

2005 National Conference on Tentmaking/Bi-vocational Ministry

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Edited by Davis Fisher

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Panel Presentation

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After seminary, for my first substantial job after a couple of false starts, I worked at a parish in Michigan where I was also a school chaplain and also had my first experience in teaching. So for several years I was working for one institution but I had a split job where I was working on the parish staff and also on the school staff at Cranbrook. During that time I decided I wanted to go back to Los Angeles where I was from and go to graduate school and work part-time in a congregation. I found a congregation that was open, and it happened to be in Malibu. (Somebody had to be there, so I figured it might as well be me or else it would be somebody less deserving.) So for about seven years in the 1980s, I was the vicar of St. Aidan's Church in Malibu and a graduate student at UCLA and also teaching in the English department part-time in the later stages of my graduate work.

In 1989 I got my Ph.D. and the bishop then, Bishop Fred Borsch, really wanted me to go to be rector of an extremely troubled and problematic parish in a town called La Pinata. That was a parish that had fired every rector that had ever been there and the last two had been involved in really serious sexual misconduct – really serious and disturbing sexual misconduct. So, being young and a little arrogant, I thought, “Well, sure, I can do this,” so I went and I was there for one year. I'm the only person ever to leave that congregation under his own steam by the way, because my two successors also got involved in sexual misconduct and were fired. I believe in family systems by the way but that's another talk.

Halfway through that year I said to myself and to my wife, Kathy, “I'm gonna' die if I have to stay here...I've got to leave.” And I went to the Bishop who is a close friend of mine but at the time was a little annoyed with me. He had already talked me into sticking it out another few months but I said, “I just gotta' get outta' here and this is gonna kill me and I will become a drunk or a sex addict if I don't get out of this place. It's really toxic and you should close the place down and sell it with salt as far as I'm concerned.”

My comments were not taken seriously, so I quit. I had a new Ph.D. in English, I now had several years of teaching experience (both at the high school and the college level), and I got a job at an independent school, Oakwood School in North Hollywood, as an English teacher. I also got a part-time job at UCLA on the faculty there and I became a tentmaker for about four years.

Two interesting things about that. I went to the Diocese and said, “Okay, here I am. I have years of parish experience and I'd be happy to do a storefront church or something like that.” No one could think of anything to do with me so, I went to All Saints, Pasadena as a parishioner. Basically I was a kind of walk-on on the staff for four years. I was a volunteer. So I was a tentmaker myself. I was teaching English during the day and on weekends I was at church and I was doing some programmatic stuff. I basically did that as, again, my gift to the church; I was

not on the staff. Eventually, I got on the staff and worked there for eleven years and then went on.

So I had about four years where I was a self-supporting English teacher by day and a priest by night. There was good news and bad news in that, and I really do hear both of them. The good news was that it was enormously freeing for me to be able to earn my living aside from the church. It gave me a sense of my own worth and dignity, honestly, and it also gave me a sense of freedom in terms of what I could take on and what I could not take on. That was wonderful. It was also very interesting to be called on in the stewardship campaign for a pledge, which hadn't happened to me as an adult. I experienced the church from the pew side of the ledger for awhile and that was helpful I think for me in my later ministry. So it was a really good experience for me.

There's a wonderful story of John Sturgess, the film director, when he was directing all these movies for Steve McQueen. Steve McQueen got very difficult later in his life and John Sturgess just said, "You know, I'm too old and too rich to put up with this," and he quit. I'm not too rich, but there are times when I feel like when I get to the limit of what I can take institutionally – where I know I have something else I can go do – it really gives me a sense of security that's helpful.

The bad news was that I fell out of the system. When you are the rector of a parish, you get a letter like once a week from the Diocese. When you are not the rector of a parish and you are not on the parish staff, you get two kinds of letters. You get the, "I am sorry to tell you the Reverend 'so and so' died," and you get the, "I am sorry to tell you that under the provisions of Title IV, Canon 'so and so,' I have deposed, suspended or inhibited the Reverend 'so and so.'" Those are the only communications you get from the Diocese when you fall off that full-time parish list. So I fell out of that system.

I also fell out of the clergy-support system, because the clericuses all meet during the week when I was in class, and colleague support groups all meet during the week when I was in class. And so for about four years I never could go to a clergy conference, I never could go to a diocesan meeting, I never could go to a deanery clericus, and I couldn't attend this colleague group that I was very much involved in.

So the good news was that as a tentmaker I had this great sense of my own worth and dignity and the bad news was that I had no one to share it with except my wife and family. Once I showed up at Diocesan convention where my name tag – that used to say "Gary Hall, St. Aidan's - Malibu" or "Gary Hall, St. George's - La Pinata" – just said "Gary Hall" with this big blank under it, like I just didn't exist institutionally.

Now that's the Diocese of Los Angeles. I know Bishop Persell runs things very differently and has a real different understanding of tentmaker ministry and all that, and I'm not now in the parish system and I do get more communication than I got in Los Angeles. So I know it's not true in every diocese, but there is this real sense of falling out of the system.

Now for the serious part of my conversation. Bill and I both ran for Bishop once – he won and I didn't. I ran for Bishop of Los Angeles in 1999 and that's the last time I'm going to do that. One of the reasons I'm not Bishop of Los Angeles is because someone asked me in the clergy question-and-answer session, "What will you do to guarantee job security?" This is the answer I gave and it was probably not the smartest answer I ever gave: "What I will do to guarantee job security is I will make sure there are the resources to help you retool to meet the challenges in

which you find yourself.” That wasn’t the answer they wanted. They wanted to hear that I will bail them out with corporation soul money and I wasn’t about to say that. And actually, the person that won the election wasn’t about to say that either.

My feeling, frankly, – which picks up on many of the things that have been said before – is that part of the challenge for theological education and for the church institutionally is to determine how we best help people prepare for not only small-church reality but also for a world that increasingly require one to size up the situation you’re in and operate effectively in it. I think that clergy (especially in small congregations, but in all congregations) really need to be able to make institutional partnerships with other agencies such as non-profits and school systems and health departments and things like that. One of the ways clergy can be effective is to have other kinds of professional training, like MSW degrees or like Masters in Education degrees or other teaching credentials, so that they can have a way of going into a community and having a way to have a professional life that is either self-sustaining or will complement their work on a parish staff.

The Episcopal divinity school, of which Bill Persell and I are both alumni, came very close this year to a joint operating agreement with Leslie University in Cambridge. It fell apart, but under that you were going to be able to – in five years – get an M.Div. degree and either an MSW degree or a Doctorate in Education. I have to say that the alumni from our own seminary screamed like stuck pigs – they thought this was a huge compromise for the wonderful integrity of the institution. I thought it was a wonderful idea. If you could send someone to seminary and in five years they could come out with two degrees and have a way to navigate the world professionally in addition to the church, would be a great gift. So one of my priorities at Seabury – since EDS is not going to do that – is to pursue conversations with Northwestern University and with Northeastern Illinois State University (The Chair of our Board of Trustees is the President of that institution.) to see how we can find ways to do that and also with ACTS (the Association of Chicago Theological Schools, which is our Chicago-area ecumenical consortium of eleven seminaries) – do an M.Div. in Spanish, which is another interesting thing.

Finally, fewer than one-half of the people going to seminary in the Episcopal church are going to seminaries like mine. (I’d be interested in what the Presbyterian statistics are.) Fewer than one half of people preparing for ordination in the Episcopal church are going to stand-alone Episcopal seminaries. They’re going either to ecumenical institutions or they’re in some sort of traditional non-diocesan program. I think that our institutions need to be connected to them. Also, I think that we need to find ways to – I really hadn’t thought about this before, but I’m really grateful for hearing about it today – to develop the idea of night time and weekend classes and also distance learning. The regulatory body of Episcopal theological seminaries makes that very difficult, but I think distance learning is the future for our church, not only in terms of people who can’t go to seminary 9-5 Monday through Friday, but also people who may be in places geographically that are distant from stand-alone residential seminaries.

So starting where I began in the homily, I think that we do live in a kind of omni-vocational context now. From my point of view where I stand as a President and Dean of a seminary, what I want to do is to reformulate what theological education looks like, if we don’t see the full-time parish priest as the normative product that we put out but as one of many options that we offer.