

Shared Ministry in Focus Calvary Church of the Brethren

You call me 'Teacher' and 'Lord,' and rightly so, for that is what I am. Now that I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also should wash one another's feet. I have set you an example that you should do as I have done for you. Very truly I tell you, no servant is greater than his master, nor is a messenger greater than the one who sent him. Now that you know these things, you will be blessed if you do them. John 13:13-17, NIV

On Sunday, January 27, Calvary Church of the Brethren overwhelmingly voted to license Charlie Estep and Jonathan Martino to the set-apart ministry in what was the culmination of many years of prayer, visioning and discussion. The congregation has come full circle over the past 90 years, moving from the days of bi-vocational, free ministry, to supporting a full-time pastor, to utilizing a combination of paid and bi-vocational ministers, alongside unpaid lay leaders.

When Salem Church of the Brethren planted a new congregation in an existing church building just outside Winchester, Virginia, in 1928, their vision for the church was based on the premise that, "The elders, ministers and deacons were in charge of the spiritual life of the church."ⁱ A team of bi-vocational pastors served the needs of the growing congregation, and by 1956, the Salem Church had granted congregational status to the Winchester church plant, and they became Calvary Church of the Brethren. Rev. J. Floyd Wine assumed all preaching and pastoral responsibilities in 1957 on a part time basis. The church hired its first full time paid pastor, the Rev. Fred M. Bowman, in 1968. The congregation maintained this pastoral leadership model (i.e., a single, paid, full time pastor) until 2017, when the church embraced a Shared Ministry approach.ⁱⁱ

One year has passed since the pastoral leadership portion of the Shared Ministry project began and the congregation is currently evaluating the outcomes after the initial year. District Office staff recently spoke with the pastors and a few lay leaders to learn how this approach began and to find out how well it is working for them. Previous Calvary Moderator and Church Board Chair Betty Keller said, "I think it's going well; there's room for growth and change." Former Calvary Moderator and Church Board Chair Steve Diehl, who served his two terms during the transition, observed, "It's going better than anticipated. The pastoral staff has worked well and prevented a lot of hiccups."

It was a startling revelation to discover how long this concept has been forming in the mind of Sr. Pastor, Clarence "Chuck" Davis, Jr. Although Pastor Davis has been serving in full-time ministry at Calvary since October of 1982, he said the idea germinated even earlier, when he was ministering in Pocahontas County, West Virginia, with David Rittenhouse. Rev. Rittenhouse has been a treasured mentor for Pastor Davis and has taught him many important things about ministry.

Pastor Davis believes the New Testament laid the foundation for shared pastoral ministry. The Apostle Paul and other early Church leaders cooperated with each other to spread the gospel message. Pastor Davis had the opportunity to observe this ancient understanding of ministry first hand when he was serving with the congregation in Pocahontas County, which met in five different meetinghouses, in the early 1980s.

Since the vision for Shared Ministry at Calvary was built on an existing idea, which had been experienced by Pastor Davis, there was no need to begin to develop a Shared Ministry concept completely from scratch. The idea has evolved over time, and with the input of dedicated committee members and others in the church who discerned together what the Shared Ministry should embrace, the idea became a reality. Pastor Davis emphasized that discerning the vision was half the journey; the committee then had to express the vision to the congregation "in a way that others could see it."

Shared Ministry Beginnings

A foreshadowing of Shared Ministry began with the congregation before the pastoral Shared Ministry was finalized. Examples include the weekly Feed the Hungry program that provides a hot meal every Monday to people in Winchester who are homeless; the teams that go to the hospital to visit with the sick; and various other helps ministries headed up by volunteers. The pastoral portion of the Shared Ministry concept was expanded as the local leadership worked on the vision.

When the concept began to take shape, Diehl said, “The Shared Ministry was a big concept—a huge change for us. I had a fear the congregation would not accept it because most people don’t like change, and that could have torn down the idea.” Diehl admitted he was not particularly in favor of the idea at first. He became more open to the idea after Pastor Davis suffered some health problems. Diehl began to see that a pastoral ministry where the pastor was working 70 or more hours a week—but still could not meet all the pastoral needs—was not sustainable.

Keller confessed that she was “...interested, but not totally accepting of the idea at first.” However, she felt she was “...willing to learn” and her acceptance grew. Associate Minister Charlie Estep said he was “...not sure what [Shared Ministry] was meant to be.” After fir through the process more, Estep likened the vision to a cone where the apex is the first seed planted and the reality expands as the cone does. He explained that the expansion of the vision happened as the church took time and tried to figure out what God wanted to do. This gave the Spirit the chance to develop the seed.

Associate Minister Jonathan Martino learned of the Shared Ministry concept later in the process and said, “I loved the idea when I heard about it but wasn’t sure how I would fit into it.” Martino had pastored on his own for five years at Hall Church, a small congregation in Nebraska, where he was accustomed to serving as the primary leader and decision-maker when it came to ministry direction. Martino was hesitant yet intrigued by the concept of shared ministry; although a new, untested idea, when two or three share in the ministry together, the potential scope for ministry is much broader than what one minister alone can provide.

From his perspective, Diehl identified what he thought was the most important thing that led to launching Shared Ministry: “We found the right people to be on the committee. We had a great group. They were really prayerful and cautious,” Diehl said. He further observed: “This was a five-year process, so the main challenge was to tweak things along the way and know what to share, and when to share it. There was a lot of thought that went into how to present information that involved a completely new way of doing things. It was as important to know what not to say as to know what to say. This was because information could change as the committee discussed ideas, yet the group wanted to keep everyone informed. Some decisions came quickly, others took more time to make.

In April 2013, the committee held its first meeting with the congregation and gathered input for forming a Shared Ministry program at Calvary. The initial responses generated specific questions the committee could study and develop. Ironically, this first discussion also led to people volunteering to form teams to participate in visitation and engage in ministries of helps to serve the practical needs of the congregation. Perhaps, it was important for the congregation to initiate the concept of Shared Ministry at the level of practical service, because it gave everyone the chance to have a role in the work of the church. Through engaging in service themselves, the congregation set the tone for future discussions.

Diehl identified a marked difference between the first meeting with the congregation and the second meeting two years later. At the first meeting, people were asking very good questions that really had no answers at that point. By the second meeting, a lot of the questions had been addressed, and they could see that “Pastor Davis wasn’t getting any younger,” Diehl said jokingly. “We didn’t want to ask Pastor Davis to leave; we wanted to keep Calvary the same,” Diehl added.

Keller recalled that getting the idea to move forward "...was a gradual thing." Estep emphasized that "There was no agenda being pushed." Because the committee members did not have a certain model in mind, the congregation could trust what the committee was bringing to them. Finally, a draft plan was approved by the congregation in October 2016 and the committee sought initial commitments from Charlie Estep and Jonathan Martino to fill the newly created ministry positions. With these initial commitments in place, the proposal was submitted to congregational vote in February 2017 and the plan was officially approved.

Estep was well respected in the congregation as an adult Sunday School teacher and leader. He accepted the call when it came and has served the congregation as a bi-vocational minister. Jonathan Martino had previously been invited to visit Calvary and bring a few messages, and the congregation was comfortable having him on the pastoral ministry team. He also, felt the leading of the Spirit to move his family halfway across the country and participate in the pastoral ministry at Calvary.

Pastor Davis recalled the Sunday morning in April 2017, when the three men selected to serve in the pastoral Shared Ministry stood before the congregation and a pin was given to each wife to affix to their husband's lapel. The pin was a depiction of the "Full Armor of God," and it was then that Pastor Davis felt they were going to become a solid team.

This pinning ceremony launched the transition into the pastoral portion of the Shared Ministry at Calvary. The four-year phased plan was officially implemented a few weeks later, in May 2017. The plan has Pastor Davis preaching a little less each year until he fully retires from his role as the senior pastor. At that point, he becomes a kind of "Pastor Emeritus" at Calvary but will continue to participate in leadership and preach occasionally. As Pastor Davis relinquishes more of the preaching duties throughout the designated four years, Martino will step up and fill the pulpit more often. Estep will fill in an average of once every six weeks or so.

The pastoral team cooperatively works out the nuts and bolts of week-to-week ministry by sitting down together and selecting the texts for upcoming sermons. Minister of Music Maria Anderson works well with all of them and is credited with making things seamless between ministers. "Maria has to get a lot of the credit," Estep said, "because she has accentuated the Shared Ministry."

The Reality

What is it like to be one of several pastors in pastoral Shared Ministry? When asked about the best part of working together to minister to the Calvary congregation, Martino quickly noted, "I've grown a lot...I'm learning about the congregation." He also said, "Seeing a combined effort—teaming up—is exciting!" Martino reflected about being mentored by Pastor Davis, but no one at that time had any idea that a decade later, he would be serving alongside his mentor in the pastoral Shared Ministry at Calvary.

Estep explained the Shared Ministry using the example from Proverbs 27:17. "As iron sharpens iron...", we have been sharpened by one another. There is a synergistic effect; three can do more than one. Pastor Chuck [Davis] has helped us avoid pitfalls," he said.

Pastor Davis responded, "It's the 'priesthood of believers' in practice." One of the benefits is there is "...more openness and honesty" as they share the pastoral responsibilities. "It's three men desperately desiring to know God. There is love, peace and unity. It's a beautiful experience," he explained.

What challenges await pastors who embark on Shared Ministry? Estep offered, "It's the same thing again, 'iron sharpening iron.' We have some frank discussions about things to keep on the same page. The differences are important. There must be honesty and vulnerability. If we agreed 100%, the church wouldn't go anywhere. We need that diversity. It's unity, not uniformity."

Benefits

The benefits of successfully implementing the first year of the Shared Ministry program are numerous. The primary success was the congregation was willing to discern the vision alongside the committee, and they waited patiently as answers to the tough questions were developed. This maturity in the congregation gave the Spirit freedom to bring the vision into focus. The official process took five years to initiate, develop and implement. Therefore, everyone is in this together.

Another big benefit of the Shared Ministry is that it has provided for the continuity of the congregation's vision over time. In the past, when Calvary transitioned from one pastor to the next, the current pastor left, and another pastor started all over. This process often meant the congregation would have to adjust to new priorities in ministry because the established, on-going leadership in various areas of service was removed.

The credit for the success of discerning a vision together and employing a team of ministers to provide leadership can be attributed to the congregation and the committee, as well as, the ministers selected to serve together. The personal attributes and characteristics, or 'fruits of the Spirit,' that each pastor possesses has made Shared Ministry possible.

Martino has found in being willing to "listen and work with" the others, the ministry can work hand in glove. "Each has to perceive what needs to be done and take leadership to get things accomplished to relieve the burden of the others on the team," he said. Estep observed, "We all think we're right, but we have to be able to learn from the others. We have to receive the counsel given and have a teachable spirit." He admits, "I've worked hard on humility. There's no place for pride, no air of competition...and things are out of your comfort zone."

From the congregation's perspective, Diehl characterized the central point as "Each have strengths, weaknesses and differences, but the message is consistent." Pastor Davis agreed and said, "Comments from members of the congregation have indicated that is the case—no matter who is speaking from the pulpit, the message is biblical."

What Calvary has Learned

If other congregations are considering Shared Ministry, the leadership at Calvary has some wisdom to share. "There were a few bumps in the road along the way," Estep observed. "We made some mistakes...this is not a business process improvement plan because this is not a business," he said. Estep also noted making mistakes and realizing that church is not business actually helped to refine the discernment process.

Martino saw leadership as foundational to success. "A central individual is crucial to the ministry," he said. Pastor Davis agreed. Reflecting to his time ministering in Pocahontas County, he said, "When David [Rittenhouse] was serving out of the country, we realized a central leader is vitally important in a team ministry." Though Pastor Davis is currently fulfilling the role as central leader, he said, "I see myself becoming more of an encourager....my role is diminishing, and it should be that way."

Even though there were bumps along the way, "The system worked," Pastor Davis stated. By system, he included the direction received from the Shenandoah District Office, as well as, waiting on the Spirit to lead. Not only was ministry direction important, but administrative systems had to iron out the wrinkles. Diehl noted the process wasn't just about the vision; the budget had to be able to support the proposed ministry plan, as well.

Reiterating an earlier point, Pastor Davis feels the committee is key to success. "You don't want 'yes' people and you don't want 'no' people. You need people who are committed to Christ and to discerning God's will. They must have the ability to weigh things. Our success was having a committee to discern God's way. Laying that foundation was crucial."

Estep added, "Without District support, we couldn't have gone down this road. They trusted us." District Executive Minister John Jantzi responded: "Sometimes, we have to let go and allow God to develop new things."

Jesus did a new thing, too, when He knelt to wash His disciples' feet. It took humility, great love and a willingness to sacrifice Himself for others. What it produced has led us to this point. The Calvary congregation is operating in Shared Ministry in ways that have not been experienced in decades. Will the bi-vocational minister, as part of a pastoral team, become the new model for the growth and nurture of Church of the Brethren congregations in the Shenandoah District? The answer lies in the leading of the Holy Spirit, the humility and willingness of believers to serve, the capacity of the District to educate pastors and the openness of congregations to respond to increasing needs for pastoral ministry. Perhaps, other congregations will "Let go, and allow God to develop new things."

ⁱ J. Floyd Wine, *A History of Calvary Church of the Brethren* (Boyce: Carr Publishing, 1972), p. 32.

ⁱⁱ *Ibid.*, pp.13-30.