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Reconnecting to Church

The parish church is the unique site where the biggest idea of all — a universe created by love — is put together with the most mundane of human events.

By Joseph Britton

In her memoir *Leaving Church* (HarperCollins, 2006), the noted preacher Barbara Brown Taylor chronicles her unexpected vocational transition from parish priest to college professor. She offers by way of explanation that somewhere along the way she had come to realize that “feeding people was no longer feeding me.” Yet her move from church to academy was not entirely discontinuous: in the end, she affirms that on her checklist of things to hold onto, even in her new collegiate circumstances, was faith itself.

Tracing a trajectory in the opposite direction, from seminary dean to parish priest, I have had a rather contrary experience, one of re-connecting with rather than becoming distanced from the local congregation. Perhaps in my case this contrasting experience is best explained by W.H. Vanstone’s classic, *Love’s Endeavour, Love’s Expense: The Response of Being to the Love of God* (Darton, Longman, and Todd, 1977), a little book I fortuitously came across just as my transition back to the parish began. As so often seems the case, it was providentially the right book at the right time.

Vanstone, who died in 1999, was a brilliant priest and theologian in post-war England. Yet he passed by many offers to teach at the nation’s leading universities to devote himself unreservedly to the life of parish ministry in a Lancashire housing estate (suburb). “Many of my best friends,” he once wryly remarked, “accepted jobs that I turned down” (see Robert L. Glover, “Man, Meaning, Mystery: The Quest for the Historical Vanstone,” *Theology in Scotland*. Online at bit.ly/2gHZNmg). He nevertheless continued to take seriously the need for real theological depth, even in the improbable context of a spiritually lifeless setting where there were no obvious hungers of the soul. Thinking of the manner in which the Church often tries to become relevant in such circumstances, he once derisively remarked, “The church is like a swimming pool: all the noise comes from the shallow end.”

Setting himself the task of remaining deeply grounded both spiritually and intellectually, he infused his work with daily prayer and regular pastoral attention to his parishioners, producing at the same time a steady flow of carefully crafted sermons, addresses, and reflections that became the backbone of his ministry. This work culminated toward the end of his life in *Love’s Endeavour, Love’s Expense*, which H.A. Williams, CR, described as “the product of personal experience of a most costly and rewarding kind.”

Vanstone’s book takes as its starting point his painful realization in the midst of his rather banal parochial situation that, in much of what constitutes ordinary parish life, it “seemed more and more incongruous to relate, in any way, such trifling achievement to the glory of God.” His work therefore became for him a “formality,” his life a kind of depressing “charade.” What parish priest has not at some point faced the same deflation of the idealistic hopes that were the origin of a sense of call into ordained ministry in the first place?

Yet Vanstone relates that one day, in a completely unanticipated revelatory moment that happened while he was merely crossing a street

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within the housing estate, he suddenly became aware of the absolute, irreducible necessity of the Church's presence in that very place. His book is an attempt to articulate theologically what he so powerfully discovered existentially in that moment.

His conclusion, as suggested by the book's subtitle, is that the Church is the unique place where the creative love of God is both concretely recognized and where a self-conscious response is made to that love. The response is made in everything the community of the Church does — those practices of faith that range from the most sublime sacred music to the most practical ministries of relief for the poor. "Here, at this level of concrete actuality is the response of recognition to the love of God; here is the work of art, the offering of love, which is the Church." The result is that the tragic sense of defeat and disillusionment we human beings so often feel is transformed through the Church's life by the discovery that love (and only love) ends in triumph as it is "expended in self-giving, being wholly expended, without residue or restraint." Vanstone argues that while the ecclesiastical forms of the Church may participate in this response, the true Church is not limited to these forms, but embraces any human act of recognition and response to the divine love that knows it to be that life force upon which the whole universe depends.

Vanstone's perspective leads to the conclusion that the parish church is the unique site where the biggest idea of all — a universe created by love — is put together with the most mundane of human events, in a reciprocal exchange of love between God and humanity that interprets and gives meaning to the whole. As Vanstone summarizes: "The Church is what man is and does when he recognizes what is happening in the being of the universe." Try that out for a parish mission statement.

Is it possible to embody such an elevated vision of the Church in the quotidian realities of its life? There are several directions in which that question might take us. Although the Episcopal Church within the global Anglican Communion may formally exist as both a national and even international institutional entity, its real life is always emphatically and inescapably congregational. One can imagine the Church functioning without dioceses and bishops (much of it does), but were there no distinct worshipping congregations where people share the sorrows of their life and celebrate its joys as they respond to God's love, the Church could not survive or give expression to the content of the gospel. As a corollary to the centrality of the congregation, one may

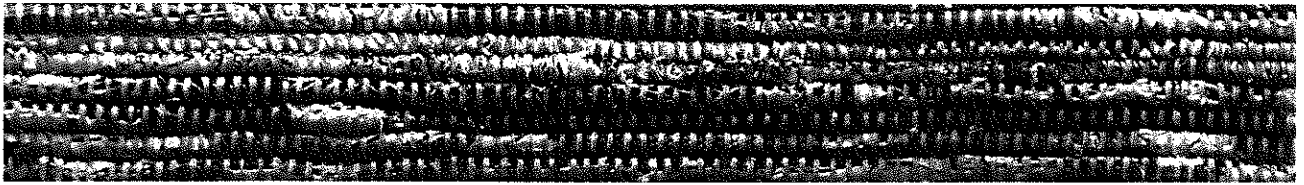
assert that a sane, thoughtful, sacrificial, imaginative, and faithful parish priest is the greatest ministry asset the Church has, a fact that Vanstone visibly embodied.

One implication of this vigorous assertion of the congregational identity of the Church is the critical importance of the local context. For instance, in the state of New Mexico where I now serve, one has to be cognizant of the reality that it is *the poorest* of all 50 states. To give but one illustration of how that local reality impinges on ministry: our outreach team approached two public elementary schools, asking how we could be of service. Expecting that we would be asked for such resources as new computers or library books, we were asked instead to offer basic clothing (socks and underwear) so that the children could come to school.

Ministry in New Mexico also means that to be culturally relevant pastoral leadership has to seek out and embrace the complexity of a minority-majority state in which Hispanic, Native, and Anglo peoples interact in close proximity with one another. The local context cannot merely be taken as a backdrop against which the typical patterns of denominational life are played out. To move beyond those self-limiting preoccupations requires of Church leaders both a genuine curiosity and modesty and an embrace of the freedom that Vanstone regarded as essential to the Church being an "enclave of recognition" of God's love. "Nothing belongs to the Church simply by virtue of its form," he wrote. "Enforced conformity adds nothing to the being of the Church." In short, like Vanstone's commitment to the Lancashire of his origins, a pastor has to have the freedom and passion to respond to the specificity of the Church's local mission: in ministerial terms, one size does not fit all.

I have especially felt the impinging force of the local context in the challenge of preaching in response to repeated recent national crises: the mass shooting at the Pulse nightclub in Orlando, for instance, or the high anxiety and cynicism generated by the 2016 national election. In a congregation like the one I serve that identifies itself as "a progressive community of faith," the people look to the sermon both for help in understanding what has happened from a Christian perspective and to be given a way to address the spiritual and justice issues that emerge. Preaching therefore cannot be incidental, but has to be at the very heart of the pastoral relationship and responsibility, laying out the common ground that becomes the setting for the congregation's corporate response.

Living in a border state, our parish community is be-



coming increasingly aware of the complexity of the immigrant and refugee experience, especially since so many people feel directly threatened. In such a moment, preaching can identify and name the human cost of the real situation, and then hold it side by side with Scriptures such as Jesus' parables that demand our engagement. I wrote some years ago about the commonly held

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view that it may be sufficient for pastors simply to show up when necessary. Because, however, the Christ whom we represent comes to us as God's question to all of humanity, probing the limitedness of what we believe in our heart and minds, pastoral leadership requires something more. It means having something to say. Having made the return to the parish, I see this more clearly now than ever.

I also see the absolute necessity of remaining grounded in prayer. Vanstone based his ministry in a tripartite dedication to meditation, sacramental life, and pastoral care — disciplines that, as Sarah Coakley observes, call forth a "painfully purgative faithfulness" and yield a "hidden efficacy" (see "Deepening Practices: Perspectives from Ascetical and Mystical Theology," in *Practicing Theology* [2002], p. 83). Much of a pastor's true work is hidden in the cultivation of a sufficient depth of interior life to support both the demands of the public exposition of faith and to provide personal reassurance for inevitable private disappointments and discouragements. Vanstone understood that at its heart, ordained ministry is a form of sacrifice: it is less about what one receives from it, and more about what one gives to it. In that regard, he is a bit of an outlier, at least in the well-boundaried terms in which one hears ordained ministry discussed now. (Such a sense of sacrifice is why we now have very few of Vanstone's meticulously crafted sermons: having preached them, he immediately destroyed the texts, since in his estimation a sermon should never be repeated. Each one must be a fresh sacrifice of study, prayer, and creative effort.)

For the sustaining importance of prayer, I am blessed

to be in a parish that has a small cadre of people who gather daily to sing Morning Prayer. Its regular predictability is the most sustaining thing that happens each day. On the morning of the recent election, we conscientiously prayed for the nation and for all those standing for office, knowing that the following day — whatever the outcome — we would be back, at prayer once again. Amid the vicissitudes of human life, the sense of God's changelessness that emerges from such daily repetition of the psalms, lessons, and prayers becomes the source of that long arc of confidence and determination that pastoral ministry ultimately requires.

As I look on my first months back in a parish, I am especially grateful that the transition involved a call to a place that is a bit off the beaten track of the established Episcopal circuit. Thanks to the imaginative leadership of my predecessor, the congregation is one that wears its Episcopal identity rather lightly, and so has a history of being willing to push liturgical and spiritual boundaries in new directions, especially in terms of full inclusion. Rowan Williams once observed that reform in the Church always comes from the fringe rather than the center, and perhaps that is why I find the fringe the most interesting place to be. This conviction has only been reinforced by serving in the era of Pope Francis, who focuses on the Church at the edge, where God's mercy and compassion are most needed and visible.

W.H. Vanstone also occupied a fringe position, choosing to serve in the commonplace housing estates of Lancashire rather than in the prestigious Oxbridge colleges that were eager for his presence. There he struggled with the question of what importance the Church has, when it can seem to make so little difference in the ordinary lives of people in the community. The conclusion he reached, after years of spiritual and intellectual struggle, was that it only has meaning when it is understood as a work of love. Sensing the tragic implications of this understanding, he came to know intimately the sacrificial nature of ministry, the expending of oneself in the service of love, just as Jesus expended himself on the cross. As such, pastoral ministry becomes an end unto itself. "There is," he observed, "no promotion from the parochial ministry." Yet as he learned through his experience, only through such aching, spent arms of love is the Church — and the world — sustained and finally brought toward love's final triumph, namely, our responsive recognition of God's love, as love.

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