



Bent, Embraced, Encircled

Hope Morgan Ward

On retreat at Iona Abbey, we engaged in a leisurely, deep, holy conversation about a Biblical character that intrigued all of us – the bent-over woman. Each of us identified with her, had been inspired by the story in a unique and personal way, carried her in our hearts.

The next morning, during Sunday worship in Iona Abbey, the leader of the Iona Community rose to preach. She read the appointed text from Luke 13. My friends and I eyed one another with wonder as she proceeded to preach a brilliant sermon on the once-bent-over woman now healed by Jesus and walking straight.

After the service, I approached her and delighted in telling her of our conversation the night before. She responded with a lilt in her voice, “As George MacLeod (the force behind the founding of the Iona Community in 1938) said, ‘If you think that is a coincidence, I wish you a boring life!’” We laughed together.

Convergence is anything but boring. Convergence is invigorating. It wakes us up, it energizes us. It piques our curiosity.

Our attentiveness to convergence opens us to God’s fresh word, God’s new beckoning, God’s onward direction. Watchfulness for convergence is a key to healing among our clergy and our churches, wherever there is a flowing together of streams – streams of personality, streams of ideas, streams of experience, even streams of stress, accusation or avoidance.

Paul wrote in Ephesians of the holy convergence of truth and love, “Speaking the truth in love, let us grow up in every way unto Christ. . .”

As we follow the stream of truth, we will see the dramatic splashes of truth against rocks of resistance and counter-flowing streams of experience and opinion. It is convergence no longer. It is conflict, pure and dramatic and frightening.

What happens when opposing views meet?

What happens when the flow of heritage meets the flow of vision?

What happens when we close our eyes to the obvious and awaken in a battlefield?

What happens when clergy, unskilled in negotiating conflict, do more harm than good?

What happens when “it is not working,” obviously not working but all are too polite to name the reality.

What happens when we have been bent for long years and rendered unable to look outward and upward and forward?

When it is not working, clergy ask for a move, a new appointment. When it is not working, churches ask for a pastoral change. We sink in the morass of a connectional swap-meet, hoping a new match will work a Lazarus-like resurrection with a new community emerging from the grave or a new leader standing with burial clothes falling away.

There is another way forward. In the stirred up waters of fear and anxiety and conflict, there is the possibility of circling and watching together for convergence. What has brought us here? What have we ignored or dismissed or denied? What part do all the participating persons and communities play in the discord? What are the living streams to which we might pay attention so that the power of God might work a miracle in and among us?

It is difficult to identify the place where disturbance stops and convergence starts, where convergence ends and disturbance begins. They meet each other, dance with each other, inform each other. Attentiveness to convergence can bring us, in these difficult places and spaces and times in our shared life, to a better tomorrow.

What we seek, in the depth of our connectional soul, is the capacity to speak the truth in love. The Ephesian phrase expresses in lovely resonance the convergence: truth and love, love and truth. In our deep heart, we know that this convergence is not easy. It is not gentle. The truth can hurt. It can feel antithetical to love. It can anger us, rising up in a tide that overwhelms friendship and affection.

As Sue Monk Kidd has so graphically written, “The truth will set us free, but first it will destroy the safe, sane way we live.”

How do we engage truth and love in difficult, conflicted, even explosive situations?

In the Mississippi Annual Conference, we have tried holy experimentation with configurations of persons seeking to allow the convergence of truth and love. Where we have had difficult stresses in the lives of congregations and pastors, we have configured around clergy in difficulty a circle of clergy colleagues for required work, required common life, required conversation. The sister or brother among the clergy who is experiencing difficulty in the practice of ministry is required by the bishop to meet regularly

with this group. The clergy colleagues are chosen by the bishop and district superintendent in dialogue with the one around whom the group will gather. The work of the colleague group is confidential.

The only reporting is the degree of progress the colleague group senses is being made. The colleague group encircles, creating place and time and spiritual space, inviting the convergence of truth and love.

These colleague groups have, in some instances, become circles of trust, love, truth, grace and growth. No two colleague groups are alike, in personalities brought together, in issues for attentiveness and work, in forward progress sensed. These groups are, for us, signs of hope, our best effort to date in addressing clergy under pressure or criticism and in helping some clergy persons work through personal, ecclesial, ethical, and spiritual issues.

We are intrigued by continued holy experiments with circles of trust. We know that the problems and stresses and pressures of clergy leadership and congregational life are best seen as systemic, organic puzzles. The issues are not removed by focusing only on a clergy person considered ineffective according to the subjective or objective assessment of congregations.

It is our hope to move from an elephant in the room to a community encircling the stress of this time and this place. We believe that the wisdom we need to coach and mentor one another forward is among us, present in laity and in clergy.

Our calling converges with our opportunity. Our privilege converges with our responsibility. Our challenge converges with the human resources in our churches, our communities, our districts, our conferences.

Clergy effectiveness is directly tied to the spiritual ability to seek, to see, to receive the holy messages of convergence. Clergy effectiveness is linked to the capacity of clergy leaders to bring their spiritual resources, their life experiences, their best wisdom to the unique ministry opportunity and challenge of this day, this time, this place.

Clergy effectiveness is not linear. There is no recipe, no adequate instrument of assessment, no perfect template. Ministry is an art, and we recognize artisans of the priestly, pastoral and prophetic art. We see shepherding artistry in a gentle, timely, attentive, appropriate pastoral visit. We hear homiletic artistry in the Biblical sermon that gives evidence of active listening to the community and the ministry context. We feel priestly artistry in ministerial countenance that is peaceful, joyful, confident, hopeful.

We also see the lack of shepherding ministry in cars continually parked in front of parsonages, the lack of homiletic artistry in obvious visits to the preacher-help web page, the lack of sensi-

tivity in verbose and protracted visits with weary parishioners, the lack of confidence and power and peace.

As a district superintendent, I listened to a staff-parish committee express their desire in regard to their next pastor. The chairperson of the committee said it simply and powerfully, "Please send us a pastor who is less anxious than we are."

On occasion, a clergyperson will be described as "non-connectional."

Generally this means in our parlance that they support independent missionaries, resist leading churches in generosity toward appointments, and show little enthusiasm for charge conferences.

However, every clergyperson is connectional in a profound, even frightening way.

The life of the clergyperson connects with persons in the congregation and community. The connection may be positive and the connection may be negative, but it is always there.

Parker Palmer, in *Leading from Within*, makes it dramatically clear. "A leader is a person who must take special responsibility for what's going on inside. . . . lest the act of leadership create more harm than good."

The work before us is inward work. Inward work is required of bishops and district superintendents as we speak the truth in love with clergy within the circle of our concern, care, love and responsibility. Inward work is required in order to be courageous and gentle and strong and meek. It is difficult to speak the truth in love, to help those who are dysfunctional in ministry contexts or exhausted from work without respite over years or broken as a result of disappointment or illness or family dysfunction or deferred hopes. It is easier to shuffle, to procrastinate, to avoid.

The truthful, loving work of supervision and colleague accountability is essential to all who lead for the sake of all who follow. In colleague circles, all lead and all follow, all teach and all learn, all speak and all listen, all weep and all rejoice. The truthful, loving work of supervision and colleague accountability is by nature, personal yet not private. It is confident yet collegial. It may be for us all, as we embrace it, the secret that unlocks the power of our renewed energy as a connection of loving, truthful leaders and local churches.

In my experience of the episcopal office, the power of the gospel resounds with clarity more often than I am brave to trust it. The truth will set us free. □

Hope Morgan Ward is Bishop of the Mississippi Area.



**See Q. 83 and 84
Study of Ministry Report to 2008 General
Conference
www.gbhem.org (click "Final Study of
Ministry Report")**

Our attentiveness to convergence opens us to God's fresh word, God's new beckoning, God's onward direction. Watchfulness for convergence is a key to healing among our clergy and our churches.