

The purposes of the parish church

A draft chapter in an upcoming book from Ascension Press -- *An Energy Not Its Own: Three cycles of parish life and the purposes of the parish church*, by Michelle Heyne, OA & Robert Gallagher, OA

There are three intrinsic purposes of any parish church. We see them as:

1. The worship of God
2. The formation of the People of God for the sake of the world
3. Being a sanctifying presence in the broader community

These purposes aren't something we create ourselves. They are the innate, natural functions of the local microcosm of the Body of Christ, the parish church. We may engage them effectively or not. We may adequately understand the issues and dynamics within them or not. The parish may have a high level of commitment and competence in regard to them or not. They are our underlying reasons to exist regardless of whether we are effective, comprehending, and committed. Accepting them as our life and work changes a parish.

The parish that faithfully takes on the purposes does so as an extension of the Incarnation. The mission of God is our mission—holy unity, reconciliation. The ends of God are our ends—the Kingdom, “a commonwealth of free, responsible beings united in love.”^{vi} The parish's attention to the three purposes is about advancing that mission and those ends.

1. The worship of God

We become what we love and who we love shapes what we become.
-Clare of Assisi

Worship is what human beings do. It comes naturally to us. We are wired for adoration, awe, and reverence. Even our resistance to it illustrates its significance and attraction. Consider the related words—honor, adore, praise, devotion, thanksgiving, love. Also consider another related word—idolatry. That's a word that invites caution. We can worship something that is destructive, and we can worship in a manner that is obsessive or blind.

The worship of God is for its own sake. It's not about there being some benefit for yourself or for the world. Though there is a benefit. We enter into adoration and awe because in doing that we engage what we were created for—our “chief end is to glorify God and enjoy him forever.”^{vii} The payoff is intrinsic and apostolic. It is what makes sense of contemplative communities. Yet, for most people, contemplative communities are difficult to understand. Worship is hard to grasp because our transactional thinking takes us into another pathway.

There is in us a hunger to be in communion with God. To know unity and harmony. To lose our life so we might find our life. It's the other pathway.

Episcopalians, and all Anglicans, have a particular approach to worship in the Prayer Book Pattern or Threefold Rule of Prayer.

In *A Wonderful and Sacred Mystery: A Practical Theology of the Parish Church* we wrote, “The threefold Rule of prayer of Eucharist, Daily Office and Personal Devotions is one way of expressing the core of Prayer Book spirituality. It has been a significant understanding for many Anglican spiritual guides, including Thornton... Martin Thornton saw the threefold Rule as forming “one whole balanced organic life.” He asserted the basic logic behind “common prayer” in seeing that “private prayer is absolutely dependent on the Office and the Eucharist.” In *Christian Proficiency*, Thornton suggested that the Eucharist was “the living heart of the Body of Christ”; the Office was “its continual beat or pulse” and personal devotions were the “circulation of the blood which gives life and strength to its several members.” Evelyn Underhill writes of the Eucharist as life “laid on His altar as a sacrifice of love, and consecrated, transformed by His inpouring life, to be used to give life and food to other souls.” She describes the significance of the Office by noting that in “its recitation the individual or group enters the ancient cycle of prayer.” She sees personal devotions as being about the uniqueness of each person’s relationship with God.”

There are three elements we’d urge clergy to pay attention to as they arrange the parish’s worship life.

The Threefold Rule of Prayer mentioned above. This pattern of Eucharist, Daily Office, and personal devotions, especially reflection, is a place to begin. It easily forms the basis of a Rule of Life and offers a balanced life of prayer nurturing both what is most comfortable and what will usefully stretch us. And while the pattern is that of the whole church, the living of it depends on the baptized person making responsible decisions in regard to their own spiritual life. The priest needs to bring the pattern to the attention of members. We do that primarily as the parish lives the Threefold Rule in its life. Also, by providing training and guidance that helps people live the pattern in a manner that fits their personality and circumstances.

Living the Church Year is the tangible way in which the parish, and each person of the parish, are helped to live in relationship to the larger Christian life of worship. The starting place is in looking at the Book of Common Prayer. Notice that over 2/3 of the book is devoted to the Holy Eucharist and the Daily Office, the services themselves and psalms, collects, and lectionaries that support the liturgies. So, do the Eucharist and the Offices. Then take note of the Calendar of the Church Year and fold into parish life the Eucharist on all Sundays and Principle Feasts (done on the day or the eve), and our two Fast days and Days of Special Devotion. Finally, add in the appointed Holy Days to celebrate with Eucharist or Office.

As is true in any effective pastoral and ascetical strategy the parish needs provide the fullness of the pattern and the individual needs to accept responsibility to understand and live it in their own life. Too many parish clergy have been seduced into a very partial expression of the church year by a mix of multitudinismⁱⁱⁱ and personal convenience. So, learn to be joyful even if only one or two arrive to join you on the Feast of the Ascension. Have that talk with your family that you’ve avoided about the need for a slight change in the family routine so the parish might more fully worship.

Awe and adoration is the ground that nurtures faithful Christian action. We have long been convinced of Evelyn Underhill’s assertion that our service must be grounded in awe and adoration. So, a few words about awe and adoration.

Awe is a gift. God gives the gift. We don't order up awe at the check-out window. Adoration is different. We can decide to adore. We can engage in adoration in our common prayers and in our personal devotions. We may not be able to decide how much passion we offer in those acts; but we can decide to do the acts. Awe is a gift.

Awe and adoration are “partly about focusing on the world outside of your head and rediscovering that it is filled with marvelous things that are not you.”^{iv} That’s a definition from a medical practitioner. It’s an acknowledgment that the experience is common in humanity. For the Christian it is a necessity for our journey into the pathways of Grace, into the Divine. In regard to our immediate concern, it suggests the need for the worship of the gathered assembly, and the daily practices of the faithful, to have woven into them experiences that will evoke awe and adoration in some of us, on occasion. There are so many ways—beauty, rhythm, light and darkness, silence, music, sacred words, icons and crosses, processions, incense, well delivered homilies. In all that we are not trying to produce a feeling or state of being. We are opening the door. What the Holy Spirit uses to draw the person outside themselves for a time will vary from one person to another and one time to another. On occasion there will be moments when almost the entire congregation will share the experience.

There are two aspects of this we’d like to give special attention to.

First, the parish can help its members know awe and adoration as it happens in their lives. Asking them to identify and reflect on previous experiences of awe is possible the best way to do this. Here are three questions that may assist such reflection:^v

- “When have you felt intense wonder or amazement, truly in awe of your surroundings?”
- “When have you felt overwhelmed by greatness, or by beauty on a grand scale?” and
- “When have you been stopped in your tracks, transfixed by grandeur?”

Second, entering into awe and adoration will change us. It will change the parish. It will change individuals. Teilhard de Chardin saw that “to adore is to pray toward ... It is to go out of oneself, to commune with a Reality larger, deeper, purer than one’s own being. Adoration is an enhancement of one’s being, though paradoxically this comes about through going out of oneself.” An enhancement of one’s being.

2. The formation of the People of God for the sake of the world

Spiritual formation prepares us for a life in which we move away from our fears, compulsions, resentments, and sorrows, to serve with joy and courage in the world, even when this leads us to places we would rather not go. Spiritual formation helps us to see the face of God in the midst of a hardened world and in our own heart.

— Henri J.M. Nouwen, “Spiritual Formation: Following the Movements of the Spirit”

Three background thoughts about formation

The Scriptures have a great deal to say about maturity, sometimes called perfection. We are especially fond of this--“Beloved, we are God’s children now; what we will be has not yet been revealed. What we do know is this: when he is revealed, we will be like him, for we will see him as he is. And all who have this hope in him purify themselves, just as he is pure.” (1 John 3:2–3)

We are something right now—God’s children. That’s a place to begin. In a world often obsessed by issues of identity we hear that our primary identity is that we are a child of God. And we don’t get to know a lot more than that. So, we are invited to humility. And there’s one more piece. In the end we will be like him.

Thomas Merton tells us that “Our vocation is not simply to be, but to work together with God in the creation of our own life, our own identity, our own destiny—to work out our own identity in God, which the Bible calls 'working out salvation ' is a labor which requires sacrifice and anguish, risk and many tears.” Merton touches on all the secondary identities of our life. He assumes a process in which we and the Holy Spirit are engaged in a common effort. Being in the likeness of Christ will be different for each person. John Macquarrie sees the end as “a commonwealth of free, responsible beings united in love.” We are formed to be instruments of God’s love.

Our third thought is that parishes often make two interrelated errors. We don’t really equip people in the tradition of spiritual practice, and neither do we have an adequate spirit of innovation and experimentation regarding spiritual practice.

You may have noticed that taken together our three thoughts suggest a kind of spiritual polarity. We are part of something larger than ourselves and we are unique. We invite you to hold that in mind as a few ideas about what the parish can do in the formation of people.

An overall strategy for adult formation

We suggest three elements to consider as central to a parish strategy: 1) an adult foundations course, 2) retreats and quiet days, and 3) spiritual guidance.

Most parishes can make good use of an adult foundations program. This is a substantial educational offering that grounds people in the thinking and practices of the Christian faith as lived in the Episcopal Church and Anglican tradition. It can serve multiple purposes. A Foundations Course offers adults an opportunity to engage the faith and practice of the church as adults. It may serve as a refresher for some as well as taking on the role of an “inquirers” class, it may also be used for adult baptismal or confirmation instruction.

A foundations course is a resource for setting loose an energy in individuals and the parish that can stir new thinking and behavior and may help move some people into a more Apostolic expression of faith and practice. There needs to be enough substance to it that it has the potential of taking participants to a new place in their spiritual life. We have been in parishes that have nine or ten sessions; about 25 hours of class time and other churches with modules that extend over three years.^{vi}

Nurturing the inner life with a few offerings each year. A yearly weekend retreat at a convent, quiet days and confessions in Advent and Lent, possibly a two session school of prayer that introduces people to a particular form of prayer. These offerings are likely to attract smaller numbers. So, again it’s important for clergy to not get caught up in multitudinism.

Spiritual guidance is the third element. There’s a need for resources to help individuals make use of practices that align with their temperament, gifts, and circumstances. As that task requires

experimentation and reflection the need is for settings, whether in groups or with individuals, that provide the necessary psychological safety alongside competent guidance. Some have made use of a pre-Lent two-session program assisting people to reflect on their current rule of life and to revise it to fit changes in the person's life. Groups can be very useful but a bit tricky to set up. How are we to create groups that allow those of a more Apostolic faith to not be forced to set aside their own needs while the group attend to the less mature members with different issue to address. In some dioceses we find ourselves paralyzed by norms forbidding priest from meeting with individuals more than a limited number of times. It's an expression of the safety anxiety all institutions face. A few immature or predatory clergy use such times to develop inappropriate relationships. So, all clergy must be restricted. The difficulty is that their parish priest is the person that apostolic and progressing members are willing to make use of as part of their spiritual life. So, in effect we undercut the spiritual life of individuals and the proper shaping of the parish community because we are afraid something awful will happen.

Above we mentioned the need in spiritual guidance to live within the ascetical tradition of the church in a manner that fits with their temperament, gifts, and circumstances. Just another word about circumstances. There are two dimensions we would emphasize. The first is about the logistics involved. For example, the living of the threefold rule must take into account a set of practical matters. Some people must work on Sunday. So that person's weekly Eucharist might need to be a midweek early evening celebration. The priest may need to help the person see that possibility. Another person may say, "I have no silence in my life. It's impossible to reflect." Invite them to explore how they get perspective about things. That may be something that can be enlarged. Or maybe they need assistance in thinking through how the lack of any silence is related to the person's unwillingness to have a difficult conversation with family members or an employer. The second aspect is about the apostolate side of their cycle between baptismal renewal and daily life. Spiritual practice is in a relationship with the person's life with family and friends, in workplace and civic life. For many people there is a tension between those elements of life. They compete with one another. Many also experience time needed for spiritual renewal as part of that competition. There's usually no correct answer to the tension. But the priest can be a generous listener and assist the person in making decisions about how to best approach the dilemma for now and to accept that with humility rather than guilt or frustration. Finally, the stuff of daily life may invite practices that integrate themselves with the church's Rule, e.g., special intentions at the offertory, intercessions and thanksgivings during the Daily Office, and reflection on how we may serve, evangelize and be stewards among the groups and institutions we are part of.

We want to keep in mind that it is the entire life of the parish that forms people in Christ. Celebrating the Eucharist and saying the Office, how we conduct meetings, how we listen seeking a collective voice alongside that of individuals, a community of forgiveness and humility, a climate that is both accepting and challenging—these and a hundred other parts of the parish's culture will form people even more than the formal programs we offer. A parish that has a Sunday morning experience that is holy and joyful, and a daily offering of the Office by a few in the chapel, is more likely to form prayerful and joyful people than one that has just a Sunday Eucharist. The parish's culture is the air we breathe and the soil in which we grow.

3. Being a sanctifying presence in the broader community

There is nothing so contagious as holiness, nothing more pervasive than Prayer. This is precisely what the traditional Church means by evangelism and what distinguishes it from recruitment.

–Martin Thornton

The neighborhood around the parish is the most common community of people external to the worshipping body a church is in relationship with. There are other relationships with external communities for many parishes. It may be an entire town or city or a vocational community such as the performing arts or medical practitioners.

These are communities the parish interacts with, has a relationship with. Sometimes there are a few people in the parish who are part of those communities. Robert was once vicar of a parish that had a strong relationship with the jazz and performing arts communities. Michelle was a member of a parish that became a haven for people suffering and dying during the AIDS crisis. There are churches connected to the volunteer fire company and others to the medical community. Most churches have an impact on the neighborhood in which they sit. When Robert was vicar of an inner-city Philadelphia parish in the 70s, he would hear stories from neighbors about how during the Depression that parish used its endowment fund to provide coal for those without heat. It was 40 years later, and the stories were still alive in that neighborhood.

That parish offers another aspect of “sanctified presence.” There was something of an uproar when some new people in the neighborhood tried to get the city to order the church to not ring the bells in the morning. There were petitions and letters to the editor all to the effect, “Leave our bells alone.” For most, the sound of the bells sanctified life. In a parish with a relationship with the jazz community when the priest would stop in at one of the jazz clubs’ musicians would wander over to say a few words about their lives, “My mother died last week,” “Marge has cancer,” “I’m going to be playing at the Tavern tomorrow, why don’t you stop in.” In the middle of a jazz mass the bass man had tears flowing down his face; asked about it later he said, “I never felt my music being accepted by God before today.”

How is your parish a blessing for some community outside itself? A witness to the Gospel—“So this would be more about the fact that, at the center of things, there’s a secret or mystery, and it is joyful.”^{vii} Here, in this neighborhood there is the Joyful Mystery.

Saint Mary the Virgin in NYC has a flood of people coming to the church on Ash Wednesday to be reminded that they are dust. Many bless pets on the Feast of St. Frances. Parishes process through the streets on certain feast days.

It may be useful to think of this sanctifying presence in terms of relationship rather than service. Too many parishes have a semi-conscious image of themselves as service providers. It’s as though doing for others legitimates their existence. Relationship seems a more accurate word. In as much as the parish is a people and place of prayer, a people and place in relationship with God, that will flow into the parish’s relationship with the neighborhood or town or other external community of people.

A second way of thinking that helps is to focus on listening not assuming what others need or want from the church. Bishop Peter Eaton wrote this in a reflection in 2020. “Archbishop William Temple: *The Church exists primarily for the sake of those who are still outside it.* In my experience as a parish priest, our most effective special ministries emerged not when we decided what our wider community needed, but when we got to know that wider community, listened, and then found ways in which we could be partners in service. Then the ministry really *worked*. When clergy and lay leaders know and are known by the local mayor and council, service agencies, social justice advocacy groups, neighboring

schools and colleges, nearby hospitals, and (yes) even the police and fire departments, all kinds of partnerships become possible, and our contribution is so much more effective. And in my experience, welcome.”

Those relationships may be organic or created, seen or unseen. The parish’s task is always about knowing the people as being in the Divine Image, and so, as being worthy of respect and reverence. Those parishes that process through the streets on Passion Sunday, or their feast day, are engaged in this sanctifying relationship. The incense of such processions is the acknowledgment of God’s presence in that community.

It is knowing that the neighborhood or city partakes in the sanctity of the Holy City. So, we intercess for them. In the Eucharist we offer a special intention for that relationship. We live as a community of daily prayer in the midst of them.

Being a sanctifying presence can be seen as one expression of “Vicarious Faith.” They may only come to the Eucharist when there is a jazz mass because they like jazz. They may spend every Monday night in the parish hall drinking coffee and acknowledging their addiction. Their children get sent to the summer day camp. They are in line for food vouchers each week. They look forward to the ringing of the bells at noon.

The church building is another sanctifying presence in a community. Some years ago, St. Brenden’s Church on Deer Isle, Maine took great pride in renting space for the Sunday Eucharist from other churches. That allowed them to give away funds to support a variety of good causes including many on the island. Apart from the logistical difficulties that created regarding the time of worship and the possibilities for social and educational functions, they discovered that many of the long term residents on the island didn’t see them as being a real part of the community. Some of that is the Maine thing about “people from away.” But another part had to do with not owning property. They were seen as not having the same stake in the community as others. They now own their own building.

Another facet of property is seen in the impact on communities and neighborhoods when a church closes. It’s much the same when communities’ close libraries and schools or consolidate firehouses. There are, of course, reasons for taking such action. But all too often the decision making process fails to consider the devastating impact on the broader community. The sense of loss and decline. Feelings of frustration and abandonment. All too often we get driven by economic concerns and fail to see the anti-sacramental message we are sending.^{viii}

We’re fond of this quote by Sydney Evans, onetime Dean of Salisbury Cathedral.

And all this built to provide a canopy over the acts of a worshipping community of believers, an organization of space in which movement and music, word and sacrament, can be presented with dignity befitting an action which is nothing less than a celebration of the Christian understanding of the meaning and mystery of being alive and being human. A cathedral is a theatre for a kind of liturgical dance to the music of time and the hidden harmonies of God. A cathedral is both a protest and a proclamation. ...a protest against all ideologies and political systems which deny or diminish the spirituality, dignity and true liberty of human persons, and a proclamation of the Christian Way as an invitation to pilgrimage, an offered route by which human beings can find help in their search for the answer to their fundamental questions: 'Who am I?' 'What may I hope?' 'What should I do?'

At the heart of it is the parish's life of prayer. The relationship is sanctified because the parish is a place and people of prayer. Martin Thornton wrote, "There is nothing so contagious as holiness, nothing more pervasive than Prayer. This is precisely what the traditional Church means by evangelism and what distinguishes it from recruitment." The stream of redemption power flows out from the parish in its life of prayer and service. The organic nature of that was noted by Father Kenneth Leech who wrote of the parish as a "disciplined, prayerful, listening Christian community." That apostolic center grounds the church in the pathways of grace. And that in turn makes the service offered the community something deeper and more real than church social work.

A case: St. Mary's on the Waterfront

St. Mary's on the Waterfront is a city parish in the broad church, liberal tradition. When they began an intentional process of shaping the parish, they knew they had problems. The case is real, the names have been changed. This was a neighborhood with a significant poor population and a high crime rate. The parish offered several programs that served the poorer members of the community. But the area also drew people from all parts of the city for the attraction of the waterfront and an arts venue.

The parish had a multi-year commitment to be in joint worship and ministries at its location with a Lutheran Church. They also were engaged in a variety of social service type ministries, often in cooperation with community agencies.

The neighborhood was about to be gentrified. In a few years there would be hundreds of new condo and apartment units, a major brand hotel, new office buildings and small businesses. They faced major changes in the areas character and demographics.

When we get to the chapter on the Parish Life Cycle, we'll look at their shift from static or decline into a process of renewal. And in the Parish Relationship Cycle chapter we'll explore two issues they needed to deal with if their renewal was to gain momentum.

The worship pattern was that of many churches—two celebrations on Sunday and one mid-week. There was no public offering of the Daily Office nor was there any significant guiding of members in their personal devotions. The formation of parishioners was limited to their participation in the worship and community life of the parish and an occasional educational program. There was a sanctifying presence through social service and occasional arts offerings for the community

The Three Primary Tasks of a Diocese

While we're looking at the three purposes of a parish it might be useful to add a few words on the primary tasks of a diocese. We see three areas that constitute the essential work of a bishop and a diocese.

1. The renewal and revitalization of parish churches.

The bishop needs to help all the parishes be communities that live and worship to the glory of God and in which the baptized are formed as instruments of God's love in their lives in families, the workplace, with friends and in civic life. And each parish is a vibrant sanctifying presence in its community.

2. Engaging the region of the diocese

The diocese can work for justice and compassion, in that state or city, on its own, as well as in cooperation with parishes and in collaboration with other denominations.

3. Connecting the diocese with the larger church

The bishop is an essential connection with the national and international life of the Episcopal Church and the Anglican Communion. The bishop also has a responsibility to help parishes be grounded in the Anglican ethos.

There are also all sorts of odds and ends a bishop may need to deal with, but these three things are the core. And the renewal and revitalization of parish churches is the primary task. The work of a diocesan staff and the various committees and working groups of a diocese can often increase their focus and effectiveness if they explore how the work of that group relates to one of the primary tasks.

ⁱ John Macquarrie, *Principles of Christian Theology*, 2nd ed, p. 360

ⁱⁱ From The Westminster Shorter Catechism written in 1646 and 1647 by the Westminster Assembly, a synod of English and Scottish theologians and laymen intended to bring the Church of England into greater conformity with the Church of Scotland.

ⁱⁱⁱ Multitudinism is Martin Thornton's term for when the church focuses on numbers. **He thought it was a common pattern of thinking among clergy that failed to face the fact of a parish being made up of people at different places in their spiritual life and ended up pretending that the parish is a uniform mass. Thornton wrote, "Multitudinism has reduced Christianity to a conventional mediocrity, in which the hard things, and consequently the inspiring things, have no place."** His three strata approach of Remnant, Incarnational and Natural Religion was a way to account for a diversity within the parish that allowed for the proficient Christian to be at prayer with the immature or tentative Christian. The Shape of the Parish Model is a similar approach.

^{iv} Virginia Sturm, associate professor of neurology at U.C.S.F. In NYT's article "An 'Awe Walk' Might Do Wonders for Your Well-Being." 10/6/20

^v From: Overwhelmed by Greatness: The Psychological Significance of Awe in Christian Experience and Formation - Biola University Center for Christian Thought / The Table - Biola University Center for Christian Thought / The Table

^{vi} For more on Foundations Courses see *Fill All Things: The Dynamics of Spirituality in the Parish Church*, Robert Gallagher, 2008. p. 183- 187

^{vii} Susanna Clark in the *New Yorker*, September 14, 2020

^{viii} The Episcopal Church fled many of our cities between 1940 and 1990. The rationale was largely economic. And there is some truth in that which had to be faced. We believe what was more significant was a failure of virtue. We lacked the humility, patience, courage, and persistence necessary to stay in the city. We lacked "an inquiring and discerning heart, the courage to will and to persevere, a spirit to know and to love (God), and the gift of joy and wonder in all (God's) works." (From Holy Baptism BCP p. 308). One example, in Philadelphia between 1940 and 1980 the Episcopal Church closed an average of one parish each year. You can find that story here - www.orderoftheascension.org/stay-in-the-city