

Beginning Ministry Together

As a young adult, I traveled in Asia after finishing a year of studying Chinese in Taiwan. I was an introvert, so I went on my own, first to Hong Kong, and then to Thailand. Of course, I didn't speak the language, so my adventures in Thailand were a bit more haphazard than in Hong Kong.

One day, I bought a ticket for a bus out of Bangkok heading south to a town where I'd heard one could catch the ferry to the beautiful little island of Ko Samui. We left Bangkok at four in the afternoon, and were scheduled to arrive at the town in the early morning. Much later, somebody shook me awake from a fitful sleep. The bus had stopped, and the driver was gesturing to me to get off, this was my stop. It was 3 in the morning, and pitch black out the windows nearest me. I gathered my backpack and got off the bus, along with one or two other people. I was standing on an unpaved road, and all around, beyond the reach of two small lights hanging over the bus stop, was complete darkness. I decided to wait there until daylight, and then go find the waterfront. Then, the lights over the bus stop dimmed, and I realized they were going off.

I quickly chased down one of the others who had just disembarked and said the Thai words for dock and ferry. He pointed in one direction, shaking his head. Then I said the other word I knew in Thai – taxi. He pointed in a second direction, nodded encouragingly and then hurried off into the shadows. So, now in an unfamiliar, small town in a land where I could not speak the language, in complete darkness at 3 AM in the morning, with only the vaguest idea of where I was actually going, I set out to find the taxi stand. It turned out to be only a few blocks away, but until I saw the single bulb hanging over the little taxi booth, I was very afraid. When I got there, the driver didn't want to go to the dock. I couldn't tell why. So I waited.

Now, I am not trying to draw a parallel between that dark taxi stand where I felt so vulnerable and disoriented ... and this church ... – no...

No, but I did discover that night that some kinds of exploration are better done with others. If I was going to go jumping off buses in the deep of the night where I couldn't speak the language; if I was going to be exploring like that... – then far better to do it together with a companion or two.

We – you and I – are doing something similar. We are setting out on an adventure, a great exploration, as well. This is the beginning.

You – congregation and visitors here – and I, the new minister, together we are at the beginning of *our* story, let's call it "our shared ministry."

Now, *ministry* is anything any one does to bring to life the mission of the church.

Clearly, ministry is shared, because you are the leaders and participants in the committees and informal groups that do so much in service of the mission of this church: the ministry of this church is shared.

And this is the beginning of our ministry together, almost anything can happen...

*This is the beginning. The very beginning.
The first person narrator introduces himself.
The mezzo soprano stands in the wings.
The climbers are studying a map or pulling on their woolen socks.*

In the beginning, new energies gather and surge. Look at the recently repainted face of the church office building, the new sign in front of the church, the redesigned website, the return to church of some folks who had drifted away...

As the new energies grow, programs will come into being and flourish, the sense of purpose for this church will bubble up clear and fresh like a mountain spring as we do our ministry together.

At the beginning, we know how we want to do it... we know we want to be loving with each other, to communicate directly and openly. We know this is healthy. And I invite you to do just that, to come directly to me, bringing your concerns, your issues, and your hopes about the church of course, but also, especially, about my ministry with you.

This is the first part, where the wheels begin to turn.

And yet, and yet... it's also the middle.

It's the middle of each of our individual stories with all our longings and joys, sufferings and reconciliations. It's the middle of the story about the church, one that has survived, evolved for more than 300 years.

*Things have had time to get complicated.
Nothing is simple.
And the climbing party is stuck on a ledge
halfway up the mountain.*

In the middle, our experiences and assumptions come with us into the relationships we begin. This can pose challenges, as well as bring gifts.

In the middle, some people are tired, need a break, need someone else to take over. So, some of the ministries may languish. Here in the middle, other people need a plan, a method that will make order out of the chaos of each person just doing what they think needs to be done. Or the confusion of not knowing exactly *how* to get involved in the life of a changing church.

Here, in the middle, the action can suddenly swerve off in an outrageous direction, previously unheard of things spring up and develop momentum and energy, like the green sanctuary group and the new pastoral care team.

It's the middle. It's is the thick of things.

It's the middle of the story about a congregation that experienced a serious violation – the abuse of a child by an elder in the church – two decades ago. That story is of struggle and pain, and healthy, caring responses... a cleanly lined scar, reminding us of the overwhelming importance of protecting the most vulnerable among us, and also how resilient and upright this congregation is in its very DNA....

And yes, it is the end.

*The car running out of road,
the river losing its name in the ocean,
the climbers in their graves.*

For as new purposes and goals emerge from within the new shared ministry of this faith community, some of the old goals and purposes, however implicit, will die. It is the end, too, of certain ways of doing things, of some peoples' presence here, of "the way we have always done it." The coffee houses that were a fixture of this church are gone. The relationship with the African American church in Boston is ended. The social action committee has, at least for now, faded away.

And worship has changed, and will continue to do so because worship is always a dance of minister and congregation. A new minister necessarily brings a new way of preaching and leading worship, a new sense of what makes good worship and what works liturgically. And closing the book on any aspect of the old worship is always hard for someone.

There's no way around it – the end of something, change, is painful. We have to expect some of that discomfort as together we create this new shared ministry which also means the end of some things.

Some of the stories that converge here, at church, are ending, some are in their middle, and some are just beginning.

One story that is central to this church, one that is in its middle, is that of our mission. Although there is no concise articulation of the church's mission in the bylaws or elsewhere, I believe our mission is captured in the phrase that is printed on the banner hung between the pillars above our front entrance. It is the phrase "Nurture your spirit, help heal our world."

And we see this mission given flesh in the work of the pastoral care team, the strong helping hands meals program, and the way so many of you have felt held by this community during a health or other life crisis. Worship is also highly valued, as the number of active members of the worship and music committee and of the choir attest to. In these many ways we see a church committed to "nurturing spirits."

The other part of that mission, helping to heal our world, is made visible in the thriving green sanctuary group that works with groups beyond our church to make change and create a community of support and resilience as the climate changes and our world is challenged. And

the people of this church give donations very, very generously to service and social justice efforts. This congregation clearly owns a mission to “help heal the world.”

Part of the new shared ministry we are beginning together will be to tend to the ministries that this congregation has been doing so well, the pastoral care and support, the worship that deepens our connection with the holy and each other, the environmental awareness building and action, the generosity to people and causes beyond our doors.

And part of our new, shared ministry will be to look for new places and ways we can enrich what we already do to nurture and heal, perhaps even finding new directions or emphases for ourselves.

Perhaps we will go “day-lighting.” Have you heard of this? “Day-lighting” is the act of peeling back the concrete and steel from rivers and streams that had been covered over as towns and cities grew last century.

Here, at the beginning of our ministry together, let something remind us of long buried streams under our feet, and perhaps we will decide to tear away the pavement that covers them. Then light will touch the darkened water once more and life will come back into the stream, plants and fish and frogs will reappear. Open to the skies again, the stream channel will once more absorb water when massive rains fall, once more protect the land and creatures against flooding.

Perhaps for our shared ministry, one buried stream is of spiritual growth and maturation. Perhaps renewed involvement in faith development classes and workshops will challenge and bring growth to our hearts and minds. Perhaps renewed interest in finding and pursuing a personal spiritual practice, beyond that of coming to church once a week, will help us go deeper. Perhaps approaching worship with a new level of engagement, and openness to the Spirit’s action, to Life’s quickening in our hearts, will help us to grow and mature spiritually, to nurture our spirits anew.

Perhaps, too, we will daylight another stream, one that flows into the river that helps heal our world. In this buried stream is a personal connection between the congregation and another group of people – perhaps a church, a homeless shelter or a community living center for people with disabilities. And together, as partners, we work for a shared justice or service concern. That stream is here, buried – remember, the church had a long, strong partnership with a church in Boston. Maybe we can clear away the rubble that chokes that stream, and see what the sunlight brings to life.

Perhaps, or perhaps we will do things as yet unimagined together as we seek to nurture our spirits and help heal our world. Let us introduce ourselves, tell each other about our lineages, study the maps together, and set the wheels turning.

This is the beginning, almost anything can happen. This is the very beginning.