Parish Cooperation

This past Saturday, St. Patrick's and Church of the Advent reminded me how good it can be when our parishes work together.

Every year, St. Patrick's holds a Basket Raffle. It's one of our biggest fundraisers, and anyone who has ever helped with a basket raffle knows how much work goes into it long before the doors open. This year, some scheduling conflicts left us knowing that we weren't going to have enough people available to successfully run the day on our own. So we reached out to our sister parish, Church of the Advent, and asked for help.

They jumped in without hesitation. And by "help," I don't mean that a few people came over for a couple of hours on Saturday. Members of Advent donated items and several of our large prizes. They came to our basket-making nights and worked alongside us turning everything we had collected into baskets. They helped set up on Friday and came back Saturday to work the raffle. By the time the doors opened, we had 277 baskets and 12 large prizes ready to go.

At some point during all of this, we started noticing how much easier everything was. Setup, which normally takes us much longer, was finished in about half the time. During our basket-making nights, we were getting through more baskets than we ever could have with our usual group. There were simply more people around to pick up the next thing that needed to be done.

Because this became a joint fundraiser, we split the profits between the two churches. Both congregations benefited from the day, and I think both congregations gained something beyond the money we raised.

We spend a lot of time talking about the challenges facing our churches. Many congregations have fewer people than they used to. The people who are there are often the same people doing much of the work. Sometimes we look at everything we used to do, or everything we would still like to do, and wonder how we're supposed to keep doing it with fewer hands. Saturday gave me a different way to look at that problem. Instead of asking how one congregation can keep doing everything it has always done, maybe we need to get better at looking beyond our own parish when we need help—and being ready to offer that same help in return.

One of the things I love about being Episcopalian is that my church is bigger than the congregation where I happen to worship. We belong to one another in ways that are easy to talk about but sometimes harder to actually practice. On Saturday, there wasn't much concern about which church someone came from. If something needed to be done, whoever was available did it. By that point it didn't really feel like Advent was helping with St. Patrick's fundraiser anymore. It was our fundraiser.

I don't think working together means giving up what makes each parish its own community. There are things I love about St. Patrick's and things I love about Advent, and they aren't the same things. That's part of why I value being connected to both. But being separate congregations doesn't mean we have to approach every ministry, event, or challenge separately.

Sometimes another parish may have people when we don't. Sometimes we may have resources they need. One congregation may have figured out something another congregation has been struggling with. And sometimes it may simply be more enjoyable to do the work together.

Saturday wasn't some grand new model for the Church. It was a basket raffle. We made baskets, sold tickets, ate food, called numbers, cleaned up, and went home tired.

But it worked. Really well.

And after seeing how much easier the work became when two congregations shared it, I don't think the lesson is that St. Patrick's found people to help us run a fundraiser.

I think the lesson is that we didn't have to do it alone in the first place.