

Longer Writeup

I was born in Elmira, New York, and grew up primarily in Syracuse, New York. My grandmother, Mary O'Boyle Eggleston, was a huge influence on me in every way; although she was only 50 when I was born, (she lived to be nearly 100) she was a comforting, serene, and encouraging presence in our family. I knew instinctively that older people could learn their entire lives. Oonah Ryan grew up in the Pennsylvania Amish country; her father, Jim Ryan, a famous horseman and trainer of thoroughbreds, delighted Oonah and nourished her spirit of adventure, and her own confidence, especially as a horsewoman.

In September, 1975, I joined the staff of St. Rita Parish in Detroit, at the invitation of the Archdiocese, and of the Parish, for a 10 month pilot project as "Prayer Minister." I was living at Ephpheta House of Prayer at the time, as was Oonah, and we were part of a Prayer Ministry team serving laity in the Archdiocese with days and evenings of prayer, catechesis, and living a regular rhythm of prayer and sharing in the house of 7 rscj. We discerned as a group who would respond to the Archdiocesan invitation, and Barbara Bireley and I offered to go where the Worship Office would send us

Ephpheta was an ordinary community, founded by the inspiration of Mary McGann, Nancy Murphy, and others, with the encouragement of Bea Brennan. Some things made the group truly vibrant. First, we were all relatively young. Secondly, we were determined to pray together with regularity, and to maintain an atmosphere favorable to prayer in the house. Thirdly, we had a strong community commitment to honest and deep communication by taking every third Sunday morning for a "Review of Life" during which we shared whatever each wished to share, in a supportive and leisurely way. Four of us collaborated on a Prayer Ministry Team; the others taught at Bloomfield Hills; some did both. We had a hospitable spirit, and we met challenges of many kinds (the death of 3 parents; some traumatic events, etc.) together.

Crossing 8 Mile Road in Detroit was considered risky at the time! St. Rita's was in a changing neighborhood that had changed dramatically after the Detroit riots of the 1960s, especially through racial integration, the loss of businesses, and a rising crime rate. The Parish mirrored this change, going from 5,000 families to about 800 parishioners, of whom 250 were elderly homebound. Occasional violent crimes happened even in daylight. The parish closed its high school, then its elementary school. Gone were the days of 8 priests in the rectory and 25 Sisters of St. Joseph in the Convent. The remaining parishioners were demoralized. For a few years, no priest wanted to pastor St. Rita's. However, in September, 1975, a very gifted priest made a long-term commitment as pastor. John Nowlan's passion was lay leadership and social justice in all forms, especially community organizing.

We did not easily understand one another as I began my first stint in a parish. For starters, nobody apparently wanted to pray! I made a dismal monthly report at the Archdiocesan Office alongside a glowing one by Barbara Bireley (who was, for contrast in the pilot study, in a thriving country-suburban parish in Romeo, Michigan.) One month, my brief report went something like this: "I fed a drunk and said grace with him; I met with 5 first communicants and helped them to prepare; I failed to interest the Parish Council in prayer." Thus passed the Fall of 1975; there was also some dissention on the parish staff, which met frequently and at length. I felt like a fish out of water and could not wait for the 10 months to end. I was very clear about this in talking with Ann Conroy, Marie Lufkin, and Nance O'Neill, then the NY Province team. I went into counseling, and made a sensible decision, resigning from the lengthy staff meetings, but appearing at meetings to make a report on the "Prayer Ministry", such as it was.

In January, 1976, I gathered with a few parishioners to adapt a Lenten Program based on scripture, simple rituals, and sharing in small groups. The little committee was the first sign of life. We stripped the program of fancy language; I began to be open to critique from the committee members ("You treat us too much like you are our teacher!") and we worked hard to publicize the program. On the first Sunday of Lent, 4 people signed up! That felt like the last straw. On the following Monday, I sat alone in the large Church, shook my fist at the tabernacle, and told Jesus that if He wanted something to happen in this God-forsaken place, He better do it, because although I would stay to the end of June, I was resigning from trying to make prayer happen.

That "I quit" unleashed a flood of grace. I admitted I could not get anyone to pray--lots of evidence for that! And suddenly, people began showing up at the little meetings. In the parish culture, they tried things out, without signing up! By the end of Lent, 60 people were meeting regularly in small groups. An elderly Sister who worked with Seniors in the parish resigned because of illness. Some parishioners told me I should apply for the job. I did not really want to work with Seniors, sick, and homebound, but the people would not give up. Providentially, I had an unexpected opportunity to consult Bishop Gumbleton, He asked me to stay at St. Rita's, and to apply for the job. When I prayed about it, I felt strongly moved to do this. I called Ann Conroy, and asked her to sit down, before I told her what was going on. She was in shock, but agreed that I should apply for the open position. Because John Nowlan was so well known in the Archdiocese, 25 applicants desired that position.

John did not see me as an ideal candidate; neither he nor the staff wanted to hire me. However, John believed that the laity should be making substantive decisions in all areas of parish life. After a delay of 3 months, the lay hiring committee insisted that I should be the new person in charge of training parishioners in lay ministry to our Seniors, along with the last Sister of St. Joseph to serve the Parish, Sister Hazel Margaret Schwaller.

In September, 1976, Ephpheta closed, and we shifted to Marygrove Street in inner city Detroit. We were now a city community of 6 rscj and an IHM, in 7 different ministries, all of us involved in ministry in the city in a wide variety of ways. Oonah ministered at St. Agnes Parish deep in a devastated neighborhood of Detroit. I made the transition from fostering prayer to working with Sister Hazel Margaret to encourage people on average about 60 years old to use their gifts for ministry. As long as we called them "volunteers" and talked about all the work there was to do, we got nowhere fast! So we took a day off at the Jesuit Retreat House, Manresa. Hazel said: "Be quiet and watch the ducks in the pond here. We'll meet at 4 pm and see what God has to say to us." At 4, we decided to change the name of the ministry from the dismal "Outreach to senior citizens, sick, and homebound" to "Visitation Ministry" in honor of Our Lady's visit to her elderly cousin. We also decided to appeal to parishioners on the basis of their baptism and life experience. We started asking them what gifts they might want to offer to their neighbors.

We also prayed with them, visited them, and in general behaved like good neighbors ourselves. We paid attention to all the patients at the dreadful nursing home--along with about 10 women who helped us to gather them for communion services. Cardinal Dearden encouraged ministry to Christians of all denominations, especially if they were deprived of ministry, and he allowed communion to be given to those who desired it under certain simple conditions (faith in the presence of Jesus, desire, repentance.) John wanted us to preach at wakes, funerals, and at the communion services conducted at the nursing home. In effect, we behaved like deacons. Simultaneously, people slowly began coming forward to offer their talents to the community.

Oonah and I both had the good fortune of being mentored by Dick Lehman in the CPE Program at the Mental Hospital at Central Islip, NY. As more people wanted to visit the sick, offer phone reassurance, work at the ecumenical food pantry, correspond with the sick and with parishioners scattered around Detroit in nursing homes, and study the nursing home situation in order to pressure them to improve their care of patients, (we reported 90 abuses to Citizens for Better Care over 3 months, and the place finally took notice!) we needed to offer training to our lay ministers, who ranged in age from 40 to 85! So

Oonah offered a modified CPE program especially for the home visitors. We also had a monthly Day of Prayer called "Journey Day" in which we shared a meal, enjoyed one another's company, had a scripture presentation, and concluded with a time of prayer in the Church-- 10 am to 2 pm. And a small charismatic prayer group that began in 1975 began meeting in a home. 8 working women in their 50s praised, read scripture, and interceded for the needs of the staff and the parish. Several healings happened in their families (alcoholism dealt with; good relationships after a marriage encounter, etc.) I am convinced this little group was foundational to the fruitfulness of Visitation Ministry.

We collaborated with our ecumenical food pantry; together, Lutherans, Pentecostals, Methodists and Catholics petitioned the Archdiocese for a Social Worker to look more deeply into the causes of distress in the families that were regular clients of the pantry. The Archdiocese gave us a Social Worker several days a week to help families in distress. After 4 years, St. Rita's had 40 lay ministers. A Sister of Mary Reparatrix was hired to continue mentoring laity when I left the parish to study for an M. Div. Alicia remained at St. Rita's for several years. The Visitation Ministry continued to flourish; even after she left, and after John Nowlan moved to another parish, and there was no staff person to mentor them, lay ministers continued their neighborhood outreach until the parish closed in the early 2000s, possibly because of misconduct on the part of a priest.

The experience at St. Rita's continues to teach me so much; experiences there have become a touchstone for discernment of spirits, for sanity about my own obtuseness and the immense power of God when I own my limitations, for listening to people and to wise authorities like our province team and Bishop Gumbleton (the team insisted that I wait on the slow moving hiring committee at St. Rita's, and even let go of 2 other job offers in the meantime!) It was of great value also to learn from the Ephpheta and Marygrove communities, including Barbara Bireley, who also stayed on and did beautiful ministry for years in her suburban parish. Finally, I treasure the way Oonah mentored our parishioners, with brief formal teachings of about 20 minutes each gathering (for 10 weeks, I think) and a great deal of listening to their experiences. She allowed them to learn from one another, and to experience their own growth in wisdom and service. And we had fun in all of it.

Finally, I treasure the fact that John Nowlan and I finally understood and respected one another, and that in a way he affirmed not only diaconal service but my baptismal priesthood. At a farewell Mass that he celebrated just before I left (restricted to Senior Citizens who knew the ministry well) he beckoned me to stand with him at the altar, and gave me the chalice to lift during the consecration. I will never forget that. And I will always remember on of our longest lived lay ministers. Nellie Herman served at St. Rita's from 1976 to 2 months before her death, at age 96, in 1996. For about 20 hours a week, she offered telephone reassurance to the homebound.

Nellie was a humorous, tactful, and astute listener to many hundreds of people during her tenure at the Parish House. She referred people to good house painters, paired lay ministers with those needing ministries, brought many people back to the sacraments, organized a Church full of parishioners and homebound guests to assist at the Sacrament of the Sick twice a year, and did it all with a graced lightness of touch. A widow who had lost her only son in an auto accident on the night of his high school graduation, Nellie's grief was transformed into consolation of the many widowed and lonely men and women to whom she listened

John called me in Houston when Nellie was admitted to hospice for cancer; I visited her the next week. The following Sunday, the hospice nurse called me to tell me that there was a change. She transferred me to Nellie's phone immediately. But Nellie was already gazing upward with a dazzling smile. "Do you see something Nellie?" the nurse asked. "Yes. My husband is here, my mother is here, and the room is full of people and angels" she said. Those were Nellie's last words. She was buried the following week on the Feast of St. Rita. She once told me that she had believed that she would never love anyone as she had loved her beloved Ernie and their adopted son, Billy. But she had come to realize that she loved her St. Rita family just as much.

Geographic Location where this story took place

St. Rita Parish, 1000 E. State Fair Blvd. Detroit, Michigan

Approximate start date when this story unfolded 09/1975

Approximate end date 05/1996

Resources

I do not think so.

Were there any particular people, books, poems, songs, scripture quotes etc. which gave this person strength, encouragement and direction?

We used the song "Bread and Roses" sung by Judy Collins at a Wednesday morning liturgy which was always made special by John Nowlan's inviting people into a dialogue homily; it was the feast of St. Elizabeth of Hungary, who supposedly hid her offering of bread for the poor under her cloak, and when her husband demanded what was there, there were roses. Nellie's memorial card read: "The Lord God has given me a disciple's tongue, that I might speak to the weary a word that will rouse them. Morning after morning, God opens my ear that I may hear...."