

The Epistle,
October 4th, 2019

What is St. Paul's?

(Continued)

We need a new model. To be honest, I wonder if a membership chapel model was ever right for the spiritual purposes of the Church. As Archbishop William Temple put it in the 1940's, the Church is the only institution "that exists for the benefit of non-members." We should never have been about just serving our own, but about going out and spreading the Good News of God in Christ to those who need it most.

We need a new model to reflect this. Many are calling this the **Mission Model**. I don't mean the technical, ecclesiastical definition of mission, as a congregation supported financially by the Diocese; I mean a congregation that finds its identity not primarily in attracting others into the church but in going out into the community, into the neighborhoods, and serving others in Christ's name. This is not to the detriment of caring for those in our congregation. To the contrary, I have found that congregations with a strong sense of mission to their communities to have the strongest pastoral care and sense of belonging.

With this different mindset, the purpose of being a church shifts from calculating the benefits of membership and the obligations to serve the church, toward participating in the healing,

sustaining, redeeming work of God in our communities with the call to serve our neighbors. It involves a spiritual transformation in what it means to be a church and in what it means to be a Christian. In this transformation, we ourselves meet Christ in those we serve. Isn't that what the Church should always have been about?

Our Episcopal Church, like many others, is going to face many challenges in the coming decade. Our model is not serving us. Our church institutions are like department stores, newspapers, and travel agencies. In our era of dynamic, destructive change, our denomination and our parishes are in for a challenging future.

However, while institutions like ours are in trouble, the Gospel and the Church as Mission are needed now more than ever. I fear for my denomination (because I love it and value it so highly) but I am hopeful for Gospel. Congregations that embrace anew this ancient model of being a mission for ministry will thrive--perhaps not by the old measures of membership and money but thrive in spirit and ministry.

What is St. Paul's mission for Key West and the Lower Keys? How is God calling us to cooperation in God's saving work in our neighborhoods? I look forward to exploring these dynamics more with St. Paul's in the coming months.