

The wilderness of a rural ministry circuit

I'm now a half-time "missional coach" to a six-church parish. I have many questions.

by [Heidi Neumark](#) in the [June 2024](#) issue



(Illustration by Laura Carlin)

When the bishop first broached the idea of my serving as a “missional coach” with a six-church parish in upstate New York, his expectations didn’t sound high. His assistant promised that if it wasn’t working out, I could give them a month’s notice. I drew a line on a map connecting the six different villages. It traced a question mark, which is perfect because all I have are questions.

At the first parish board meeting I attended, the bishop talked about how great I am. I definitely do not feel great. I can only offer ordinary things: relationship building, small groups, peeling carrots with the kitchen ladies, Bible study, Sunday worship. With only 20 hours a week, there’s hardly time for more.

Twice a month, I lead worship and preach at two of the churches. The schedule requires a mad dash from one to the next—no time to greet people after the first service before I get in the car, still wearing my vestments. And after decades of urban ministry, all this driving is new for me. It takes me an hour to get to any of the churches. But the Hudson Valley scenery is beautiful, and I try to get an idea of the economy as I drive by—farms, guns, a Wonder Bread outlet, construction materials. The largest buildings I’ve passed are a state prison and two Amazon warehouses.

On my second Sunday, I entered a church with the altar attached to the wall and was told that I must face it. With no time to give it much thought, I acquiesced—and for the first time in my life, I celebrated communion with my back to the congregation. Next time, I’ll tell the assistant that Jesus faced his disciples at the Last Supper, so let’s try that. This church is proud of being the oldest continually worshipping Lutheran congregation in the United States. Their president may be the oldest as well, plus he has advanced pancreatic cancer. But after worship he joined an usher to count the offering. I was told it will take five people to replace him, a challenge when the average attendance is ten.

I began on the first Sunday of Lent, which seemed like a perfect place to start, all of us in the wilderness together with Jesus. When I interviewed, the board was happy that when asked what new mission I thought they should undertake, I said that I didn’t know and I didn’t think it was my role to impose my ideas (not that I had any). “That’s the right answer!” I was told. Now, not so much. They are desperate for answers, direction, a hopeful way forward. *We know you’re not a miracle worker, but*

. . .

Each of the six sanctuaries displays a US flag. While this would once have been a deal-breaker for me, there are so many issues here that I barely notice the flags. And while White Christian nationalism certainly exists in these parts, the people at the churches I'm serving pray for immigrants. Gay couples appear to feel at home, and two of the churches sport rainbow banners. They enthusiastically share food with neighbors. I have been told that I must never, ever mention or preach about politics. I will always preach what I feel led to preach, so I guess time will tell what is deemed too political. In any case, railing against the flags seems pointless for now.

When I sat with members of the congregation with a worshiping attendance of five, I learned that three of them were baptized there as babies. They are now in their 70s. No wonder they are attached to the place, which needs several hundred thousand dollars of repairs. When we spoke of hopes for the future, a woman in her 90s said that her hope is to be buried from the church and that they could fashion her coffin from the sainted building's rotting wood.

On the other hand, the youngest person present noted that many young families with children have moved into the area, as evidenced by the growing amount of outgrown baby and toddler clothes left at the church doors for distribution. The idea of outreach to young families was quickly shut down since "families are only interested in Sunday sports." I suggested that babies and toddlers might not be engaged in serious sports yet and began to tell them about Wee Worship, but why encourage outreach if their best option is to close the dilapidated building?

A leader at another church said she believes most of these congregations have some passion around LGBTQ concerns, and perhaps I could help them find a common mission there. But for now, all are resisting shared identity and mission as an imagined threat to individual congregational survival. I've been reflecting on the image of the mother hen trying to gather her chicks together, "but they were not willing" (Luke 13:34). It helps me to see these churches with greater tenderness—six frightened, stubborn little chicks loved by Jesus.

Almost as soon as I arrived, the pastor announced that she had accepted a call elsewhere, presumably a place with one council meeting a month instead of six. This leaves me as the only pastor: although that is not my intended role, I am a pastor and I am here. At the next parish board meeting, someone proposed a plan to dissolve the parish, but nobody seconded it. I was later told they are waiting to see what the synod will do.

The priest at the wonderful Episcopal church my husband and I joined told me he sees I am still in the wilderness. At first I was annoyed, but of course he's right. This calling is all about sitting with uncertainty. On Kate Bowler's podcast, writer Maggie Jackson talks about breaking the inertia of one's knowledge and going forth despite discomfort. Through the rain, past the stick fields, the prison's barbed wire and the weathered barns, with bread and wine and a cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night—onward!