

SanDawna Ashley leads Leadership Summit through bi-vocational ministry discussions

Speaking to more than 50 attendees at the Synod of Lakes and Prairies' first annual Leadership Summit at Christ the King Retreat Center in Buffalo, Minn., the Rev. SanDawna Ashley talked about transition and readiness in leading congregations through change – specifically through calling a bi-vocational minister.

Ashley, assistant stated clerk for call process support and teaching elder ministries in the Office of the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), was the keynote speaker for the Summit, speaking three separate times to presbytery leaders – mostly members of presbytery committees on ministry and preparation for ministry.

On the second morning of the Summit earlier this month, Ashley asked attendees to “focus on three areas – theology, perception and strategic orientation,” separating the theology section into function and mission.

Function, she said, “is the ‘who does what?’ management of task, specific roles and expectations.” These functional tasks, she said, include good worship, spiritual formation for all ages, pastoral care, Christian education, the need to engage in justice-making, the proper handling of the gifts of the people, and the need to maintain the administration of the church.

“We understand that this is important work for all congregations. However, this work becomes essential in smaller congregations where this is less staff and the need to depend on volunteer hours is paramount,” she said.

Ashley said the call to mission – the second part of the theology component – is “easily understood.” She said, “It is simply living out the great ends of the church.”

Addressing a congregation’s perceptions at the time of transition to calling a bi-vocational minister, Ashley indicated there are both negative and positive

perceptions. On the negative side, congregations could be feeling grief, anger and anxiety, and may even be thinking, “It’s only a matter of time before we close.” But among the positive perceptions, she said, are the recognition that a congregation will not be solely responsible for a minister’s livelihood, that a pastor will be able to bring skills from her or his other position, and that it offers pastoral options for smaller churches.

Ashley said, “Biblically whenever the people of God began to think themselves less than who God made them, God reminded them that they were the chosen people; they were provided everything they needed for the task ahead.”

It’s important, she pointed out, that ministers helping congregations make the transition to bi-vocational ministry be trained to understand “the invisible lenses that shape the values and behaviors of congregations.” The transitional minister – or interim minister – must be more than a place-holder, she said.

“For interim pastors their work should be helping congregations reframe negative narratives. This will mean covenanting with trained interims who have gifts and graces in assessment, listening for narratives, and helping congregations become unstuck,” Ashley said.

And the final step in the transition process – strategic orientation – begins with a “focus on the call of God,” she said. “Create space for testing the spirit and discernment. Find the places of joy. Build upon the foundational DNA of the congregations adapting realities for today’s church.”

The strategic work is the “work of equipping, educating and nurturing” to carry out the congregation’s call.

In the long run, the transition can be difficult, slow and chaotic. Ashley said, “For congregations in survival mode, those in coaching transition must lead by reassuring them that chaos is a part of the process.”

And she called on attendees to remember the impact of God. “It is important that the strategic orientation includes divine intervention and that rather than

placing all our trust in process and the ability of individuals, we must trust in God to make our paths straight."