

## **Local Collaborative Ministry in Practice**

### **What does discernment mean?**

To discern is to see something clearly – in the context of Local Collaborative Ministry, to see the gifts God has given and how they relate to a congregation's calling in ministry. Any process of discernment in the church involves some serious thinking, along with prayer to discover God's plan in our lives. Discernment for LCM applies that prayer and thoughtfulness towards discovering what work needs to be carried out in a congregation, and how its members are gifted for doing and supporting that work.

The details may differ from place to place: formally, the process may happen in a small group such as the Vestry or at a congregational conference, and it will usually be guided by a trusted person from outside the congregation. The first step is to examine what ministry needs exist, and what qualities are desired in the persons who will be exercising those ministries. For example, a church may need someone (or more than one) to lead worship, who is comfortable in a public setting, is generally well prepared and has a prayerful approach to leadership.

Once the needs and desired characteristics are established, the discernment group begins to consider who in the congregation fits the description of the various ministries. It is at this stage that prayer can bring surprising results – helping the group to “see clearly” the giftedness of people whose calling has not previously been obvious. Likewise, someone who has served for a long time in a particular role may be discovered to have gifts which point in another direction.

When there is a consensus, individuals are asked if they are willing to take on the ministries for which they have been identified. Their prayerful response is also part of discernment, whether their answer is yes or no! In this way the process maintains two elements which have always been part of the way the church discerns a calling to ministry: the call is felt by the individual, but also confirmed by the wisdom and prayer of the church as a whole.

### **What does the team do?**

The primary goal of a congregation's ministry support team is to support ministry – not by one person or a small group, but by all the baptized members of the church. This support within the congregational structures is fundamentally to enable everyone to fulfill their baptismal promises to minister Christ in their daily lives – at home, work or wherever. The support team continues the work of discernment, watching for new ministry needs and for the changing ways in which people can use their gifts.

Members of the team will take leadership responsibility for particular aspects of ministry, such as worship, pastoral care, Christian education, outreach, evangelism, hospitality, administration or spiritual nurture. Some may be ordained as priests or deacons to be symbols and reminders of the priestly and diaconal ministry of all members of the community. Others will co-ordinate the work of several people ministering in the same area (such as Sunday school teachers or pastoral visitors).

The team is accountable to the congregation, to the diocese and to one another. Good communication, including regular team meetings, is essential so that the different aspects of

ministry can be co-ordinated. Teams will also work along with stipendiary clergy, in some case as Rectors or priests-in-charge and in others as part-time resource persons. The workload for team members will not be greater than that presently experienced by lay ministry volunteers, and the LCM approach has the advantage of ensuring that the people are doing work which draws on their strengths. The team also makes a commitment to continuing education in ministry and team training. Teams can take advantage of whatever diocesan, local, ecumenical or provincial programmes are available, and will have many opportunities to learn through teaching – sharing their own skills and gifts with other members of the congregation.

### **Does the ministry team replace the Vestry?**

In some provinces developing this style, experience has shown that the vestry system can be reformed to resemble something very like the LCM ministry support team. There vestry members lead particular aspects of ministry, and see their role as enabling the development of gifts for ministry among all members. In these places the function of the vestry has expanded far beyond the traditional concerns for administration, decision-making and the management of finances and property. Where the choice and appointment of vestry members also includes some element of gift discernment, it may be redundant to have both vestry and ministry support team.

In most cases, however, the vestry is better regarded as a particular ministry, enabling other ministries through its management functions and authenticating them through its decision-making powers. So the norm will be for vestries and ministry support teams to co-exist, probably with some overlap of membership, helping to ensure co-operation between the two. Some people, who have found vestry to be the only available outlet for their commitment to ministry, may well find that they fit better in the ministry support team; and that may draw out other potential vestrymembers with appropriate gifts of wisdom and capacity for reflection. In this situation, ministry support teams will be expected to report to vestry.

### **Who will be in charge?**

Experience has shown that there is a problem with designating one person as “in charge” of a congregation committed to LCM. When that person is a non-resident priest, the designation perpetuates an unhealthy sense of dependency. When it is locally identified person, he or she quickly becomes the local cleric with all the old expectations that go with that role, despite everyone’s efforts to the contrary.

As a result, LCM structures need to operate within a model of shared or circular leadership. This idea is not unique to the church or even new: it reflects team approaches which have been operating in industry and other spheres of life for some time. In this model no one person always chairs the meeting sets the agenda or leads the service. Instead efforts are made to share these and other leadership functions, by setting up a rotation or by each person volunteering to take a turn.

Shared leadership will be a special challenge for congregations that continue to have a full-time stipendiary Rector or priest-in-charge. While she or he takes on new roles as the mentor and trainer for the congregation and team, attention will have to be given to sharing the traditional

leadership functions which have gone with that position.

For congregations operating without a Rector or priest-in-charge, there are other challenges. Their ministry support team, supported by diocesan resource personnel, will need to examine how all aspects of leadership are being carried out, including less obvious ones such as long-term planning and liaison with other levels of church administration.