

Interview Continued

HDD: What are the challenges of a small Episcopal Church in a small town in north Florida?

MB: The fluctuation of numbers - between winter and summer - is not as impactful right now as it was when I was growing up here. There is no longer the mass exodus in late March and early April, as residents sought to escape the brutal heat and oppressive humidity of Florida

that we used to see before whole-house air conditioning became more accessible and affordable. Nor is there the rush back to Florida at the first hint of snow in the northern reaches. So, we no longer have that 6-7 month, almost dormant period that we saw when I was growing up.

Financially, that is a positive impact. In the past, parishioners supported us when they were here, and the church in their hometown, when they were there. So, while we might slow down some when it gets really hot (or down below freezing), for the most part we are active year-round.

But this congregation is aging out, as it is no longer "popular" or even important, to many of the younger generation, to be a part of a church family. We reach out to all ages, but the greatest response is from the retirees. Fortunately, for us, many folks are now retiring earlier, while they still have their health and are possessed of some degree of physical and mental stamina, so we are blessed with the presence of some of those folks, who still have time and energy to give to God's work in this place. The challenge, if you will, is to bring more of that age bracket in each year so that you always have new blood coming through the door, so to speak. Sometimes these folks are not Episcopalians, but soon find that this is "home" and so they become Episcopalians. We are grateful for their presence.

So, most of our activities here are year-round and have been for some years. That takes more people and more involvement of those people, and sometimes, because of the age of this congregation, we are short on involvement. You just pick up the pieces and move on.

HDD: How does Holy Comforter interact mission wise with Crescent City and Putnam County?

MB: Within Putnam County, there is not much interaction between us and other congregations, because of the lack of geographical proximity. For more years than any of us care to count (not a negative, just a fact), we have had a sister relationship with Emmanuel in Welaka. At one time, these two congregations were yoked and shared a Priest. But the "flavor" and characteristics of the two congregations have been vastly different for many years. So, while I still do a good bit of work with them as far as office and production is concerned, and

Fr. Charlie [Erkman] goes once a month to do a Eucharist service for them, we do not on a regular basis - only occasionally - share activities. (I have a particular, emotional fondness for Emmanuel, and they know that if they need something, I'm here for them.) IF they are shorthanded for an event they are doing, we always have volunteers from Holy Comforter on hand to help. Emmanuel is the closest in proximity to us in Putnam County, 15 miles away.

Crescent City, being so small, has always had congenial interaction among the various denominations in town. That continues, especially as needs present themselves.

While we stand ready to help St. Mark's, St. Mary's, St. Paul's and St. Andrew's, if needed, and have answered the call many times over the years, they are 25-40 miles away.

Throughout Putnam County, there are only a handful of liturgical churches. (Independent, fundamentalist churches are much more prevalent in this area, and because Episcopalians are in many ways very similar to the Catholics, they seem to fear associating with us.)

HDD: What outreach projects has the church been involved in?

MB: Until about 18 months ago, Holy Comforter housed on our campus the South Putnam Christian Service Center, for over 20 years. This was an ecumenical outreach serving folks whose basic needs fell between the cracks of other services offered in the county. The Center served clients from the Dunn's Creek bridge south to the county line. The Center is currently housed on the campus of First Presbyterian and still serves the same geographic area and sees one hundred or more clients each day that they are open. And we still support them. The community found many years ago, that a central agency was much more effective in truly serving the needs of the population, than each individual church trying to do so.

We are also involved in other community outreach endeavors as they arise. With such a transient population, that need fluctuates, and thus does the response needed from supporting organizations.

We have always enjoyed good participation for a church our size in ERD, UTO, and such, and for many years had an active companion parish relationship with Cuba.

HDD: What are some of the gifts a priest would do well to have if accepting a call to Holy Comforter and Crescent City? If you were on the search committee for a new priest what would you think it important to look for?

MB: While the business community in Crescent City has shrunk considerably since my growing-up days (at one time you could buy almost anything you needed or wanted right downtown) you can drive

25-35 miles north or south for places to meet your shopping needs. So, a priest would have to really desire and/or be willing to adapt to the degree of isolation that we enjoy here (some don't). That's not always easy if you have come from a metropolis. While the area is culturally minded, there's not much here to nurture that element - though it can be had within a two-hour drive in any direction, as we are surrounded by college towns. A Priest would really have to want and enjoy the rural life-style.

A Priest would have to be well educated or he would find himself an outsider. And a Priest would definitely have to be able to meet people where they are as we have a very diverse population (Hispanics from throughout Central and South America, Laotians, Vietnamese, and a smattering of folks from other countries. One of our newest residents was born in China, grew up in Hong Kong, obtained college degrees in Australia and worked for Intel Corporation in their semi-conductor division. He's one of my favorite newcomers. His wife speaks no English, but we have a great time together).

If the Priest had a school-age family, they might find the school system a bit lacking in educational opportunities for their children. But that situation is changing. And a Priest would have to be able to interact with a diverse age group. Authentic, genuine, intentional are all words that come to mind. The flip side is that, like much of Putnam County, liturgical and main-line churches are the minority as many of the churches in this county are splintered off (sometimes several times) from something else; many times the minister owns the church; and many times they preach their own version of the Gospel, which often surely does not sync with Episcopal teaching or practice.

HDD: I was impressed by the beautiful ordination service at Holy Comforter for the Rev. Charlie Erkman. I like Charlie a lot. The service was held outdoors and lunch was served after the service. I imagine a lot of planning went into the service. What part did you take in the planning and execution of it? Were there any special challenges? You all did a great job.

MB: I put together the bulletin for the ordination service - with a lot of help from the diocese, because we combined the ordination and institution of new ministry services into one service. In the past we always held two separate services, but for this event, we combined them. Usually, the ECW designs and executes the reception, but for this event a friend of Charlie's who had a restaurant, wished to cater the reception as an ordination gift to Charlie. So, my sister, Emily and I sat with Charlie and Patty and the caterer and Charlie decided what he wanted, Emily decided how to lay things out, and I placed orders for anything else that was needed and borrowed tents, chairs and tables from my Rotary Club.

Charlie has been a great gift to Holy Comforter. He's a traditionalist but laid back enough that he fits in well in the congregation and the community. He has a servant heart - much needed in this community. And he's just plain fun!

HDD: Crescent City and the surrounding lakes sounds like a lovely place. What do you like especially about living in Crescent City? What are your favorite 'beauty spots' or lakes or springs?

MB: I grew up around all of the lakes in this area. I've watched Lake Crescent all of my life. It is constantly changing and is continually awesome, in part because it is a tidal body. If you watch the lakes and their surrounds you see Mother Nature at her best. And she weaves a beautiful story as the seasons change. So, I don't really have a "favorite" spot. I love them all.

I love the small-town atmosphere (knowing that I'm no more than two hours from what the cities have to offer). This is a very friendly town and always has been, but in the days before television and air conditioning people got out in their neighborhoods more and you knew more of your neighbors than today. People walked their neighborhoods, went to the city parks, etc.

Crescent City is on a ridge - 38 feet above sea level here at the church - and 15 miles from salt water as the crow flies. So when the tide turns, we have wonderful sea breezes, because it's flat as a pancake from here to the ocean. Glorious!!

We also have our own little micro-climate as we are smack on the cusp of the separation of north Florida from Central Florida, and so we are neither and both. That, coupled with our proximity to the ocean, creates a unique little pocket well suited to all kinds of plants for those who like to garden, which I do.

Interestingly, eight miles down the road, you are in another Diocese.

HDD: How is Crescent City involved in the florist industry? What does it contribute?

MB: Beginning with the freezes of the late 1800's, each time we had a devastating freeze that impacted the citrus industry, more and more growers looked to alternative crops. Cut foliage, even in the early days, was a part of agricultural/horticultural production here. But with each devastating freeze, agricultural interests had to assess what they could do to keep their agricultural zoning and Green-Belt exemptions, and make a profitable living, and many of them turned to the production of foliage crops for the floral industry, as those crops could be freeze-protected more readily and successfully than citrus. And as was the case with Florida citrus, this is an international market, supplied by a relatively few growers.

Early and late oranges and grapefruit were the most widely planted in this area of Florida and are still planted by the brave souls who continue to cultivate citrus. Mid-season fruit in

this area is more impacted by December to early March freeze incidents. (Canon DeFoor's ancestor was instrumental in bringing grapefruit to Florida.)

HDD: How many years have you been attending POST? What do you appreciate or think is important about POST?

MB: I've lost track of how many years I've attended POST. Lots. I appreciate most the sense of sisterhood among attendees. Perhaps the most important part of POST is the interaction and support between those of us in the parish trenches and the Diocesan staff. I've never been one to spend much time wondering what I should do in any given situation, but rather have surrounded myself with resources and resource people. (And in this Diocese that is a well-traveled two-way street.) But if you are not an Episcopalian, but are employed by an Episcopal church, that can often be pretty daunting and intimidating, and it's so neat to see the expression of relief on some faces when they find out that with POST you have a sisterhood of help and information and support. And while we refer to the "atmosphere" as sisterhood, we often have male counterparts in attendance.

HDD: What about Camp Weed? Do you see Camp Weed as a conference center and camp as important to the church and the Diocese?

MB: The original Camp Weed is too far in the past to be relevant to most folks today, though it surely holds some wonderful memories for the few left who remember St. Theresa Beach.

I still remember the meetings when we first started the discussion in this Diocese about relocating the Camp. And I remember the first trip we made out there for a Diocesan gathering to look at the proposed site. What an awesome experience! And I had several emotional reactions to the place: peaceful, beautiful, spiritual - the place just seemed to wrap you in its arms, like an older, trusted adult, when you as a child were having a bad day or didn't feel well. (Does that sound crazy?) But there was something else that was tugging at me, as though there was some undiscovered story or history that was permeating the place. And, lo and behold, that was finally uncovered!!!!

I'm a "gatherer", and so I have never had a bad experience at Camp Weed. I love gathering there in that wonderful place with like-minded souls (no matter the reason for being there) and just enjoying each other as we take in all of the gifts that God has put in place on those wonderful acres. I can't be the only one in this Diocese who has that view - in fact I KNOW that I am not.

So, from my point of view, it is extremely important that we continue to nurture and grow that place - "A PLACE APART" - for the benefit of those who are here now to enjoy it and be nurtured by it and those who will come after us. People change and grow old, but God's places do not, and surely the Camp and Conference Center is among God's places.

HDD: Anything else you would like to share with us?

MB: Being an Episcopalian is not something that you do - on Sunday or some other day.