Theological Reflections on the Past 25 Years by Charlie Clauss

On the occasion of Messiah’s 100th anniversary, a picture was taken of all the members that could be gathered. I thought of that picture as I stood in the group for the picture to help mark Messiah’s 125th anniversary. There are a number of people from that first picture who are no longer with us, either through death or the streams of life carrying them to different places. And there are many people who still participate in the community. This continuity and discontinuity is reflected in the themes of our life together, especially in the area of theology.

When we first arrived at Messiah, the Rev Dr Ernie Ashcroft was the rector. I will leave for others to describe his personality (!), what I recount here is his sharp focus on preaching about Jesus. He was an apologist (one who gives a defense), and more often than not, his effort was geared toward showing who Jesus is, especially in his death and resurrection. Fr Ernie was well prepared for the task of this proclamation to a Modern world that denied that the Resurrection was possible; ministry was a second career, having been trained first as a scientist.

This emphasis did not stand alone, but was combined with both work on ministries of healing and faith renewal. Healing ministry was a long standing component of Messiah’s work (here is a strong point on continuity with the present). A large group of Messiah parishioners (then and now) offered prayer for healing, both within the Sunday worship service, and outside those services. Healing, seen as the restoration of the whole person, combined nicely with ongoing efforts at spiritual renewal. Messiah offered frequent renewal weekends and other events, emphasizing the continuing work of the Holy Spirit in the life of the community and its members.

It should be noted that in those times there was a strong influence from the Cursillo movement (an effort with roots in the Roman Catholic Church to facilitate lay renewal). Many Messiah members were active in local Cursillo, which had spillover effects, especially in worship music. Messiah’s waning connection with Cursillo helps to highlight the broader theological currents that have affected Messiah. Messiah’s participation in Cursillo has declined primarily due to the perception that local Cursillo has moved away from a focus on the person and work of Jesus. Whether this perception is correct or not, Cursillo is no longer an influence at Messiah.

The mention of worship music brings up the currents of worship at Messiah. Many churches in the last 25 years have been torn apart by the so called “worship wars.” No doubt there have been conflicts over worship at Messiah, but not with the results reported elsewhere. The double emphasis on Jesus and a commitment to a personal faith dimension have allowed Messiah to develop worship that many describe as quite unique. Built on the foundation of the 1979 Book of Common Prayer, Messiah has constructed a service that can incorporate a wide variety of art and music forms.

Fr Malcolm Ellis became rector in 1994. Curiously, there have been 3 bishops for the Diocese of Minnesota over these 25 years, while Messiah has had 3 rectors. This is pure coincidence, but it provides a background for a major influence over the course of these years. Our relationship with the broader Episcopal church has changed over these years, and tensions around that relationship increased over the course of Fr Malcolm’s tenure. Clouds on the horizon promised the rain of controversy, but Fr Ellis’ time with us was primarily a time for building.

Fr Ellis had experienced a dramatic healing earlier in his life, and so he was very supportive of the healing ministry thriving at Messiah. The healing ministry grew. With events like the Wholeness Through Christ healing weekend in June of 1995. Other healing events followed. The healing teams visible on a Sunday morning were just the tip of an iceberg, with healing prayer, soaking prayer, prayer appointments of many kinds, and an ongoing effort to provide adult education in the area of healing.
One key program of these years was the Alpha program. Alpha is designed to fulfill what has also been Messiah’s two major themes: proclaim Jesus, and draw people into relationship with him. But it also provides, paradoxically, a subtle opportunity to focus inward. While the intent of Alpha is outward evangelism (at least 30 people made faith commitments because of Alpha), for Messiah it served as a way to solidify our commitment to these two main pillars.

Messiah had had a strong children and youth program, during this time, these areas took on a renewed focus. This period could be described as a family ministry season. The children’s Sunday school, “Catechesis of the Good Shepherd,” was (and is) a mainstay of our children’s education program. Likewise, youth ministry was growing. Both of these ministries have as a foundation that children and youth are not just the future, but are called now to participate in the life of the parish and the life of Christian discipleship. This growth in these ministries caused us to start looking our space (or lack there of), eventually leading to the building program.

Central to Fr Ellis’ vision is what could be called a “non-hyphenated Episcopalian-ism.” What was important was what we as a parish were called to do. This was a point of view in ways very similar to Fr Ashcroft, and Fr Ellis expressed this often in the phrase “a place for wherever you are in your faith journey.” At the end of Fr Ellis’ tenure, Messiah was a fairly diverse place! It turned out this diversity was accompanied by fault lines that events beyond Messiah were soon to highlight.

What followed could be described as a perfect storm: Fr Ellis moved on and so we were in an interim time; we began a building program; and the national Episcopal Church in 2003 made some controversial (!) decisions. We might have been able to deal with the first two, but the consecration of a non-celibate gay man as bishop of New Hampshire rocked us back on our heels. We were not prepared as a community to deal with this controversy. The results were not just negative on the financial side, but ministry contracted. At the risk of sensationalism, this was spiritual warfare. We are a place where Jesus is proclaimed and people are called to follow him. The enemy does not like this! We endured his rage (so to speak).

A central misunderstanding in the middle of this was the polity (rooted in a more catholic ecclesiology) of Messiah. People who came to Messiah from other traditions by and large did not grasp Episcopal authority structures. Both the bishop of a diocese and the rector of a parish carry a great deal more authority than many other senior pastors in other denominations. The ownership of property, except in very rare circumstances, goes to the diocese.

Enter Fr John Newton. Fr Newton began his tenure in the middle of these storms (obviously ending one of them). The building is finished after Fr Newton arrives, but the fight over a response to the Robinson consecration is ongoing. After initially voting against joining ACN (Anglican Communion Network – a group of parishes and diocese banding together to speak out for a traditional theological view, especially around human sexuality), Messiah later reverses course and votes to join. Many had left Messiah over the Robinson consecration; now many more leave because of the decision to join ACN.

Membership in ACN might have served Messiah, and especially Fr Newton well if ACN had remained committed to renewal in the Episcopal Church (TEC). However, ACN quickly broke away from TEC. Fr Newton subsequently joined Communion Partner Rectors, a group committed to remaining in TEC and working for renewal.

Fr Newton represented a rather rare perspective. He had a more catholic ecclesiology leading him to stay within the structures of TEC, but in most other ways, he had a Reformed theology. This led to the most notable thing about Fr Newton: his sermons were more often than not “expository;” that is, the sermon found its center in the scriptural text. Fr Newton would preach series on a text, sometimes following the lectionary, but sometimes striking out on a study of a book long after the lectionary had moved on. This “Bibliocentrism,” a hallmark of Evangelicalism, was a defining characteristic of Fr Newton’s time at Messiah.
Also a hallmark of Evangelicalism is a concern for mission (especially world mission), and this too defined Fr Newton. Messiah had had a long time partnership with a parish in Haiti, so mission was not foreign to Messiah. Indeed, the previous two rectors had been “international” and Messiah supported missionaries to many countries around the world. But this took on an added flavor. Fr Newton especially enjoyed introducing Messiah to the liturgies of Anglicans in other countries.

This inclination in Fr Newton turned out to be quite providential. Messiah was the owner of a new, large facility, but the previous controversy had reduced our numbers significantly. Who had we built for? At the Christmas Eve services in 2007, a number of people from Burma came to worship with us. Over the next years, it became clear that part of the reason we had built was for the Karen (a Burmese people group). “World mission” came to us! Ministry to and with the Karen would be a continuing part of Fr Newton’s ministry at Messiah.

In someways, we had come now full circle. Because of strong leadership in children and youth ministry/education (both lay and clergy), Fr Newton could devote more effort to adult education. And so adult ed did prosper, not only through Sunday morning classes and forums, but also through weekend retreats and conferences. Fr Newton brought in speakers and teachers from a variety of places.

Notable in this is that these adult programs were not just about learning in an academic sense, but recaptured Messiah’s long standing center: Proclaiming Jesus and calling people to follow him. This is a “whole person” sort of activity, and include the need to let the participant not only learn facts, but also experience God’s presence. Fr Newton’s “Lenten Quite Days” most clearly illustrate this.

As noted earlier, there have been three rectors over this time frame, with a corresponding three diocesan bishops. It is not overstatement to say that our relationship with the diocese has been strained. A large item in our parish budget is our diocesan assessment (an amount of money we give every year, set by the diocese). The payment of this has often been a matter for some discussion, and in times of financial hardship, we have often not paid the full amount. At one point, we owed the diocese a fairly large sum. They would have been within their rights to have hampered our building program because of it. So it was with baited breath that we welcomed the choice of a new bishop. As it turns out, the new bishop has given us reason to hope in a more healthy relationship with the diocese. One of his first actions was to forgive the debt of many parishes, including Messiah. Time will tell where this relationship will go.

It is interesting that as we celebrate our 125th anniversary, we are again in a time of transition. Just as between Fr Ellis and Fr Newton, God has provided an interim rector to guide us. An Ethiopian church is using our building, and Karen ministry continues. We have had Great Adventure Days (our vacation church school), a youth mission trip, and summer youth interns. Grief has attended us, as long time members have died, and our long time music ministry leader is fighting health concerns. At the end of his years with us, Fr Newton had open heart surgery – what a way to end a tenure! But maybe it is the grief and sorrow, more than the times of relative happiness, that clearly show us the most basic of theological truths: God is with us! We will need to reflect on the past to learn the lesson it has for us, but even more, we will continue to trust God to provide for us and be present with us, come what may.