

THE WHY AND WHAT OF MINISTRY COVENANTS

OUTSTANDING LEADERSHIP FOR MINISTRY IN THE DIOCESE OF NIAGARA

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OVERVIEW

God seems rather fond of making covenants. We find evidence of this divine habit in creation itself, in ancient Israel's formation and its journeys, in Jesus, in baptism and in ordination. God reveals a desire to promote chosen, loving relationships with us shaped by a common vision and values. As we strive to live out these covenants, God moves us to make covenants with one another: in marriage, in religious orders and through ministry covenants.

In a ministry covenant, three parties from the entire community of the baptized – bishop, clergy and people – deepen and strengthen their partnership in ministry. Through an intentional covenant, we are reminded that our partnerships are mutual and ongoing. We name particular vision-shaped, missional aspirations. We identify specific, measurable, attainable, realistic and time-based (SMART) strategies for pursuing our goals. We express our mutual expectations. We plan for times and ways to review, renew and redevelop our partnership. Typically, ministry covenants in the Diocese of Niagara are undertaken with the convictions that we are at our best when united in ministry, when moved to genuine encounters with our neighbours and when serving God's mission in the world. They lead us not only to strengthen our partnerships in the church, but discover the blessing of surprising new partners for God's justice, peace and healing in the wider community.

A covenanting God

Ours is a covenanting God. God is always striking deals in new circumstances to establish or deepen the relationship with us. These deals make for chosen, loving relationships dedicated to living out common values. As people of faith, we have long lived in those overlapping covenants. In each we are given further clarity and offered explicit commentary about how to live out that relationship.

In the Hebrew Scriptures

In the very act of creation, God makes an eternal covenant with all humanity [Ecclesiasticus 17:12]. After the great flood, Yahweh struck a covenant with all living creatures. In that deal a rainbow reminds God of its reality. With Abram and Sarai, God promises to make their descendants numerous. Their names are changed and they are expected to walk before God and be blameless. Through Moses, the people of Israel are led out of slavery into a new freedom. In that freedom the people are fed with enough for each day, pointed to a land of promise and equipped with Ten Commandments as a guide to faithfulness. The "I will make you a house" promise to David is granted covenant status [2 Samuel 23:5]. Jeremiah bears witness to God's intent to renew the deal – "I will be their God and they shall be my people" (31:33). This time its terms are written on the hearts of the people of Israel and Judah. The hoped for result is pervasive "second nature" knowledge of God.

In Jesus

A new covenant is struck in Jesus. When he institutes the eucharist, Jesus finds the language of covenant ready to hand and he uses it to interpret his death. "This cup is the new covenant in my blood." [1 Corinthians 11:25, cf. also Mark 14:24] St. Paul claims a ministry of this "new covenant...of spirit." [2 Corinthians 3:6] This pact brings new parties to the table making all peoples the people of God.¹ Through the life, death, resurrection and ascension of Jesus, the Christ, all nations are "grafted... into the tree of... [God's] chosen Israel." [*The Book of Alternative Services*, p. 316; cf. Romans 11:17ff.]

¹ Perhaps it would be better to describe them as "re-emerging," since the enduring arrangement with Noah is with all creatures and that the act of creation is said to make a covenant with all humanity.

In baptism

Bridging between these “old” and “new” covenants is the baptism of St. John the Baptist. John’s baptism is presented both as a sign of repentance and of initiation into the imminent reign of God. That sign is itself ready to hand when Jesus commissioned his disciples to baptize the nations. Through this baptism all are invited to align themselves with the coming kingdom which Jesus both preached and incarnated. In time, covenant language is applied to the promises baptismal candidates make as elements of a “baptismal covenant.” The new arrangement sealed between God and Jesus’ disciples in baptism marks out the baptized community as a covenant people.

In ordained ministries

Within the baptized covenant community, some are set apart for specialized ministries to assist and strengthen our common ministry. Bishops, priests and deacons exercise particular ministries of oversight, sacramental administration and servanthood. Those who exercise ordained ministries do so not merely as people who perform particular tasks. They also offer themselves and their gifts in relationships of mutual partnership.

In other relationships

And our covenanting doesn’t stop there. The faithful are prompted to enter other covenants. Each one provides a way in which to live out our baptism. In this way we imitate the God who is always initiating these chosen, committed relationships characterized by self-giving love. Those bound together in marriage are in covenant love relationships [BAS, pp. 532, 536...]; so are those who live in religious orders.

The purposes of ministry covenants

The practice of developing covenants between ministry partners in the Diocese of Niagara is founded on these many overlapping covenants. From one perspective, our ministry partnerships have already been established elsewhere: in baptismal and ordination vows, through the Bishop’s letter of appointment and the giving of the Bishop’s license, at services of institution (in which the Bishop instructs the cleric to “take this charge which is mine and yours”), and in the service celebrating the beginning of a new ministry. Unfortunately, despite so many well-meaning beginnings, we often quickly forget that there are three parties to the partnership: bishop, clergy and people. Most ways of lifting up the three-fold ministry partnership either predate a particular partnership by many years (baptism, ordination) or only receive attention at the very beginning of a new partnership (letters, licenses, institutions, inductions, celebrations of new ministry). Without something more, we risk seeing the Bishop as an occasional special visitor or a distant CEO. Should we give way to this risk, we would fail to see the Bishop as the church’s primary missionary and pastor. Our tendency towards clericalism often identifies the clergy-person as “the” minister. The ministry of the laity, the ministry of the vast majority of the baptized community, can become distorted into either serving as the clergy-person’s helpers or, worse yet, becoming paying consumers of the clergy-person’s ministry. When these things happen, we deny our talk of the importance of baptismal ministry. The entire baptized community would not really be embarking on a shared ministry venture in furthering God’s mission together. Ministry covenants are being developed in Niagara to avoid such impoverishing results.

Intentional ministry covenants seek to strengthen our ministry partnerships within the baptized community. They remind us that our partnerships are mutual and ongoing. They name particular vision-shaped, missional aspirations. They identify specific, measurable, attainable, realistic and time-based (SMART) strategies for pursuing our goals. They express our mutual expectations. They build in times and ways for review, renewal and redevelopment.

Vision-shaped

The development of ministry covenants across the diocese is a particular strategy in our diocesan vision. It seeks to promote excellence in ministry. It is also a way to raise up outstanding leadership for ministry, recalling that gifts for leadership are offered by the whole community, not only identified “leaders.” The very fact of having ministry covenants is a response to Niagara’s vision. What is more, the content of our ministry covenants is shaped by that same vision. In them we are striving to identify goals for each area of our diocesan vision:

- continuous culture of innovation;
- generous culture of stewardship;
- life-changing worship;
- outstanding leadership for ministry; and
- prophetic social justice making.



Niagara’s vision is not really a strategic plan. It is a conviction that we align ourselves most faithfully with God’s mission by “Following Christ passionately...” and when “we pursue excellence, practise justice and grow.” When we do all of this grounded in the values of spiritual discipline, valuing diversity, honesty & integrity, and passion & hard work, then we will bear much fruit. That fruit is already flowering in our being innovative, generous, transformative as worship communities, missional as disciple-making leaders, and prophetic as advocates and activists.

What of the future? Where will God lead us as we let this vision remake us? “Beloved, we are God’s children now; what we will be has not yet been revealed.” [1 John 3:2a] We are persuaded that we are partners in ministry with God in Christ and with one another now. What we will be, as we grow and more actively engage our diocesan vision in each parish, is what we are setting out to discover together. Our ministry covenants invite us, therefore, to discern, prayerfully and imaginatively, how we will faithfully and more fully engage each aspect of our diocesan vision in the place where we are presently planted.

United in partnerships

One thing about which we can be reasonably certain – that at our best we are together. It is Jesus’ prayer for his followers that they be united. “*The glory that you have given me I have given them, so that they may be one, as we are one...*” [John 17:22] It is St. Paul’s recurring plea that we be one body. But in what should we be united? Being for others through service to God’s world! At Lund, Sweden, in 1952, the World Council of Churches affirmed that churches should act together in all matters except those in which deep differences of conviction compel them to act separately. Our default position is that we act together. It is acting separately which needs an explanation and a compelling reason. If this is true for Christian denominations generally, it is especially true for parishes within a denomination.

Our diocesan vision, the global ecumenical church, Paul’s pleadings, and, more importantly, Jesus’ prayerful yearning, all provide a compelling rationale to engage in ministry together. God calls us to break down silos which isolate us from one another. We belong together in serving God’s mission for the world. That belonging together is most clearly embodied in the ministry partnership between bishop, clergy and people. It is also becoming clearer that our ministry partnerships need to include our Anglican, ecumenical and community neighbours.

Missional

The impetus for serving together in partnership also comes from a movement which has discerned afresh that God is the God of mission. It is rooted in the conviction that God is always and everywhere pursuing a healing and transforming mission of justice, peace and care for the earth – that God is ever working to bring in God’s reign. Its catch phrase is that it is not so much that the church of God has a mission as that the mission of God has a church. That missional God works through whoever is a willing

co-creative, collaborator. As we look out at the “mission fields” of our neighbourhoods, we are discovering that God shows no hesitation to work outside of and even “without” the church. Whether through civil society movements or organizations; visionary individuals or courageous collectives; people of other faiths and of, ostensibly, no faith; those on the margins and protestors on the streets; in the courts and tribunals; or in enlightened boardrooms or philanthropic foundations, God is finding and working with partners in pursuing that mission. When we are most faithful, the church can be amongst God’s partners. And by being such a partner, we will find so many others of God’s friends and partners “out there” in our local neighbourhoods and in the wider world. The excellence we are pursuing includes being missional. Our ministry covenants, therefore, will, as a matter of best practices, commit us both to engage with our neighbours, near and far, and to foster partnerships with other parishes, other faith communities, civil society, governments, but, most especially, those with lived experience of injustice.

What Covenants Are Not

There are strands in our biblical and theological traditions which appear to treat the covenant at Sinai as Israel’s “original” covenant. [J.O. Cobham, “Covenant,” *A Theological Word Book of the Bible*, ed. Alan Richardson, pp. 54-56] While law figures prominently in that deal, not every covenant is accompanied by new laws or *Torah* imposed on the parties. It is helpful to see subsequent covenant stipulations as commentary, *Midrash*, on the original *Torah*. In any case, we misunderstand the significance of the law for Israel if we characterize it as a burden. It is a gift for a people who very much would like to know how they will live out this chosen, committed love relationship we have with the living God. It is worth noting this so that we do not depict every covenant in legalistic contractual terms. There are significant differences between covenants and contracts, not least of which is that covenants establish and express enduring loving relationships. With that focus on establishing and deepening relationships, ministry covenants are not employment contracts. The laws, canons and contracts which govern these aspects of our relationships are found elsewhere.

What Covenants Are

Ministry covenants result from careful and prayerful shared discernment of God’s call to mission. They are declarations of our partnership. They are expressions of the direction we intend to take in pursuit of God’s mission through particular ministries in a particular place and time. They provide a response to the question, “How shall we live out God’s call together here and now?” They communicate clearly our hopes for and requests of ourselves and each other. As such, they provide us with valuable tools for reviewing our progress towards those goals. They, thereby, give us opportunities to revise our goals and strategies when we discover (as we most likely will) that we have been too ambitious and would benefit from course corrections. And they give us opportunities to celebrate with one another and give thanks to God when we discover (as we most certainly will) that God is richly blessing the entire baptized community in the adventure of shared, fulfilling ministry.

