
Shared Ministry for Christian Mission

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by Canon Cathy Zappa**

Did you ever have to do “group work” in school? I did, and I always dreaded it. A group assignment meant that I was going to have to find time to meet with several classmates, negotiate who was going to do what, and be careful to balance my participation with everyone else’s. It meant that I would have to listen to others and take their perspectives seriously. Worst of all, it meant I would not have absolute control over my own grade, but rather would have to depend on and trust in others.

The “committee” is an adult version of “group work,” and it’s a phenomenon so common in churches that there are all kinds of jokes about it. (How many church members does it take to change a lightbulb? At least fifteen: one to do it, and three committees to approve it.) In churches, we *do* like to discern and minister in groups, and so we gather not just in committees, but also in guilds, Bible studies, outreach groups, the Chapter—and we spend a lot of time in meetings.

One could argue that it would be more efficient to spend less time in meetings and that it would be easier if we just worked alone. If you want something done well, do it yourself!

Yet Jesus, who had a lot of important things to do, gathered a group together to share his work, and he sent them out in pairs. He *commanded* them to work together, even, or especially, in mission and service of his Gospel. Why?

For one, our ministries are much richer and more sustainable when shared with others. The fact is that we need one another in order to do what God calls us to do, and to be what God calls us to be. We need one another for support, strength, and encouragement. We need others to complement our gifts, expand our perspectives, help us learn to trust, and open our hearts. As we work together and get to know one another, we get to know ourselves better, too: we begin to see our own blind spots, pride, and insecurities, as well as our gifts.

Shared ministry is not just a means to an end. It is essential to our spiritual formation, as God grows us through our relationships with one another, *especially* relationships that cross social, ethnic, and political boundaries. We cannot achieve social justice, for example, if we don’t practice it on the way. We can’t build peace without working with our enemies.

Our choosing to work together is also essential to Christian mission. In this do-it-yourself culture, we are prone to think that dependence is a bad thing and that productivity and efficiency are the highest values. But when, following Christ, we choose to work toward common goals together, particularly with those who seem different from us or whose perspectives challenge our own, we are witnessing to a different set of values: community, reconciliation, wholeness.

The process of working together, I believe, is as transformative as any specific outcome we are working toward achieving. And the faith, humility, and relationships developed along the way are the real first fruits of the reconciliation and transformation we seek.

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