

PART-TIME IS PLENTY

*Thriving without  
Full-Time Clergy*

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## Chapter 2

# SURE, I CAN GIVE A SERMON

### *How Laypeople Step Up and Share Leadership*

When Christ Episcopal Church in Bethel, Vermont, had a full-time priest in the 1990s, the congregation knew it faced some tough choices ahead. Worship attendance in this economically depressed area fluctuated with the seasons and wasn't large enough to support a full-time compensation package.<sup>1</sup> Christ Church faced financial challenges in trying to maintain two houses of worship that date to the nineteenth century. Parting with that historic legacy was more than the congregation could stomach. Turning to part-time ministry came with perils and warnings that attendance might decline further, but the people of Christ Church decided to take the risk.

Christ Church switched to part-time ministry and became a thriving congregation. Church finances went from unsustainable to stable once the priest's compensation was no longer a source of constant worry. Christ Church has no staff costs now because its priest is unpaid. She was a Christ Church parishioner with a full-time job as an insurance agent and got ordained so that her church could have a priest. Being able to shift funds to property upkeep has helped the church's historic buildings get the renovations they've needed. Average Sunday attendance has remained steady in the low twenties, with as many as fifty in the summer, and new members replacing those who pass on or relocate. The

church gives around \$1,000 annually to feed the hungry via Bethel Food Shelf, a donation that never would not have been possible when the church had paid staff, according to Senior Warden Nancy Wuttke. Congregants are more engaged than ever before as everyone now has at least one area of ministry responsibility.

“It’s up to us to keep the church alive,” says Katie Runde, an artist and musician in her thirties who joined the church a few years ago and is now in training to become another unpaid priest at Christ Church. “In some ways, it’s more alive because every member is active.”

Christ Church’s success traces back to steps it took to free up and empower laypeople for effective ministry within the Episcopal tradition. From the laity’s own ranks emerged its first unpaid part-time priest, the Rev. Shellie Richardson. She traveled a custom education path with guidance from the Diocese of Vermont’s Commission on Ministry to become ordained and serve Christ Church. A few years later, in 2017, the congregation raised up another laywoman, Kathy Hartman, to serve as a second priest and help carry the load. But even before Hartman joined the clergy, the congregation was mobilized to share pastoral duties and make sure no one got burned out.

Labor at Christ Church, whether ministerial or administrative in nature, is distributed to the greatest extent possible. Rather than require the Rev. Richardson to prepare a weekly sermon, congregants became preachers. Half the congregation comprises a *de facto* preaching corps as members take turns giving the week’s sermon. Members with skills in the trades have put their talents to work reconstructing stairs and doing other projects. Others with a flair for decorating gave the parish hall a makeover by adorning walls with spirited, uplifting art in formerly

sterile spaces that congregants didn't dare touch in the days of full-time priests at Christ Church. Now when a vestry (governing board) meeting happens after worship, the atmosphere is joyful with laughs mixed in with meaningful decisions and open discussion led by a positive, high-energy lay leader. Laypeople have taken a large measure of control and are not looking back.

"If we were given some big chunk of money now, we would do more repairs on old Christ Church," Wuttke says. "I don't think it would even occur to us to say: 'Oh, you know what, we could probably afford a priest now.' Having a paid priest would probably free us up to do other things, but I don't know that we want to be freed up. We kind of enjoy feeling like we're needed and supporting each other."

In Christ Church's experience lie clues into what enables congregations to find new vitality with part-time ministry. The key isn't to find a charismatic clergyperson who's independently wealthy and treats the ministry as a meaningful hobby. Nor is the ticket to find a pastor who is willing, perhaps due to weak boundary-setting skills or the inability to say "no" to congregants, to put in full-time hours for part-time pay. Such arrangements lead too frequently to burnout and resentment. Congregations that feel they must have full-time clergy need to say as much when seeking a pastor, even if the offered compensation is uncompetitively low. As soon as a congregation ignores limits on a part-time pastor's time or winks dismissively at the idea of ministry being part-time, it is disrespecting the pastor's capacity to earn outside income or pursue other priorities. That's a path to exploitation and should be avoided.

Instead, the door to vitality begins to open when laypeople say: "We can do this. We can rethink the pastorate

and take on pivotal ministries that used to be our pastor's job." As congregants imagine that future and live into it, they channel grace and impact lives visibly, including their own. In every situation that cries out for a part-time ministry to begin, insights from other settings can help a church discern the right structure for its own flourishing. Congregations can develop and share playbooks for succeeding in part-time ministry, even if their judicatory staffers are skeptical as to whether it can be done.

### **BE A MAVERICK: PLAN AHEAD**

Most transitions to part-time ministry are not well-planned in advance. Bishops, conference ministers and their counterparts have told me that most congregations just sort of fell into it. They pivoted, or panicked, when the money got so tight that a new model was urgently needed. That's not entirely their fault. As noted above, congregations get bombarded with warnings to keep their full-time pastorate at all costs for as long as possible. They pray God will provide somehow for that full-time position to continue. Believing that planning for part-time would essentially mean giving up on the church, they don't plan for it. They don't map out how the congregation's priorities will be sustained in a new organizational structure. They avoid hard decisions about what will be discontinued to make way for the new. The congregation instead scrambles to fill gaps as they become apparent, even if the process doesn't make much strategic sense.

Congregations that thrive in part-time ministry often dare to think differently. They start by believing, based on biblical revelation and empirical evidence, that part-time

ministry doesn't have to be their downfall. It could usher in a new slate of opportunities for maturity and growth.

They envision going part-time before the pressure mounts. Some debate the part-time possibility two to three years in advance. Once they've decided to go part-time, they give themselves a good eighteen months to fine-tune game plans and lay groundwork. That provides time for congregational discussion on how best to use the pastor's time; how pastoral responsibilities will reduce or be reallocated; and how expectations—both in the parish and in the wider community—can be calibrated to support success.

Congregations have been learning to make a road map before embarking on a part-time arrangement. Holy Trinity Episcopal Church in Southbridge, Massachusetts, drew lessons after its failed attempt to go part-time in the mid-2000s. Having bled red ink under an unaffordable full-time pastorate for eight years, Holy Trinity drew up a plan that would explain for congregants—and for applicants to the part-time rector position—what the congregation was prepared to do to share the ministry load. This allowed the congregation to develop job descriptions for itself and for the incoming rector, which was something prior priests at Holy Trinity had not had. In their letter of agreement, laypeople pledged to handle duties that would have normally been covered by a full-time priest. For instance, lay leaders would assess needs for new programs and ministries; monitor pastoral needs in the congregation; provide pastoral visitation except in serious cases where a priest was needed; and assume administrative as well as programmatic duties in coordination with the rector.

This level of planning helped make Holy Trinity a poster child for a thriving part-time congregation in the

Episcopal Diocese of Western Massachusetts. Unlike nine years earlier when few qualified candidates expressed interest, this time the position was filled by the Rev. Richard Signore, an experienced priest who was officially retired but eager for a part-time opportunity. He told me he'd been impressed that Holy Trinity was organized with a clear, viable plan for sharing the ministry load and for honoring his part-time commitment. The plan also helped the church discern ministry priorities while reaching out to its transformed neighborhood, which has become largely Latino and faces challenges from poverty to crime and substance abuse. For example, helping neighbors learn about free public gardening opportunities in the city emerged as an important outreach of Holy Trinity. Teaming up with bilingual volunteers opened doors to new relationships. Weekday soup lunches were phased out as they didn't seem to meet a need. Now the church has regular outreach and stable finances. On the day I visited, more than 100 were in worship, including a few dozen Latino family members visiting for their youngsters' First Communion experiences.

Now part-time congregations that aspire to be vital are being coached to follow in the advance-planning ways of Christ Church and Holy Trinity. That's how congregants at St. Luke's Episcopal Church in Fair Haven, Vermont, found themselves in small groups during worship with Rev. Lawson on a summer day, exploring which priestly functions they still need—and which ones they could still muster from their own ranks of about twenty active people. Five months later, Melanie Combs was called to be priest, which would mean keeping her job in town government, working with a diocesan commission to get customized training and eventually presiding at Eucharist at St. Luke's.

Other individuals were tapped as well: one for pastoral care, another for healing, a third to coordinate preachers, and two more for hospitality. Like other congregations, St. Luke's is putting its personal stamp on what a distributed pastorate entails, that is, when pastoral duties are not concentrated in one but shared among many. In the process, St. Luke's is also helping refine a pathway for others to follow en route to thriving in a context with downsized staffing.

### START EARLY

It's one thing for a church to think ahead about going part-time. It's something else entirely to take the plunge and do it while the church still has many signs of health. But transitioning to part-time early, before a full-blown financial crisis hits the church, can be a ticket to making sure the congregation continues to thrive with a pared-down pastorate.

A good example comes from Clarendon Presbyterian Church, a Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) congregation in Arlington, Virginia. Money was not a problem at Clarendon when it began a transition to part-time nine years ago. The sale of a church-owned vacant lot had generated \$750,000 in proceeds, and the congregation had sufficient income to cover the salary and benefits for Pastor David Ensign. But the church needed to act early in 2012 for a different reason: pastoral burnout.

"It was killing me," the Rev. Ensign told me. "Everything fell on the pastor's shoulders, from running copies of Sunday morning bulletins to changing burned-out lightbulbs."

Burdened by administrative chores on top of pastoral responsibilities, Ensign had no time for the creative pursuits in art, writing, and music that once put a spring in his vocational step. Because his wife also worked, he could absorb a pay cut if the church would be willing to trim his duties. He asked his session (local governing board) to make him part-time as a means of retention and as a blessing to his health and well-being. The congregation said yes in order to keep its valued pastor. The church cut his hours to 30 per week and found other ways to cover what had been his responsibilities (more on that in chapter 3).

What started as a staffing adjustment, however, opened floodgates to other forms of out-of-the-box thinking and creativity at Clarendon. Laypeople realized that if the pastorate could be rethought, then so could other parts their life together. They removed pews and replaced them with comfortable, portable seating that could be rearranged to create a sense of intimacy—and no longer feel like a small flock dwarfed by its fixed furniture. Space without pews also enabled Ensign to playfully experiment with dramatic configurations for worship. The chancel became a space for art installations that change each month. When I visited, the space held Ensign's newest creation: a wild arrangement of strings, poles, planters, and names on tags to send a message about inclusion, immigration, and God's love.

After worship, parishioners told me how they too felt liberated by the way that their pastor had modeled for them. They saw it as a way of rethinking what matters most and bravely going for it. Clarendon member Ron Bookbinder said the move to free up Ensign's time has inspired him to take risks, such as going on a construction mission trip to help West Virginians rebuild after a storm.

“I’m freed up because of the new structure,” Bookbinder said. “You’re doing what you want to do. You don’t have to get burnt out. You don’t have to do everything. It opens you up to consider doing something different.”

What happened at Clarendon has been playful and joyful in part because it wasn’t done under a growing cloud of financial anxiety. The congregation went part-time on its own terms. All could regard it as a blessing for Ensign and the church, rather than a hard pill to swallow under a cloud of financial necessity.

Congregations that have acted early to avert a financial storm brewing in the distance have found it pays to get out in front of the problem. In Gloucester, Massachusetts, St. John’s Episcopal Church went from full-time to part-time after its last rector moved on. With a three-quarter-time pastorate, expenses would be more in line with revenue. But the relatively modest cutback wouldn’t be so severe as to require much adjustment among the laity. Embracing new roles has meant, for instance, that laypeople rather than a priest now organize St. John’s weekly adult forums, which entail Sunday morning presentations between worship services on a church-related topic and then facilitating open discussion. In fact, many of the rank-and-file barely noticed the shift to part-time because it was too minor to affect them, according to Rector Bret Hays, yet the move put the church on firmer financial footing.

Moving to part-time when the shift can deliver meaningful benefits and before it’s a necessity gives a congregation a sense of control over its destiny. Anxiety is mitigated as the church realizes it has options and can take remedial steps. If fresh vitality leads to numeric growth and the congregation wants to scale up the pastorate, that

option is always on the table as logistically feasible. Going part-time need not be a forever commitment, especially if a congregation acts sufficiently early.

For those that have already waited beyond an ideal transition point: fear not. Though starting early can be important and helpful, plenty of hope remains for the many congregations that aren't so organized or just fall into part-time for whatever reason. The genius of part-time lies partially in its flexibility, which can often be forgiving when it needs to be. Congregations that delay might need to pare the pastorate more substantially, mobilize laity more assertively, and/or reconstrue ministries more creatively as a consequence. But none of that is inherently fatal or necessarily precipitous of further decline. On the contrary, such essential shifts can provide the life-giving jolt that congregations in a rut need. They can still tap fresh lifeblood if they rise to the occasion by opening their minds to the new thing God is doing in their midst and hop on board.

### **DEMONSTRATE YOUR CAPACITY FOR NEW IMPACT**

Discovering new ministry opportunities can be a powerful antidote to the worry that some churchgoers bring to the transition to part-time clergy. They benefit from seeing early on how the part-time approach can facilitate new impact and how it doesn't need to be the step backward that naysayers have told them it will be. So here's a tip: make room for a new initiative that meets a real need in the community.

Adding an initiative can be as simple as repositioning a familiar ministry so that it has a heightened impact. This is possible for even the smallest, least-resourced of congregations. Consider the experience of New Sharon Congregational Church, a United Church of Christ congregation in tiny, rural New Sharon, Maine (population 1,400). With only about six congregants showing up for worship, the Maine Conference of the United Church of Christ informed parishioners that they couldn't afford even a part-time pastor and would need to look hard at the prospect of closure. But church members were defiant: no way would they close. They would lead worship themselves. Clergy would visit on occasion to provide pulpit supply, serve Communion, and offer consulting input on decisions facing the congregation. The path to thriving wasn't entirely clear, but they were resolute to try and trust God to provide direction.

Fresh energy came when the people of New Sharon did what their last settled pastor had explicitly prohibited: change the day for Sunday school. The church sadly had no children, and Sunday morning Bible education wasn't drawing them. The problem wasn't lack of interest. Area families were keen to raise their kids in the faith; many were homeschooling them for that reason. But for those not already attending church somewhere else, Sunday morning marked the only time when working parents could relax at home with their kids or take them on an outdoor adventure, such as kayaking, snowmobiling, or riding all-terrain vehicles. Such factors loom large in Maine, the second-least religious state in the country after Vermont. The former pastor had insisted that families make New Sharon Congregational Church their Sunday priority. Only when

that pastor left, and the congregation became more lay-led, did congregants feel at liberty to move their lay-led Sunday school to Tuesdays after school. They felt they'd received a de facto license to experiment and were determined to use it.

The church school move to Tuesdays met a giant need in town for after-school programming. The church had no competition because no one else was offering any type of organized activities for kids. Homeschooling parents leapt at the opportunity to drop kids off for a couple hours of socializing with other kids from other families in a faith-based environment. Within a few weeks, five children were showing up regularly. Volunteer teachers were ecstatic. The young families' enthusiastic turnout felt like validation for their decision as a church to stay open and continue offering ministries in town. Laypeople swelled with gratitude that God had not given up on them. The Lord still had work for them to do, and perhaps do it more effectively in their case with less clergy control in the mix.

The advent of after-school programming in New Sharon has injected a measure of new vitality into a congregation that still faces an uncertain future. The core group of churchgoers has grown from six to twelve. That's hardly enough to proclaim revival. But with no staff to pay and other expenses minimized, the congregation has stabilized its finances at least for now, and attendance is going in a promising direction. In addition to growing Christian education for children, the congregation has maintained a monthly assistance ministry called "Pies Plus," which makes sure locals living in poverty receive a basket of practical provisions and a homemade pie to go with them. As the church discerns its way forward, it has learned the

value of listening to neighbors' needs and experimenting to see what God has in store for a faithful remnant.

THE REMAINDER OF CHAPTER TWO HAS BEEN LEFT OUT OF THIS PREVIEW.