



About Baptismal Ministry

In the Diocese of Vermont, we use the term “baptismal ministry” to describe our committed response to live out our baptismal promises within God's Creation so all may be aware that we are in communion with a Living and Sustaining God. Baptismal ministry demonstrates, for us, the fullest expression of our commitment to the baptismal promises, including both the ministries we may have in our daily lives (teacher, parent, social worker, engineer, lawyer, bus driver, etc.) and the ministries we do within the church and/or on its behalf, clearly marked and named (deacon, minister of hospitality, acolyte, Eucharistic minister, etc.).

Baptismal ministry is a concept that has emerged over the past 60+ years in the wider church. This concept holds up the importance and value of both lay and ordained ministry. The call to full participatory lay ministry grew out of an increased understanding of the origins of the church and is reflected in the Baptismal Covenant.

The early church was predominantly led by laity. Congregations were small and met in local homes. Aquila and Prisca (I Corinthians), for example, are the leaders of their home church. Over the years, the church first added deacons, who were charged with the responsibility of disbursing food and money to the poor, widowed and orphaned and then added bishops, who were charged with the responsibility of “oversight.” Later, priests were added to function on behalf of the bishop. Gradually the role of the laity diminished as the clerical roles became more professionalized. Instead of being the primary ministers of the church, the duties of the laity were reduced to “work, pray and give for the spread of the kingdom”.

During the 1940s, scholars began research into existing and newly-discovered materials from the early church. Notable among these were the Dead Sea Scrolls and the Nag Hammadi libraries, which gave us access to accounts never before available. This research led to a liturgical renewal movement which resulted in most major denominations seeking to return to a more ancient and authentic liturgy. Key among the changes was the restoration of the centrality of baptism which now occurs on Sunday mornings (vs. the previous norm of private baptisms) and includes the Baptismal Covenant. In the Episcopal liturgy, the *1979 Book of Common Prayer* added five questions to the creedal statement that moved the expectations of the role of the laity from the catechism directly into the baptismal liturgy.

Over time the repetition of the Baptismal Covenant has informed the consciousness of the church and especially its laity. A movement began to grow in the 60s and 70s which was called “mutual ministry” or “total ministry” and, more recently, “baptismal ministry.” This movement called for the recognition of the importance of the laity in proclaiming the Good News, working for justice and peace, and respecting the dignity of every human being in their daily life and work (the Baptismal Covenant questions). Liturgical changes reflected this with the introduction of lay persons reading the

Scriptures and prayers, administering the chalice at the Eucharist, and taking the Eucharist to the sick and home-bound. Gradually the role of the laity in the leadership and governance of the church has grown as congregations realized that full participation means more than attending annual meeting.

Baptismal Ministry in Our Congregations

The movement of baptismal ministry has coincided with global realities that now engage the church. In the United States today, there is greater diversity in the choice of faith, and the option of “no faith” or at least minimal investment in any faith group is a choice of more and more Americans. While many Americans still believe in God and even identify themselves as Christians, the number attending and supporting the institutional church has been decreasing steadily for decades, resulting in churches with large building and staff expenses and fewer members, many with lower commitment levels and/or more demands on their time and resources. The end result is that almost half of all Episcopal churches cannot afford full-time clergy. The expanded role of the laity in those contexts becomes a necessity. In other parts of the church, the expanded role and ministry of the laity are a complement to the ministry of the paid clergy and staff, working in concert to carry out the mission of the church and the congregation.

In churches where funds, geographic isolation, size or other factors have impact, the model of a Local Ministry Support Team is attractive. This Team is comprised of people from a local congregation who have been identified by the congregation and put forth as public ministers to provide the primary congregational leadership. Congregations wanting to form a Local Ministry Support Team begin with a process of study and discernment. Most of these congregations are small, and a large portion of the congregation is involved in exploring this new model. The focus must be clearly on the theological principles of having a Team lead the congregation rather than just finding a solution to the “problem” of not being what a church is “supposed to be.” These congregations often spend a significant amount of time exploring the concept of baptismal ministry, encouraging every member to identify his or her own ministry—often already being exercised in the congregation. These individuals form a Covenant Group, which continues the discernment and study in partnership with the Diocese. Members of that Covenant Group may be ordained or licensed or commissioned, according to the needs and desires of the congregation worked out in consultation with the Diocese, creating the Local Ministry Support Team. These Teams generally are renewing—that is, over time new Teams are formed, incorporating some new members with some of the original group while others in the original group “rotate off” to exercise other ministries in the congregation and/or community.

In churches that can afford to hire staff to do most of the church-based ministry, we still recognize the theological imperative for all of us to be full participants in the life and ministry of the church. The vestry and rector, in consultation with other church leaders,

often choose to begin this process by addressing a “pinch point”—e.g., the need for a clearer organizational structure that will enable all those currently engaged in ministry to be supported in that ministry. Most congregations have a structure that is based on the model of a much smaller church where basically everyone reports to the rector. That’s fine when it is 5-10 groups or staff members; it is unmanageable when it is over 20. To improve oversight and guidance of the church’s many ministries, the vestry reorganizes the work into Ministry Areas or Teams such as liturgy, outreach, pastoral care, church administration, education stewardship, evangelism, etc. This means that members, working with two wardens and the rector, provide the primary ministry leadership in this parish. The vestry along with the rector and wardens will, of course, continue to provide the mission leadership (vision, direction, resources, etc.) for the parish.

The change to a Local Ministry Support Team or a shift in structure to Ministry Teams both expand the leadership core of members and improve the oversight structure of the church. While these changes in and of themselves increase “baptismal ministry,” there is much more work beyond just restructuring. This is the ongoing work of the church in the next few decades. Together we need to learn how to be the church in a non-Christian world, how to live faithful Christian lives, and how to do the work God has called us to do with the time, gifts and resources God has given us. Inviting every member of the church to discover and exercise his or her ministry is what baptismal ministry is about. Exercising our ministries in ways that enable all of us to be empowered by the Holy Spirit and thereby be instruments by which God calls others into relationship with God and us is what baptismal ministry is about.

This is not just a way to *organize* the church—it is a way to *be* the church. It is not just about making the organizational structure clearer and decision-making easier, nor is it about saving money or finding a way to have a priest in a remote area. It is mostly and most importantly about being the people of faith whom God has called us to be as God’s people gathered at this particular church. And it is only when we live into that reality that we will begin to know that God, acting in and through us, has the power to do much more than we can ask or imagine.

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