a missioner.

I have been in my current situation since 1979. That is, I am living in the same community for the last 21 years. The "situation" has changed (and is changing) as we speak! Eleven years ago, Tom Lippart and I (and the congregations we had been serving as rectors) entered a relationship with a third congregation, to provide some pastoral oversight since they were no longer in a position to replace their rector who had moved a year before. We both were at Grace Church in Menominee one Sunday a month and we alternated being there on Thursdays.

Tom retired three years ago. I have absorbed most of his time at Grace, so that I am there every Thursday (more or less) and every second Sunday and every fifth Sunday when they occur. I often say that my position is something of a hybrid: three-quarter time "rector" in Iron Mountain, one-quarter "missioner" with the people of Grace, Menominee. Tom's arrangement in the years before his retirement was somewhat different than mine, but I will let him tell that part of the story.

I mention this "history" because it is unique in the diocese and reflects the situational nature of ministry development here. No two places are alike; no two compensated positions are alike.

My case - which is still a "work in progress" - attempts to combine the insights and practices we label "mutual ministry" in two different settings: One (Menominee) began as a "missioner" position from the start eleven years ago, though their memory of having their own rector was long and very much alive. This resulted in some arrangements and accommodations which still smacked of "rector" even after that was no longer the case. The other (Iron Mountain) has been a traditional "rector" position gradually morphing into a position with some of the marks of mutual ministry and missioner written all over it. Depending on the day, the transition has been more or less successful (and anything but complete!). While Iron Mountain commissioned a ministry support team 2½ years ago and is about to launch a second covenant group, they were the only congregation in the diocese unable to raise up one or more local presbyters (we identified three but none felt they could accept the call) so I remain the sole priest in this place, with all that that means.

I detect from your note that you would like to begin to be a "missioner-like" priest-in-charge in your current location. If that isn't the case, my comments may not be all that helpful. The following are random and in no particular order:

¹ Written in response to an e-mail request for more information from outside the diocese

1. I have often thought it would have been easier to start with fresh ordained leadership at some point along the way rather than try to keep the same cast but change the script (changing the rules of the game while play is in progress is another metaphor that resonates with me). My(our) decision to stay here has many causes, and I chiefly am glad we did stay, but it made the way (and "makes" the way) trying at times. Old patterns (my own included) have great staying power and it is a common thing to catch myself acting out of old ways on a fairly regular basis. Needless to say, so do many others in the congregation.
2. The arrangement with Menominee which began eleven years ago was a helpful ingredient in the process that has brought the congregation in Iron Mountain to where it is today. As I recall, Roland Allen talked about "creative absences" as key to indigenous ministry development. Things happened here because I was physically absent on a regular basis. I hasten to add that more could have happened than did, but the principle is still a good one. I would suggest that you find good reasons to be elsewhere and allow those times to be training grounds for other leadership.
3. Even in my current relationship with Holy Trinity Church - where I am $\frac{3}{4}$ rector - we have used some of my absences for creative liturgy. Twice I was in Menominee on the Sunday we normally honor high school graduates, for example. We designed a service that was a "liturgy of the word" with some innovative features, including an "address" by a retired teacher that is still talked about. Last Fall, we designed an "All Hallow's Eve" service for Sunday morning, October 31, based on the material in the *Book of Occasional Services* that was a highlight of the Fall. I have discovered that there is a small price to be paid to be so deeply involved in planning creative liturgies only to be absent for the event itself.
4. Much of being a missionary-type priest is working behind the scenes to see that people are "invited" along (nursing home visits, for example) as well as prepared enough for their roles in my absence that they have some sense of competence/confidence. I meet monthly with the other two preachers in Iron Mountain to work on specific propers or to reflect on the craft of preaching or to share some of my own hard-won wisdom about this sermon-thing. That effort is invisible to the congregation but does have an impact on the final product I believe.
5. I've discovered that "collaborative" decision making, collaborative ministry, etc. is often slower and messier though the results are often far superior than solo performance. This is not to say I still don't do things alone - I still pick out the hymns, for goodness sake - but increasingly things are done as a community. I'd suggest that you identify one or two areas that currently fall on your plate alone and invite others to join you in doing them and gradually handing them over completely. Down the road, pick out one or two more and do the same thing.
6. One of the great difficulties for me (and others) is to release (or share) a responsibility and then take it back when others falter or (and this is even worse) when it isn't done to my standards. I believe this is called a "control" problem! A wise voice in the early years of mutual ministry in this diocese referred to it as "learning to let things not happen!" This

becomes a self-discipline issue for me and I have a mixed record of success with it.

7. Speaking of self-discipline, I think a large part of the transition from traditional ordained ministry to "missioner-like" ministry has to do with seeing myself as part of the community. That may seem like a simple idea, but it is often hard to put into practice. I have to keep reminding myself (and saying out loud to others) that "we are in this together," "it is our ministry (and above all Christ's) not just my ministry." The roots of that are baptismal, of course, but it is very easy to say that and another to do it. In other words, look for opportunities all over the place to remind people that it is so and expect others to remind you of your own transgressions to the contrary! Realize also - as we have said many times over - this change (yes, paradigm shift!) will take a generation (or more) to become part of us. So, don't be too hard on yourself when you fall into old ways!

8. I believe there are some things that I do that other missionaries in the diocese don't do simply because I'm here most of the time. Since my office is in the church building, much of the time I answer the phone, pick up the mail, turn up the heat and unlock the doors because I'm around. This is in marked contrast to my time in Menominee (it was over a year before I even had a key and I still don't know how to turn on all the lights in the worship space) as well to other full-fledged missionaries. And yet, if your situation is as I imagine, you will likely still do the things I still do. This doesn't mean others cannot (or should not) be drawn in, but the reality is that they will still be yours to do, at least in part. I think that is the result of "being resident" even if I am not here all the time. Don't sweat it.

9. In our situation, the kinds of changes I'm describing and that you've picked up from the conferences you've attended, are greatly aided and abetted by the systemic impact of "mutual ministry" on our whole diocese. It is reflected in every aspect of who we are (canons included), however imperfectly. I cannot imagine, as a result, what it would be like to try to make these transitions without that wider support. Local ordinations, for example, cannot happen simply as a local initiative. All I can suggest is to keep telling the story, keep gathering folks together to spread the message, keep raising up an alternate vision of what the church can be!

10. Likewise, we have been greatly advantaged by the steady stream of visitors (actual and virtual) who reinforce in us the sense that we are doing something good and who press on us to be even truer to the vision than we thought we were. Without that flow from outside, our experience would be very different.

I hope I have been able to address some of your interests and concerns in this rambling response to your note. I'd be glad to answer more specific questions.

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