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Adaptive Clergy Hear New Calls

By Kathleen Moore

RESPONDING TO A CHANGING CHURCH

The Rev. Garth Howe lives out a model of bi-vocational ministry as both vocational deacon serving at Grace Episcopal Church in Chicago and assistant vice president, account management for the Church Pension Group (CPG). In his role at CPG, he has insight into the ways in which models of clergy leadership are changing across the church, and the ways in which CPG is responding.

"My vocation revolves around social justice issues," Howe says. "As a deacon and at CPG, they all know me as the social justice guy. The diaconal call is to be in and with the world. Rather than separating my full-time work with CPG and my part-time work as a deacon at Grace Church, I choose to embrace it as one continuous ministry — expressing my call in both settings. My

work with CPG requires me to be out with the church most of the time, but I remain confident that my diaconal ministry is expressed in every life interaction, regardless of the setting."

Howe first began discerning a call to the diaconate before he moved to Chicago from San Diego in 2012, but he found working diaconal training in with a demanding full-time job challenging. "Because of the defined structure of the requirements, the vocational diaconate had been fairly unavailable," he says.

Once in Chicago, Howe joined St. Peter's Episcopal Church, which became his sponsoring parish. "They sponsored me originally for discernment, but I still didn't know if I could do this," he says. "My job at CPG is way more than full-time. So, I had this tugging at my heart to do more for the church, but I just didn't know if I had the capacity. But at the same time the diocese was reimagining their deacon process. It was clear there was an interest in opening up the diaconate to a broader scope of people, people who had full-time jobs and other obligations, but still felt called to this work."

Howe's process included online, intensive learning through Bexley Seabury Seminary in Chicago, as well as chaplaincy training at Bishop Anderson House. "It was attainable," Howe recalls. "And it allowed me to fulfill my call in a way that is tremendously meaningful. I've been ordained a year and a half now."

Howe believes the diaconate has an important role to play in the church as more and more priests become bi-vocational or responsible for more than one congregation.

"There's so much strain on priests these days — I think the diaconate is needed around the church," he says. "Priests with limited time and resources may say, 'okay, let's make sure that Sunday happens, let's make sure that the Wednesday night dinner happens, let's make sure that my flock is being fed.' And what may be diminishing is the time they can dedicate to church in the world. The diaconal call is identifying those needs in the world, bringing them back to the church, and then actually doing something about it. The action part is so important. Our job as deacons is to bring these things back, and for our congregation to do something."

In an effort to help his congregation respond to needs with action, Howe led an adult forum series called "Passion before Program."

"One result of that work was the creation of 'GraceCares Packs,'" he says. "We collected items like soap, shampoo, socks, quarters for public transportation, and blankets, and assembled them after services. Then we would each take one and pass it on to someone we met out in the world who may have a need for such items." During the winter season, Grace put together and distributed over 50 GraceCares Packs and repeated the program this summer, replacing winter-related items with summer necessities.

"A lot of my stories are about who I engage with on the Red Line at 6:30 a.m. on my way to Grace every Sunday morning," Howe says. "There have been enjoyable experiences, and some have absolutely not been enjoyable. I wear clericals because I'm in the diaconate role in the church. I think it's important for the Christian church to be visible in the world. 'They will know we are Christians by our love' only goes so far."

As a co-coordinator of the Diocese of Chicago participation in Chicago Pride this year, Howe focused on why we take part in this visible public action. "While it is absolutely fun to be in a parade, the reason I believe we

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march is to be in solidarity with a community which has not always been embraced, and oft times neglected and hurt by the church or religion," he says. "It is important for the church to be visible as a sign of love, hope and support." Howe's sermon on the subject resulted in an increase in participation from the Grace community.

In his role at CPG, Howe has seen firsthand how new models of clergy leadership are developing across the church. "CPG started significant outreach in 2014 with an eye toward making revisions to our pension plans to adapt to the changing needs of the church," Howe explains.

Over the course of two years, CPG senior leaders connected with more than 3,000 clients at listening events, focus groups and conferences. "We made a concerted effort to get out into the church and talk to people," says Howe. "We talked to bi-vocational priests, non-stipendiary priests, part-time, rural, urban and suburban priests. We tried to get as much information as we could around where the church was heading. Financially we know where the church is, but this was more about how to make sure that we're adapting the way we do business in order to stay current. We also conducted a 'Voice of the Client' initiative, where we listened to bishops, diocesan administrators and diocesan councils to better understand what their pain points were and what their joys were. And then we brought it all back with us."

The result was modifications to the clergy pension plan and related plans, which took effect January 1, 2018. "The modifications make sure that we have an entry point that is attainable by anyone who receives compensation from a church employer," Howe says. "While they may not have a material income replacement over time, there are other benefits like life insurance that are avail-

able to active participants in the clergy pension plan.”

The modifications also offer more flexibility, responding to the needs of bi-vocational priests and acknowledging that there is now generally more time between cures for clergy. “There’s more flexibility now around things that the church is experiencing,” says Howe. “The new model allows someone my age — I’m about to be 63 — to say, ‘You know what? I want to take two years off and do a mission trip. I want to go to Haiti.’ It allows that flexibility, which also is the changing face of what priests are called to do.”

Howe says people often ask him in his capacity at CPG about what the future of the church is going to look like. “We model all sorts of things,” he says. “But it depends on what the church is doing. It is changing, and our job is to stay ahead of the curves as the church continues to evolve.” ✚



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Above: The Rev. Garth Howe in Chicago's annual LGBT Pride Parade.