

NYAC Cooperative Parishes: One Body, One Spirit, One Hope

“Therefore, as a prisoner for the Lord, I encourage you to live as people worthy of the call you received from God. Conduct yourselves with all humility, gentleness, and patience. Accept each other with love, and make an effort to preserve the unity of the Spirit with the peace that ties you together. You are one body and one spirit, just as God also called you in one hope. There is one Lord, one faith, one baptism, and one God and Creator of all, who is over all, through all, and in all.” –Ephesians 4:1-6

The Standstill

On a Wednesday in early April, the Bishop and Cabinet were involved in its normal appointment process. When the Bishop and Cabinet work on appointments, the group goes through an intentional and specific process that considers the needs of a church, the congregation and the needs of the community. Then the Bishop asks the Cabinet, “Given all that we know, who has the gifts and skills to serve the community and congregation?”

When this question was asked on this particular Wednesday, there was silence. There were no names shared because there no names left to be shared. All available pastors had been assigned and there were still 40 churches with open appointments. The Cabinet had reached a standstill in the appointment work.

How did we get here?

The Cabinet realized the Conference had reached the point of convergence of several realities. As a conference, we are facing a tidal wave of retirements among our active clergy. Those retirements have been added to by those who have chosen to retire early. Additionally, over a dozen active pastors shared they had been impacted by pandemic-related pressures and they could not pastor anymore.

That day, Bishop Bickerton sent the Cabinet home hours before they were scheduled to leave because they were done for the day. They were up against a reality they did not know how to address in that moment. The Cabinet left to go to their homes and pray and ponder their next steps together. The next day, they gathered together and acknowledged that the conference had never had this kind of a dilemma, therefore the Cabinet had not been here before. Yet, they also shared with one another a deep belief and faith that God would lead them. Together, they began to architect a model that would guide them. The Bishop suspended the appointment process and the Cabinet started to explore restructuring the Conference into intentional cooperative parishes. The Cabinet took a deep dive into every district, looking carefully at every church, charge, congregation and community to discover patterns and possibilities. Within that discovery process, God helped them remember that they were already equipped with the tools to address the appointment problem, as well as issues of sustainability, denominational strife and the changing landscape of ministry throughout the conference.

Seeing with New Eyes

In 2019, every church in the New York Annual Conference was organized into a system of cooperative parishes. The Conference formed loosely organized cluster groups for support and conversations about potential mutual ministry with the stated purpose of enhancing our church's efforts at mission and ministry in our regions. When the Covid-19 pandemic hit, these newly-formed cooperative parishes appeared providential. Cooperative parishes took on a new life of possibility for clergy and congregations. Being in relationship and sharing ministries across the parishes helped with the mental, emotional and spiritual issues related to the ongoing pandemic. Many clergy and congregations found the cooperative parish model a positive way to engage in mutual ministry and support.

The Cabinet recalled this history during that week in early April, as they began to see with new eyes the possibilities that were unfolding before them. They started to talk about the ways an intentional and formal cooperative parish model could address the open appointments and sustainability issues of the congregations in regions across the conference. They grew excited over the ways this cooperative parish model could offer possibilities for churches to equip their laity to make new disciples and have a transformative impact on their communities. At the same time, they encountered resistance and a desire to do their work as we had always done it. Through patient conversation and exploration, together they found that they could not go back or stay the same. They needed to move forward. Through faithful and grace-filled dialogue, they began to align around the ways the cooperative parish model could be the answer they had been seeking. Within a few weeks, the Cabinet was certain that the Holy Spirit had led them to see with new eyes the myriad opportunities within the Cooperative Parish model for mission and ministry across the Conference.

What is a Cooperative Parish?

Paragraph 206 of the 2016 Book of Discipline begins this way: "Local churches, with the guidance of the Holy Spirit, may enhance their witness to one another and to the world by showing forth the love of Jesus Christ through forms of mutual cooperation." A **cooperative ministry** is when groups of people representing two or more churches share their ministries to meet the needs of the community. Example of this are local churches completing a mission project together or working together in a community feeding ministry. A **cooperative parish** is an ongoing structured way to employ cooperative ministries between churches within a defined region. The cooperative parish will have a Parish Council with clergy and laity from each church in the cooperative parish to discuss, plan and make decisions regarding mission and ministry through the cooperative parish.

There are several forms of cooperative parishes. Most of the churches in the New York Conference will be engaged in a Multiple Charge Parish where every church in the Cooperative Parish maintains their local church identity and participates in the Cooperative Parish Council for shared mission and ministry. In a Multiple Charge Parish, clergy are appointed to the Cooperative Parish and assigned to a local church(es) and their communities. There will be some churches engaged in a Larger Parish, where the Parish Council is more central in the administration, planning and decision-making for all of the churches in the Cooperative Parish. In a Larger Parish, clergy are appointed to the Cooperative Parish and share the assignment to

all the churches of the Parish. Together with the Parish Council, the clergy of a Larger Parish will serve the needs of all the churches and the communities of the parish.

Benefits of a Cooperative Parish

The Cooperative Parish provides the opportunity for all churches to engage in ministry together that they cannot do as individual churches. Many churches do not have the people or resources to organize a church missions event, confirmation retreat or regular outreach activities on their own. However, these mission and ministry opportunities are possible in a cooperative parish. Cooperative Parishes also offer the laity to have access to different and new ministry opportunities, experience the gifts and leadership of other clergy and laity across the parish, and use their gifts and calling in new contexts and settings across the parish. Through Cooperative Parishes, the laity can be empowered and equipped to live into their unique ministries.

Every year at annual conference, Bishop Bickerton reminds pastors that he appoints them to a community, not just a local church. He reiterates his expectation that pastors will use the church as a mission outpost to the community. Cooperative Parishes are a Wesleyan model of our connection to expand our church's ministry to the communities, using our churches and our parish ministries as the center of transformative possibility to all the people in the parish.

God Is with Us

We have seen the hand of God working in our midst and have seen God opening a door for the New York Conference. This is a new model of ministry and structure for this conference that is an opportunity, not an obstacle. This open door will help us see the next expression of Methodism, connected to our Wesleyan history of circuit riders and Methodist societies. We know there is uncertainty. There is potential for confusion, conflict, miscommunication and misunderstanding. Yet, for the sake of the Gospel we have been trusted to proclaim, we must find ways to get out of our comfort zones, lead with courage and begin to take our cooperative and collaborative ministry to the next level. God has called us to make and nurture disciples. Knowing that God is with us, let us accept God's invitation to do more together than we can ask, think or imagine and walk through this open door.