Why Can't We Find More Supply Clergy?

Many of our congregations have felt the frustration firsthand: a priest is needed for a Sunday, and the diocese simply doesn't have anyone available to send. This isn't an oversight or a lack of effort — it's the result of a structural shortage that has been building for some time. Here's a closer look at why supply clergy are so hard to come by, and what we might do about it together.

The Numbers Behind the Shortage

Our diocese is home to 52 congregations. Of these, 40 are part-time — meaning they do not have the resources to support a full-time priest. That's already a significant share of our congregations relying on clergy who split their time and energy across other commitments.

Within that group of 40 part-time congregations, the picture becomes even more challenging:

- **23 congregations** are regularly served by priests who are over the age of 72, the mandatory retirement age in the Episcopal Church. In years past, these retired priests made up a large part of our supply clergy pool — able to step in for a Sunday here or there when needed. Today, however, most of them are committed to long-term supply work at their own congregations, which means they're no longer available to fill in elsewhere.
- **The remaining 17 congregations** are served by clergy in extremely part-time roles. These priests typically hold secular jobs alongside their ministry, which limits how much additional time they can give. In theory, they could serve more congregations. In practice, they're boxed in by scheduling: all but two of our congregations hold their principal service on Sunday morning between 9 and 11 a.m. When every congregation needs a priest during that same two-hour window, there simply aren't enough people to go around.

Why This Matters

Put simply, the diocese doesn't have a shortage of willing clergy so much as a shortage of *available time*. Our retired priests, who once formed the backbone of our supply system, are now needed full-time in their own parishes. Our bi-vocational priests are constrained by their secular work commitments and by the fact that nearly every congregation wants them at the exact same hour.

What Are Some Potential Solutions?

One of the most promising options is also one of the simplest: **worship at a different day or time.**

If congregations were willing to hold their principal service outside the traditional 9–11 a.m. Sunday window — whether that's a later Sunday service, a Saturday evening service, or another arrangement altogether — the pool of clergy available to serve would grow considerably. A priest who is already committed to a 9 a.m. service elsewhere might well be free at 1 p.m., or on a different day entirely.

This kind of flexibility asks something of our congregations, and we recognize that changing a worship time is not a small request. But it may be one of the most effective ways to ease the strain on our supply clergy system without waiting for new priests to be ordained or new retirees to become available.

We welcome your thoughts and would encourage congregations to have honest conversations about whether a schedule change might work for them. Every congregation that shifts its time frees up a priest to serve elsewhere — and helps the whole diocese function more sustainably.

--Canon Cathy Dempesy-Sims

Next Week: How may a regional ministry model help this clergy shortage?