Co-Creating Common Good: Diocesan Collaboration in the Mission of God

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What is the role and function of the church, as an institutional ecclesial body, in addressing economic inequalities in the United States, or in the world? For those of us who identify as Episcopalians the question might be: What is the vocation of a diocese in “creating common good”? Here, diocese is understood not as the office of the bishop and her/his staff, but rather the common witness to and participation in God’s mission by parishes and worshiping communities in a specific geographic jurisdiction. Put another way, what role do Episcopal churches working in common as a diocese have in addressing the ills and challenges of the economic order in which we all “live and move and have our being”? Is such worldly work an appropriate sphere of interest, action, and investment for Episcopalians when we come together as a diocese? This article will argue that Episcopalians can indeed take important steps to co-create with the triune God an economy (oikos) that is life-giving and abundant for all. It will also offer a few modest examples of how the Episcopal Church in Connecticut is seeking to participate in God’s mission of restoration and reconciliation in the neighborhoods and cities of our state.

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differences across the provinces of the Anglican Communion. The experience of Episcopalians living in the context of an old, established diocese in New England that is wrestling with the end of Christendom is radically different from those who know the challenges of post-earthquake reconstruction in *L’Eglise Episcopale D’Haiti*\(^1\) or the radically multicultural cities of the Diocese of Los Angeles, where worship is in English, Spanish, Chinese, Korean, Tagalog, and Vietnamese each Sunday. Context is fundamental to how a diocese lives into the invitation to create common good.

So what is the context in which the Episcopal Church in Connecticut seeks to be faithful to God’s leading in the ordering of our economic life? Our contemporary economic realities are greatly influenced by our history and geography. From colonial times through the eighteenth and into the nineteenth centuries, families in Connecticut scratched out meager incomes on small subsistence farms in often rocky and unforgiving soil, while trade, whaling, and fishing characterized the towns and growing cities along the shoreline of Long Island Sound and the waterways of the Connecticut River. From the mid-nineteenth through the first half of the twentieth century, the innovative and enterprising spirit of Connecticut Yankees resulted in new advances in manufacturing, particularly in metallurgy and machinery, as the state led the way in the production of guns, clocks, and tools.

Most of the manufacturing that had characterized the towns and cities of Connecticut for over a century began to decline, however, in the mid-twentieth century, as industries moved to the southern United States or overseas in search of cheaper labor. Today drivers on Interstate Route 95 along Connecticut’s shoreline with Long Island Sound will find boarded up and burned out empty factories from New London to New Haven to Bridgeport. While Connecticut’s historic manufacturing economy declined, new industries in the financial sector began to grow. Hartford became known as the “Insurance Capital of the World,” and Fairfield County’s close proximity to New York City in the southwestern corner of the state meant that bankers and brokers could easily commute to Wall Street. Historic farming

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\(^1\) *L’Eglise Episcopale D’Haiti* (The Episcopal Church of Haiti) is the diocese in the Episcopal Church with the largest number of members. Because of its unique history of being an independent church before becoming a diocese in the Episcopal Church, it maintains its name as The Episcopal Church of Haiti instead of the Episcopal Diocese in Haiti.
communities became bedroom communities for those working in the financial sector as farms gave way to housing developments and shopping malls. Before long, investment bankers and hedge fund managers began to set up their own shops in Fairfield County in towns such as Stamford, Greenwich, and Westport.

What has resulted from these changes in Connecticut industries in the last half of the twentieth century is an economic order where communities made rich from the newer financial industries are in close proximity to poor cities now bereft of historic manufacturing jobs. Similar to cities in the third world, where the very rich often live very close to the very poor, in Connecticut some of the world’s wealthiest people live in incredibly affluent towns immediately adjacent to some of the most economically depressed cities in our country. The gap between the rich and the poor in Connecticut says it all: in 2012, Connecticut ranked first in inequality among all states, with the average annual income of the top one percent of Connecticut residents at $2,683,600, and that of the other 99 percent only $52,603. It is not surprising that, since the local tax base provides the bulk of school funding, there is a great discrepancy in both educational resources and scholastic achievement between the richer and poorer communities in Connecticut. For years Connecticut has had the worst educational achievement gap in the United States between its minority students living in poor cities and their white peers living in affluent communities. The results from a U.S. Department of Education test given to students each year in every state showed that in 2013 Connecticut had the largest achievement gap between its minority students and their peers in five of twelve indicators. Although this was an improvement from seven of twelve a few years earlier, Connecticut nevertheless continued to lead the nation in educational inequality.

While we may wonder if the rich are getting richer and the poor are getting poorer in the contemporary global economic order, this is undeniably the reality in Connecticut.

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Co-Creating in the Missio Dei

What is the vocation of a diocese located in Connecticut, given a context of such gross economic and educational inequalities? More specifically, what should the sixty thousand Episcopalians in 168 parishes and worshiping communities in the Episcopal Church in Connecticut do to help create common good, given that our state has the largest gap between the rich and the poor in the United States?

These questions, while seemingly apt, begin with the wrong premise. In our desire to create common good, we should not start with asking what can we do, but rather, what has God already done to create common good? For the work of creating common good is the work of the loving creator God, first and foremost. As Christians we affirm that God came to dwell among us in Jesus, the Incarnate One—fully human and fully divine. In Jesus’ life, death, and resurrection God has broken down the dividing walls that alienate us from God, each other, and all creation. Through the power of the Holy Spirit, God empowers us in baptism to be about God’s work, God’s mission, of making all things new. In baptism we are commissioned—co-missioned, within God’s mission—to restore all people to unity with God and each other in Christ. In baptism we are invited to participate in the mission of God, the missio Dei, and become co-creators with the Triune God in God’s common good.4

The first thing a diocese needs to do to co-create common good with God is to better understand and inhabit the narrative of the missio Dei. We need to have a grasp of how Holy Scripture is the story of God’s mission to restore all people to unity with God and each other in Christ. A facility with and knowledge of the narrative of God’s mission as presented in the Bible is crucial if we are to join in God’s work of redemption. As the great Christian educator and biblical storyteller Dr. Verna Dozier once said to me, “If you can’t tell the story of the Bible in ten minutes, then you really don’t know what’s in the Bible.” A brief overview of the metanarrative of God’s mission as presented in Holy Scripture can help us to join with God as co-creators of the

4 A helpful resource for understanding the call to alleviate poverty as part of one’s baptismal vocation is Sabina Alkire and Edmund Newell, What Can One Person Do? Faith to Heal a Broken World (New York: Church Publishing, 2005). See especially chapter 2 for a summary of the biblical narrative of God’s mission.
For how can we be about creating common good if we do not know and believe who God the creator is, that God in Jesus has brought about a new creation, and how God the Holy Spirit empowers us to be about God’s mission in the world? In the Episcopal Church in Connecticut we have tried to sum up the biblical story of God’s mission in one hundred words. This brief summary is found in diocesan convention publications, in parish teaching materials, on bookmarks, and on our diocesan website. It invites and reminds the faithful of the diocese to be co-creators with God in a new creation in which all share in the common good. “God’s Mission (100 Word Version)” reads as follows:

God loved into creation—
the universe, earth, humanity.
It was diverse, and it was good.

Human sin entered and distorted
our relationship with God,
one another, and creation.

God yearns to make all whole again.
This is God’s mission.

God chose and liberated a people,
sent the law and the prophets.

God came in Jesus,
fully human and fully divine.

In Jesus’ life, death and
resurrection we are restored
to unity with God and each other.

God sent the Holy Spirit,
empowering the Body of Christ.

God co-missions us in baptism
to participate in God’s mission
of restoration and reconciliation.6

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5 For an overview of how the Bible taken as a whole is a metanarrative of a God in mission, see Christopher J. H. Wright, The Mission of God: Unlocking the Bible’s Grand Narrative (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 2006).

The Missional Network is a collaborative group of missiologists and mission activists who, following in the footsteps of Lesslie Newbigin, are actively engaged with the question of whether the West can be converted. Alan Roxburgh, one of the key leaders in the Missional Network, has emphasized that parishes and congregations, supported by denominational judicatories such as dioceses, synods, and conferences, need to actively experiment with different ways to engage God’s mission in the world. Roxburgh encourages religious leaders to cooperate with civic and community leaders and organizations “in the neighborhoods” in which we live and work. Only by joining God in the neighborhood and trying experiments to advance God’s mission of restoration and reconciliation can we co-create common good.

In the Episcopal Church in Connecticut we have been trying experiments in God’s mission to co-create common good across parishes and in diocesan-wide programs. Three brief examples are worth noting as representative of efforts to join God in God’s mission in the neighborhood: (1) a parish addressing housing needs for the elderly and poor in an economically depressed section of New Haven; (2) an opportunity for clergy to renew their ordination vows by discovering others working for the common good in Hartford; and (3) a retreat for postulants and candidates for Holy Orders focused on discovering the kingdom of God in the cities and villages of eastern Connecticut.

(1) Creating Affordable Housing

St. Luke’s Development Corporation (SLDC) began in 1997 as a response to God’s mission with a goal to transform an economically disadvantaged neighborhood in New Haven. Lay and clergy leaders of St. Luke’s Episcopal Church, including the Reverend Victor Rogers and his wife, Gloria Rogers, felt called to address the needs of the people in their neighborhood. St. Luke’s, one of the historic black
churches in the Episcopal Church, has a century-old tradition of addressing the social, political, and economic ills of the world. It was from St. Luke’s that the Reverend James Theodore Holly, then its rector, departed in 1861 for Haiti in order to live a life free of racism.

St. Luke’s Development Corporation, a separately incorporated 501(c)(3) not-for-profit organization with its own board made up primarily of lay leaders from St. Luke’s Episcopal Church, is dedicated to “God’s missionary call to provide opportunities for economic development and community revitalization.” In 2005, the SLDC entered into a partnership with Housing and Urban Development’s Section 202 Supportive Housing for the Elderly to build the Josephine Jarvis Gray Elderly Housing complex on a lot close to the church. The complex provides eighteen units of affordable housing for the elderly and cooperates with social service and community development agencies in the neighborhood.

St. Luke’s Development Corporation is currently embarking on its most ambitious project to date. SLDC is working closely with Yale Law School, Yale School of Architecture, and Housing Enterprises, Inc. (another not-for-profit organization focusing on housing for the poor) to purchase vacant lots and substandard housing and retail buildings adjacent to the church building. The plan is to fully develop the block with three affordable single-family homes, a twenty-eight-unit apartment building for low- and middle-income families, community meeting facilities for local gatherings and educational initiatives, and newly developed retail space for income generation. St. Luke’s Development Corporation is one experiment in God’s mission that is co-creating common good with God and community partners in the Whalley Avenue neighborhood of New Haven.

(2) Renewing Vows for Collaborative Mission

Engaging with the powers and principalities by testifying to sovereignty of Christ in the political, social, and economic realm is basic to co-creating common good. The bishops of the Episcopal Church in Connecticut take very seriously the ordination charge to be ”one with the apostles in proclaiming Christ’s resurrection and interpreting the Gospel, and to testify to Christ’s sovereignty as Lord of lords and King of kings.” We are committed “to make Christ known as Savior and

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9 From a capital campaign fundraising letter of October 2015 by Gloria Rogers, Fundraising Committee Chair of the St. Luke’s Development Corporation.
Lord, and to share in the renewing of his world.”\textsuperscript{10} This vocation of proclamation and renewal of the world, which we share with all who are baptized, has become a central focus of the traditional Reaffirmation of Ordination Vows and Service of the Blessing of Oils each Holy Tuesday since 2012, offering us an opportunity to experiment with new ways of co-creating common good.

In 2012, with the key leadership of Bishop James E. Curry, then Bishop Suffragan, the Episcopal Church in Connecticut was deeply involved in the movement to end the death penalty in the state. On Holy Tuesday 2012 the three bishops of Connecticut took their witness against the death penalty to the streets of Hartford.\textsuperscript{11} Leading the Episcopal clergy, along with ecumenical and interfaith partners, the bishops prayed the Stations of the Cross in the neighborhoods of the capital city, which was wracked by violence and poverty. This witness led directly to the abolition of the death penalty in Connecticut.\textsuperscript{12} The following year, in the wake of the horror and tragedy of the shootings at Sandy Hook Elementary School in December 2012, the bishops organized a similar witness against violence in all forms, including the violence of economic inequalities, in Washington D.C. And so in Holy Week 2013 the bishops of Connecticut led over four hundred Episcopalians from Connecticut and across the Episcopal Church in the Stations of the Cross in our nation’s capital.\textsuperscript{13}

As a direct follow-up to Trinity Institute’s conference “Creating Common Good,” Bishop Suffragan Laura Ahrens suggested that our Holy Tuesday 2015 observance focus on discovering and participating in the in-breaking of the common good with collegial organizations

\textsuperscript{10} From “The Examination,” in The Ordination of a Bishop and The Ordination of a Priest, The Book of Common Prayer (New York: Church Hymnal, 1979), 517, 531.

\textsuperscript{11} The Episcopal Church in Connecticut has historically been served by three bishops, one diocesan and two suffragan. In late 2014, the Rt. Rev. James E. Curry retired as Bishop Suffragan, and the diocese now has two bishops: the Rt. Rev. Ian T. Douglas, Bishop Diocesan, and the Rt. Rev. Laura J. Ahrens, Bishop Suffragan.


in the neighborhoods of Hartford. The day began with the bishops and clergy, along with colleague pastors and bishop from the New England Synod of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, gathering in Bushnell Park to worship with “Church by the Pond,” an outdoor eucharistic community of Christ Church Cathedral in Hartford comprised of the homeless and poor. Following a eucharist with sisters and brothers in Christ who live on the margins of our society, the clergy then fanned out to walk to four different locations in Hartford that have a primary pastorate to the poor and the oppressed in the city.

The clergy spent the morning hearing the stories of how the common good is being realized in the neighborhoods of Hartford, in the care of the indigent sick at Hartford Hospital, in educational opportunities for inner city young adults at Capitol Community College, in broad-based community services at Hartford Public Library, and in feeding programs at Hands on Hartford/Manna Community Meals. Moved by the witness of these four community agencies, the Episcopal and Lutheran clergy then gathered back at Christ Church Cathedral to participate in a service of the blessing of holy oils and to discuss over lunch how we all might cooperate with agencies in our own neighborhoods to address poverty and the needs of the marginalized. It was clear that the oils of chrism and healing that were blessed in the worship were signs and symbols of our baptismal vocation to co-create common good in God’s mission of restoration and reconciliation.

(3) Trusting the Spirit in the Neighborhood

A final example of how the Episcopal Church in Connecticut is experimenting in God’s mission to co-create common good is recent changes we have made in the ordination process in the diocese. Candidates for ordination, both as deacons and as presbyters (priests), in Connecticut need to be fundamentally committed to the mission of God in Jesus through the power of the Holy Spirit and to see their primary calling to God’s mission in the neighborhood. Given changing demographics of the Episcopal Church in Connecticut there is a declining demand for full-time parish priests in the diocese. When full-time positions in parishes are open, the pool of applicants is usually drawn from across the Episcopal Church. Priority in the ordination process is thus given to candidates who see themselves as “hybrid” priests who will both serve a gathered eucharistic community on a
part-time basis and also maintain secular employment in the wider world. Such hybrid priests are often directly involved in secular vocations that seek to build up the common good, such as artists, teachers, social service workers, doctors, and nurses.

Attention is given in the theological education and formation of priests and deacons in the Episcopal Church in Connecticut to keep the candidates engaged in the struggles and possibilities of God’s mission in the neighborhood. Shortly after Easter 2015, the bishops gathered with eighteen postulants and candidates for ordination at the diocesan conference center. Seeking to extend the lessons learned on Holy Tuesday about co-creating common good with colleagues in organizations in Connecticut’s cities and neighborhoods, the bishops decided to do a bold new thing for the retreat.

After a meal together, those gathered engaged in a study of Luke 10:1–9, in which Jesus sends the seventy into the towns to cure the sick and proclaim the kingdom of God. After the Bible study, the eighteen postulants and candidates were randomly paired off and assigned to the three different “towns” of Waterbury, Torrington, and Litchfield. Waterbury and Torrington are former mill towns that now struggle with high unemployment and urban decay. Litchfield is a former rural farming community that is becoming increasing gentrified with weekend homeowners from New York City. All three have significant struggles in creating common good, given the income gap between the rich and the poor in Connecticut.

The postulants and candidates were then sent out, two by two, to discover what the living Christ is up to in the neighborhoods of Waterbury, Torrington, and Litchfield. Carrying no purse, no bag, and no sandals, they were to proclaim the peace of God to those whom they met. Accepting the hospitality of others, they were to open themselves up to and discover the kingdom of God that has come near. Many of the postulants and candidates expressed fear and trembling at the prospect of being so radically open to Jesus and trusting in the Holy Spirit in unknown places. Yet when they returned that evening, each pair told amazing stories of encountering the creation of common good in a nursing home for the poor and the forgotten, in a clinic attending to those struggling with opiate addictions, in a day care center for adults who are differently abled, in a judge’s chambers where restraining orders are granted to protect the abused, in an arts cooperative revitalizing the closed industrial mills. Each postulant
and candidate could easily identify where he or she witnessed the sick being cured and the kingdom of God drawing near.

The following morning the postulants and candidates gathered with the bishops and the rectors and vestry members of the parishes in Waterbury, Torrington, and Litchfield to discuss God’s mission of restoration and reconciliation in these three “neighborhoods” of Connecticut. It was a rich and powerful time of sharing and imagination, and all left renewed in their call to be co-creators with God in creating common good.

Concluding Observations

This essay setting the call to create common good within the lived experience of one diocese has maintained that that work of creating common good is first and foremost the work of God—a manifestation of God’s mission of restoration and reconciliation as found in Holy Scripture. The body of Christ, in all of its incarnational particularities, has a key role to play in God’s mission, and baptism is our commission—our co-mission—to become co-creators with God in creating common good. In the case of the Episcopal Church in Connecticut, faithfulness to God’s mission requires us to address the gross economic inequalities of the state in which we live. By pursuing different experiments in God’s mission we will discover God anew in the neighborhoods of our cities and towns and God will use us to co-create common good. Nothing could be more exciting than to join with God and one another in this hope-filled, life-giving venture.