

LIVING YOUR CALL WITHIN COMMUNITY  
A MANUAL FOR CREATING, LEADING, AND  
PARTICIPATING IN LAY MINISTRIES  
AT  
THE EPISCOPAL CHURCH  
OF  
ST. MARY THE VIRGIN

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## INTRODUCTION

*Then he said to his disciples, "The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few; pray therefore the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into his harvest."*

Ours is an active faith. All baptized Christians are called to serve God through Christ in this world. The call to service through action is constant throughout scripture, and we renew our personal commitment every time we re-affirm our covenant with the newly baptized. We, of course, are called to live our faith within every aspect of our personal and professional lives. But, we also are called to witness through prophetic service in the world and in specific support of our corporate church, as embodied in the national Episcopal Church, the Diocese of California, and the parish of St. Mary the Virgin.

The Episcopal Church of St. Mary the Virgin has long been blessed with deeply committed, active, and inspiring lay leaders. Over two hundred people participate in one of the worship ministries alone.<sup>ii</sup> Scores of these and others serve on the Vestry and many committees, and in various other administrative, pastoral, operational, and support functions. St. Mary's parish volunteers take the Eucharist to people at home; rebuild houses in the community; cook and deliver meals to the homeless; paint the church; answer Night Ministry phones; raise and manage the annual budget; take people to hospital appointments; edit, fold, and mail the newsletter; serve in diocese and deanery leadership positions; wash windows; prepare and serve Lenten meals; and do much more for our church and our community.

With so many people doing so much, it is easy to sit back and assume that everything is covered. But, even if that were true, which it definitely is not, it really is not the point. Christ calls us all to serve. Thus, if we are not serving a ministry in some capacity, we have not yet responded completely to Christ's call.

This *Manual* provides some simple guidelines on how to organize, manage, and participate in successful lay ministries within a thriving parish church. It does not attempt to explore calls to Christian service outside of St. Mary's or the very special calls to holy orders. While recognizing that there are some notable distinctions between churches and secular nonprofit organizations, many of those distinctions may be more apparent than real. Some recognized skills and techniques for organizing, leading, and participating in largely volunteer-led nonprofit organizations clearly apply to lay-led activities at St. Mary's.

This is a manual of tools, not a proscription of requirements. On the other hand, it does assume that good intentions are not enough. Any healthy organization, including a parish church, needs leaders who care enough to acquire the tools and practice the skills necessary for the institution, as an organization, to thrive. Perhaps this *Manual* will help.

## DISCERNING YOUR CALL TO MINISTRY

*The Lord will fulfill his purpose for me. . . .<sup>iii</sup>*

The Episcopal Church applies the term “discernment” to the process by which a person explores the nature of her or his call to Christian service and the specific form it will take. Christian discernment is a life-long endeavor. The term “discernment” also is used to label the formal process that an individual may undertake through parish and diocesan structures to explore a potential call to holy orders as an ordained deacon or priest. Through rigorous and formal education and examination processes, ordained priests and deacons are granted additional responsibility and authority over, by, and within the Episcopal Church. But their call is rooted firmly in the same covenant that we all share upon baptism into Christ. Discernment to holy orders is outside the scope of this document. If an individual feels called to holy orders, (s)he should begin the exploration process with the rector. Once again, however, by the fact of our baptism into Christ, each of us accepts the same obligations of Christian service.

So, to what ministry (or ministries) are you called? How do you explore the options? How do you know what is the right fit? How do you know that you are serving God’s call and not your own needs? Good questions, all. Some of the following steps (in no particular sequence) may be helpful.

- Pray. Without any preconditions or pre-conceptions, simply get on your knees and ask, in the name of Christ, “God, how do you want me to serve you?” Keep asking, over and over and over again. If you need help, the *Book of Common Prayer* is a great source of reflection and prayer.
- Identify the range of existing opportunities and needs for service within the church. You may do this by talking with other members of the parish, attending an annual meeting, talking to chairs of parish committees and activities, exploring the offerings at a ministries’ fair, or even looking at a parish organizational chart. The *Cow Hollow Church News* and the website, <http://www.smvsf.org>, also are good sources of information.
- Pray.
- Identify your own skills. These may or may not be ones that you use daily in your workplace or your personal life. Perhaps you have skills that are lying fallow that you would like to express or use in depth to feed your soul. You may have skills that you want to test or to develop; things you would like to explore. You may even have some well developed and recognized skills that you use professionally but expressly *do not* want to use in a church ministry for the sole reason that you are seeking to nourish and refresh your soul, not engage or hone your work skills. Maybe you just want to round out your life. God is with you.
- Pray.
- Know your soul. What makes you feel good about yourself, fulfilled? Where do you find God? This is not the same as feeling appreciated or recognized for accomplishment. It is not about feeling that you have done something well, but that you have done something good. It is about feeling that you are doing what Christ wants you to do in service to God.
- Pray.
- Talk with clergy. They are trained, experienced, and guided by Christ in helping others explore and fulfill their spiritual selves.
- Pray.
- Clergy may recommend a formal discernment committee of local parish members to help you work through the process in a more structured and supportive way. This is required of all people who feel

called to holy orders, but it can also be a useful tool for anyone seriously exploring the call to personal ministry.

- Pray.
- Try a spiritual retreat like Cursillo or some other in-depth, immersive spiritual experience that creates the time, space, quiet, and support for personal discernment and growth.
- Pray.
- Make a decision. Jump in. Try it. You may never know what God has in store for you until you actually do it. Know that Christ is with you every step and stumble of the way.
- Keep praying.

## PARTICIPATING IN LAY MINISTRY

*Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit; and there are varieties of service, but the same Lord; and there are varieties of working, but it is the same God who inspires them all in every one.<sup>iv</sup>*

Whoever said that “there is no ‘I’ in team” has never worked on a church committee. That’s not necessarily a bad thing. Humans are not herd animals. We are social, yes, but we also are individuals. Our individuality can be our greatest gift in our ministry in God’s church.

The keys to a rewarding experience in lay ministry are these.

- God
- Servanthood
- Assertiveness
- Power of collaboration

God. All ministries are in service of Christ for the glory of God. It is all too easy to forget God during the hustle and bustle of our activity on behalf of God’s church. Goals, time, space, personalities, conflicting assumptions, authority relationships, and other things trivial and large get in the way. But, the work that we do on behalf of the Church of St. Mary the Virgin is God’s work, not ours. Occasionally each of us needs to step back, breathe deeply, and recite again, with meaning, “*Thy* will (not mine) be done.”

Servanthood. Jesus provided a powerful model of servanthood by washing the feet of his disciples. Participation in, and leadership of, church committees and ministries is not about ego fulfillment or leadership recognition. It is about *service*. When conflicts arise, and they *will* arise, it is important to step back and ask whose needs are being served. If they are anyone’s but God’s, then some adjustment may be necessary.

Assertiveness. Assertiveness is best defined as “speaking the truth in love.” It is not threatening, abusive, or hostile. It is not expressed through manipulation, insults, or sarcasm. And it definitely does not say “yes” and then do “no.” Assertiveness simply expresses a person’s desires, needs, and boundaries in a straightforward, nonjudgmental manner. A healthy committee or lay ministry is one in which all feel safe asserting their needs and opinions *in support of each other*.

Collaboration. Successful parish committees and collective ministries assume that the whole can accomplish more than the any individual or the sum of individuals working separately. Therefore, healthy ministries value diversity of viewpoints and skills, which work together in service of a greater good.

What if it doesn’t work out? Suppose you are a new member that joined a committee partly to get to know some members of the congregation. Or, you may have assumed that the members would participate in planning decisions about what the committee will do. Instead, you discover that the committee is really a pool of workers who are expected to show up at scheduled times to do specific tasks. Because the “committee” never meets, you have not met any new members of the church through it. That may be exactly the type of experience some people relish—no decisions, no wasteful meetings, simple tasks, predictable schedules, in and out. And it may be what that particular ministry requires. On the other hand, it may not be the type of experience you were seeking or where your skills are used best or where your soul is fulfilled.

Be assertive. Be honest with yourself and with other committee members and leaders. Tell them in a loving, caring, pastoral way what your needs are and in what ways they are not being met. Don't sulk; take no offense. Don't assume ill intent or bad management. Don't just slink away by not returning emails or refusing to show up. Grant everyone the respect of communicating your needs. Who knows? You may even find that several other people share the same concerns, and yet no one had ever expressed them to the leadership, who, in turn, might be very receptive to those needs and ideas. In any case, be assertive in expressing your needs. And, if they cannot be met, with no ill will, move on.

## THE PURPOSES AND ORGANIZATION OF LAY MINISTRIES

*Rather, speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in every way into him who is head, into Christ, from whom the whole body, joined and knit together by every joint with which it is supplied, when each part is working properly, makes bodily growth and upbuilds itself in love.<sup>v</sup>*

Volunteer lay ministry may take many forms in a parish setting. No matter what the nature of the activity, with few exceptions, all share one common trait: They are done in community together. Some, like the Vestry, are very formally charged and structured, perhaps even required by public law or church canons. Others, like ushers and Altar Guild, exist and are structured to meet well recognized, and often continuing, needs. Still others may arise to fill a specific need and may possibly disappear when that need has been met or no longer exists. Some committees may even cease because they simply can no longer attract the volunteers necessary to continue. There is a natural life cycle to some ministries.

### Purpose

Regardless of how formally a ministry or committee is created, be clear and specific about its purpose. Most simply, a purpose statement says, “We are doing *X* in order to accomplish *Y*.” It defines *what* and *why* a ministry is being done. *What* and *why* are not the same things. Exploring the *why*, the *purpose*, may result in extended, rigorous, and rewarding discussions within the ministry or volunteer committee. Indeed, discussions of purpose may reinvigorate an entire ministry.

As an example only, which of these is a function/activity of ushers, and which is a purpose? Would adopting one of the statements as a *purpose* make a difference on how the other items are done or how they relate to each other?

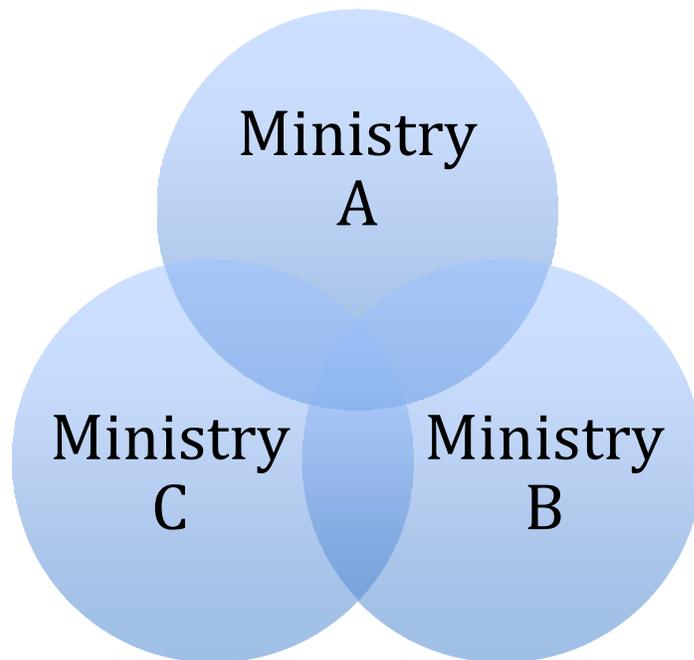
- Ensure the smooth flow of the service.
- Greet people as they arrive.
- Seat people efficiently with as little fuss as possible.
- Help everyone feel equally welcome and comfortable throughout a service.
- Efficiently and accurately collect and record the offering(s).

It is important even for long-standing, continuously operating ministries and committees to adopt, review, and perhaps even revise their purpose statements periodically. Some program-directed committees may want to go so far as to adopt mission statements. It is useful to review the purpose statement annually through discussion and assent by all those engaged in that particular ministry or committee. Annual review allows the ministry to check assumptions, as well as to incorporate new members into the “soul” of the ministry.

Some ministries and committees perform different functions to accomplish a common purpose. The hundreds of people organized into multiple functions who make the worship services provide a power example of shared mission. It is especially important for those ministries that share a common purpose to understand what they share and how they interact with, and enhance, each other. The chairs of those shared ministries might find it useful to meet periodically, or at least immediately prior to special events like high feast days, to clarify roles and explore how they best can support each other. Nothing is more destructive to inter-ministry collaboration than unchecked assumptions of responsibility and authority. “Is that my job or yours?” Confirm assumptions in advance.

## Organization

Although an organization chart at St. Mary the Virgin is included in the Appendices, it would be best to consider these ministries not from this corporate organizational model (a business school adaptation of military functional structure), but rather from a relational model of intersection purposes and activities. In this model, one can clearly see where ministries overlap in *purpose* and therefore have great opportunity both to support and to conflict with each other.



The particular strength of this relational model in a church is that it allows otherwise separate ministries to see opportunities for expanding service and impact through bridging activities with each other. Again, as an example only, are there opportunities for a particular outreach ministry to both strengthen, and be enhanced by, a partnership with the youth ministry or the Welcome Committee or the young adults group? Do they share any purposes? The relational model offers a new way of looking at opportunities to serve Christ *and* strengthen the church

## Life Cycles

Some ministries, especially outreach or social service ministries, may experience natural life cycles. They may flourish with the excitement of first challenge, peak during periods of strong leadership or high visibility, and then may move into periods of decline. Depending on the nature of the situation, that decline may be long and slow, or it may be dramatic and precipitous. It may be the result of changes in leadership, demographic changes in the congregation or the community, or even changes in clergy. The ministry's founder may have been unable or unwilling to recruit and prepare a successor. Perhaps the need or purpose has changed or has been met.

In any case, it is important to acknowledge the decline when it is evident and analyze it honestly. Do not let a struggling ministry continue just because of the lack of will to terminate it. Ultimately, the decision to continue or discontinue any ministry rests with the rector. That decision will be most sound if the people most intimately involved in the ministry or committee can advise the rector prayerfully and candidly. The demise of a particular ministry need not mean that the ministry, itself, its leadership, or anyone else has failed. It may just be time to move on. God has plenty of work for us to do.

### **The Opportunity and Risk of Prophetic Ministries**

Finally, some committees and ministries are created specifically to stretch and challenge the prophetic vision of the congregation. They offer the opportunity for expanding the parish's mission and stimulating spiritual growth. By definition, they also are risky. Such is the nature of prophetic witness. Even Jesus recognized the reality and value of failure.<sup>vi</sup> When a ministry is struggling, whether it is a new initiative or a long-standing program, it is important to analyze the reasons. Was it the wrong ministry? Was the congregation or the community not ready for it? Was it under-resourced? Has the natural cycle run its course? Has new leadership affected the ministry? Is there need to reorganize or restructure the approach? Don't be hesitant to reorganize and try again. Also, be willing to say, "Apparently not now." Again, there is plenty of other work to do.

## LEADING LAY MINISTRIES

*The one who called you is holy, be holy yourselves in all your conduct.*<sup>vii</sup>

Regardless of purpose or structure, there are some simple steps that each volunteer ministry can take to increase its effectiveness

Chair. Unless otherwise designated by law, canon, or bylaws, the chair normally is appointed or otherwise designated by the rector. It is the role of the chair, working closely with clergy, to recruit, organize, lead, promote, and manage the committee to achieve its purpose.

Committee Recruitment. In some cases, law, canon, or bylaws determine committee composition. In most cases, however, the size, character, and composition of ministries and committees will be determined in consultation between the Rector and the chair. The rector may have firm ideas of who would best further the purpose of the committee, and the committee chair may have special insights at a personal and operational level of people with special skills or callings for a specific ministry.

The best way to recruit committee members is through personal contact. In order to get the people you want, just pick up the phone and extend an invitation. Do not expect blanket announcements in the *Sunday Bulletin*, *Cow Hollow Church News*, or the website to net the number or type of volunteers you want. Even emails are easy to overlook or ignore. Nothing is more effective than speaking to someone after church or calling personally. It is difficult to say no in person.

Before you recruit a committee, be very clear what you want its members to do. People will want to know the extent and nature of the commitments they are being asked to make. Be prepared to explain how the committee's work will forward the work of the parish and serve God in the world. How much time are you asking of each individual? Is it concentrated or spread out? Will there be committee meetings? Will members have a say in what the committee does and how it does it? Your ability to answer questions like these will help the prospective committee member make a thoughtful decision and avoid disappointment over unmet expectations in the future.

Organizing the Committee. Full committee involvement in planning and goal setting are important components of all successful ministries. It is especially critical that the members of pastoral, project, and outreach ministries not only buy-into the goals and strategies, but actually *own* them. That means that the members must participate openly in discussion and selection of goals, strategies, and activities.

Some outreach or program driven ministries may find it useful to adopt annual goals or work plans. These need not be long, complex documents, but simple statements of what the committee hopes to accomplish in a particular year, such as (a) reach more people, (b) expand membership to meet expanded need, or (c) decrease the number of times any single member must serve in a month. Such goals are especially important for ministries that are organized to provide specific services to specific populations. Similarly, a simple work plan need not be complicated, and will help ensure that the committee stays on track.

Per the above discussion, it is important that functioning committees, particularly those in pastoral and outreach ministries, actually meet. Meetings need not be often, perhaps quarterly; never meet because you *are supposed to* meet. What is most important is not what happens at meetings but what happens between them. However, a committee that does not meet at all is not a committee and will soon lose direction,

momentum, and members. Use meetings to build shared vision, measure progress, identify obstacles and surprises, craft solutions, and (if necessary) alter direction.

Collaboration. It is very easy to see a ministry's mission in isolation, especially when people are further separated by the Sunday service they normally attend. But, the power of collaboration extends beyond individuals within a committee to the effectiveness of diverse ministries seeing opportunities to work together to the benefit of the entire parish family. In basic terms, this is known as leverage, and it requires three things to work. First, committee chairs must be willing to look for opportunities to work together. Second, those committee chairs must approach and ask other committee chairs. And finally, all chairs must be open to opportunities to respond positively and not simply recoil into automatic shutdown when approached. It helps to ask two simple questions before responding to a potential opportunity for collaboration: 1) Will it further God's work in this world; and 2) will it serve the parish family of St. Mary the Virgin? If the answer to either one of those questions is positive, then no litany of logistical challenges, operational details, or interpersonal relationships should get in the way.

## CREATING NEW LAY MINISTRIES

*And I heard the voice of the Lord saying, "Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?" Then I said, "Here I am! Send me."<sup>viii</sup>*

God may be calling you to a ministry that is new to you or your church. Establishing a new ministry can be a daunting task in many ways. How will others respond to the ministry? How will they receive your personal call to lead it? Are you really the right person? Isn't there someone else to lead who is more qualified or has more time or is more eloquent or is better connected? It may help to ask two simple questions. First, does this ministry serve God through Christ on earth? Second, if not you, who? Isaiah said, "Here I am!" So can you.

How does one establish a new ministry within an Episcopal parish? Here are some basic guidelines.

Authority. The rector has sole authority to approve, establish, reorganize, and dissolve committees and ministries that are not otherwise required or established by law, canons, or by-laws. In some cases, the rector or other clergy may initiate a new ministry and seek lay leadership to implement it. In other cases, lay members of the parish may seek to organize a ministry to address a perceived need. Any lay leader wanting to establish a new parish ministry is advised to consult early and often with the rector. The rector will be most likely to support those proposals that (a) address parish priorities, (b) do not assume that the clergy or someone other than the lay presenter will organize the ministry, and (c) for which there is a rational implementation plan, including organized structure and budget projections.

Parish Priorities. These may be found in a variety of documents and formats: strategic plans, parish profiles, reports to and of the annual business meeting of the parish, and Vestry and clergy communications with the parish. The lay leader must be prepared to clearly articulate the perceived need that the ministry will address in order to explore its priority in discussions with the rector. How will the proposed new ministry further God's work on earth and serve the parish of St. Mary the Virgin? Words like "ought" and "should" are of little value when presenting and prioritizing prospective new ministries.

Responsibility. It is unfair and not productive to suggest a new ministry for someone else to implement. The person who presents a potential new ministry must be prepared to own it.

Planning. New ministries are most likely to succeed if they are thoroughly planned, including initial recruitment, organization, definitions of authority and responsibility, measurements of service, and budget. What constitutes "success?" What obstacles might arise, and how will they be addressed? How will new leadership be identified, recruited, and trained? It is essential to know how you are going to present and promote the new ministry within the congregation; in secular terms, prepare a marketing plan. It is helpful to plan four or five years out in order to explore the needs and nature of a continuing, evolving ministry.

Budget. Every ministry has cost, whether time, space, and/or money. Consider and present these needs thoughtfully. If cash expenditure is required, the Vestry must approve and budget annually. The budget is a quantitative statement of qualitative goals. Therefore, be prepared to tie budget income and expenses to the ministry, itself. Five-year projections will help the rector and Vestry understand the extent of the commitment that the parish is being asked to make.

Ancillary Requirements. What other clergy, parish staff, or lay leadership will the proposed ministry need to involve in order to succeed? Will you need parish rooms or offices? Will you need specific equipment or tools, like flip charts or DVD players? Be careful not to assume additional resources without identifying and requesting them.

**SUCCEEDING WITH GRACE**  
**BASIC OPERATING PRINCIPLES FOR SUCCESSFUL MINISTRIES**

*“Which commandment is the first of all?” Jesus answered, “The first is, ‘Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one; and you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength.’ The second is this, ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ There is no other commandment greater than these.”<sup>i</sup>*

- The purpose of every ministry is to do God’s work through Jesus in the world.
- Ministry is a call, not a task.
- The way to hell really is paved with good intentions. Successful ministries require and deserve thought, time, and effort.
- Begin and end every meeting with a prayer.
- Do not expect people to do what they have not been asked to do.
- Ask. Never say “no” for another person.
- Word of mouth trumps every other form of communication. General mass announcements in any form seldom stir a soul to action.
- If you are using parish space, reserve it with the parish administrator. Never assume that you have the space without checking the parish calendar.
- Always assume positive motives.
- Mistakes are not bad; they are just mistakes.
- Every bottle has a neck. Be prepared to wriggle through.
- The smaller the turf, the more vigorously it is protected. Expect it, accept it, and plan for it.
- Send hand-written thank you notes. Often.
- Have fun and fill your soul.

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<sup>i</sup> Matthew, 9:37-38

<sup>ii</sup> *Cow Hollow Church News (CHCN)*, Fall 2014, p. 7

<sup>iii</sup> Psalms, 138:8

<sup>iv</sup> Paul’s First Letter to the Corinthians, 12:4-6

<sup>v</sup> Paul’s Letter to the Ephesians, 4:15-16.

<sup>vi</sup> Luke, 10:10-11

<sup>vii</sup> 1 Peter, 1:15

<sup>viii</sup> Isaiah, 6:8

<sup>ix</sup> Mark, 12:28-31