A Church at the Intersection

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Christmas Eve morning last year, before our 8:00 a.m. Mass, I was standing outside the front doors of my parish, St. Paul's Episcopal Church in downtown Flint. It was the day of Flint's annual "Santa Hat" run, and heading north on Saginaw Street were a half-dozen or so fit-looking men, dressed in thin, colorful hi-tech gear, jogging in the cold for the fun of it. At the same time, shambling west on Third Street, were a half-dozen or so of our hungry neighbors, dressed in bulky layers, heading for the free breakfast served on Sundays by our friends across the street at First Presbyterian Church. These two groups crossed paths, without incident, at the intersection of Saginaw and Third.

This is where I work: at the intersection of prosperity and poverty, at the intersection of the developers and the dispossessed. I believe there is no more exciting, no more vital, no more necessary place to be church¹ than right here at the intersection, this intersection of Saginaw and Third in downtown Flint, a few square blocks where millions of dollars are raised and spent to renovate some of our landmark buildings, and to maintain others, while the whole city suffers the twin stigmas of being the poorest per capita large city in the nation—and the poster-child for lead-poisoned water.

I am a practical theologian and community pastor, not an academic. I use the texts of my trade—the Bible, the Book of Common Prayer, and readings in Liberation Theology—alongside what I see and hear from the people of my city, what's

1. "To be church" is an expression that refers to people doing what the ministry is called to do as opposed to "to be *in* church," which refers to being physically inside of the building.

Picture 1. St. Paul's Episcopal Church, Flint, MI

reported in the media, and what's told to us by our civic officials to make some kind of sense in my own mind about the legacies of rampant capitalism, environmental injustice, and systemic, institutional racism in my city, to preach and teach in my parish, and to work with other clergy and civic leaders to further justice and mercy.

Put another way, I run on the intersection of impulse and instinct more than on the hard data and empirical evidence required by a scientist. My parishioners are aware and educated, and don't come to church to be baptized in a wash of data. They want help putting their faith into action. They're at the intersection, too.

St. Paul's has been in Flint since 1840 and has stood on the corner of this in-

tersection since 1872. Parishioners past and present have lived through the birth, boom, and bust of the auto industry, and the subsequent loss of half our city's population. While there's an unmistakable resilience in the people of Flint, there's also, I find, a kind of a boot-strappy fatigue and frustration directed toward the people of Flint—the poor ones, anyway. I find this fatigue and frustration comes from some out-county residents, including those who fled Flint. It also comes from some Flint residents themselves who prefer not to notice the intersection, the more prosperous ones who want to distance themselves from their town's ills, and who think the water crisis was overblown and that its discussion discourages development.

For a while, I didn't notice the intersection. My home is in one of the few neighborhoods that survived the collapse of the auto industry. My water seemed okay, and I chose to believe what I read in the newspaper.

I moved to Flint in May 2015. This was after the water source was switched to the Flint River, before the lead problem was discovered, and during the protests by some residents who could see and smell that what was running from their taps just wasn't right, despite what the experts told them: "Who are you going to believe—us, or your own eyes?"

I was the new rector in a legacy parish where General Motors executives and white collar workers once worshipped. While our membership roster has diversified—and our annual giving has diminished—there is still a prestige about the place, and perhaps an expectation that the priest thinks hard about where he stands and what he says. Don't step into the intersection without looking both ways, or you might get run over.

On the other hand, the parish called me here knowing of my activist bent in my prior parish in Benton Harbor, Michigan—another poor, majority black town suffering under a state-imposed emergency financial manager. They said they were looking for someone who would be active in the community. But I was new and unsure if I should align myself with the gathering forces known as the water-warriors.

That summer, I heard of a water protest happening in front of City Hall, just a few blocks south of the church. I walked down and watched from the periphery. I could see the water in those protesters' jugs was orange and brown, and their talk of rashes was real. This was before the lead was discovered.

I was like many of the comfortable in my city and most members of my parish who weren't concerned. So I chose not to step into the intersection—until the lead was discovered and the streets suddenly got a lot more crowded with the newly-outraged "good" citizens of Flint like me.

I wish I had the foresight and courage to stand in the intersection with the water protesters in the summer of 2015, when I saw with my own eyes but chose not to

Picture 2. St. Paul's water altar

believe. I wish had the awareness and creativity to build our water altar, where our church aisles intersect in early August instead of late October.

It would have been much more powerful and prophetic to stand behind this altar and share communion of the body and blood of Jesus, intersecting in communion with the poor of the city whose cries for justice were ignored and whose bodies and blood were poisoned.

I hesitate to say that some good has come from the man-made disaster that is the Flint water crisis. We're more aware of shortcomings in our infrastructure, locally and nationally, even if we don't have the will to fix them. We're more aware of the stubborn reality of lead poisoning that comes from air, soil, and water. We're more aware of the concept of environmental racism: that communities of color and of the poor are built upon damaged ground.

And another good has come. Many people—though far from all—who thought they kept to parallel lines, met at intersections all over the city to forge relationships, fight for resources, and find still more of the flinty resilience we all seem to be made of.

St. Paul's own response began, like many churches, with bottled water distribution. For the first few months of the crisis, we handed out thousands of cases of water, stopping only after the state took over the distribution network (known as

Picture 3. One case among countless cases

the Pods). We also received checks from parishes and from our denomination's relief agency to add specific, lead-mitigating food to the long-established soup kitchen, food pantry, and cooking class programs our faith-based partners and we had in place. These nutrition programs continue.

To be sure, we're far from where my faith and vision say we should be. The hard realities of this town linger. Political divisions fall largely along color lines. The same is true among the churches. Downtown is redeveloping and gentrifying while most neighborhoods north, south, east, and west from center-city are denied the resources they need to rebuild.

And, most tellingly, trust is shattered. The people who were the most harmed by the Flint water crisis, with all its antecedents and products—the early protesters and the poorest—are the ones least willing to believe that things are getting better, even as lead and galvanized service lines are being replaced and lead and copper levels are reported to be well within standards. They still rely on bottled water, even as the state has recently ended the Pods program and assures us that filtered water from our taps is safe, saying, in essence, “Mission Accomplished.” The water-warriors I talk to don't trust anyone in government, period. Who can blame them?

I wouldn't call any St. Paul's parishioner a water-warrior. We have many generous

people who participate in our outreach programs, but none are activists. Moving minds from charity to advocacy is hard. Protesting is rebellious and policy change takes a lot of time.

We have work to do in this parish. The water crisis is but a symptom of a much deeper social and economic disease. I fear we are reluctant to look too hard at the ills that surround us, and I as their rector often pull my preaching punches and let us all off too easy.

This, then, is the long-term work of a church at the intersection. We're not scientists, we're not engineers, we're not civil servants. Our work is that of naming oppression. Our work is that of reparation, of reconciliation, of resurrection, of hope. Our work is that of witness, of seeing and drawing attention to the intersection of Santa-Hat runners and hungry people in need of a free breakfast who cross paths without incident—the people themselves and the pain and promise they represent.

This church has been at this intersection, whether it has realized it or not, for nearly 150 years. It's a good thing we've had staying power. We need it now, more than ever.

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