In 2008, St. Francis-in-the-Fields and I received the gracious gift of a Clergy Renewal Grant from the Lilly Endowment. This paper is a reflection on our shared journey – who we are as a parish, how we have come to understand ourselves and our ministry in terms of our Baptismal Covenant and the Prayer of St. Francis, and how our sabbatical time has strengthened and affirmed us on our journey.

When the cornerstone for St. Francis-in-the-Fields, Malvern, PA, was laid in 1963 it was for an A-Frame building located on a gift of nine acres of wooded farmland in the horse-country of Chester County. The parish chose to build with wood, stone and clear glass, not insulating themselves and their prayers from the world but keeping the glorious natural views always visible and evocative – a decision that has shaped our ministry, our community and our lives. For the past 50
years St. Francis has worshipped, grown, built and expanded on this property, and for the past ten years I have been their pastor. During that time, the Prayer of St. Francis with its core principle of creating and fostering peace has become essential to our common experience. The prayer is used in every liturgy and serves as the concluding collect of the Prayers of the People on Sundays. In addition we have actively sought to incorporate the promises of the Baptismal Covenant into our common life.

These two documents have become so formative for us that in 2006 our vestry adopted them as the framework for an organizational model on which we would base and evaluate the effectiveness of all our ministries and programs. Our PEACE model featuring the promises of the Baptismal Covenant is framed and prominently displayed in the narthex of our church (a copy is included at the end of this paper).

My own personal theology has always been intensely incarnational. I believe that God is with us, continually calling us into deeper relationship with God, one another, and all of creation. Baptism brings us into the Body of Christ, and Holy Communion feeds and nurtures us for the work ahead. One of my favorite prayers begins “O God, who wonderfully created, and yet more wonderfully restored, the dignity of human nature: Grant that we may share the divine life of him who humbled himself to share our humanity” (Collect for the Second Sunday after Christmas, Book of Common Prayer 1979) I believe that when a community seeks to see Christ in each other and to serve Christ in all persons that the Holy Spirit empowers us to do just that. That belief sustains me in ministry, allowing me to preach and teach with conviction. Jesus’ ministry with its continual emphasis on the imminence of the reign of God is summed up for me in the phrase “God loves you, now act like it!”

I have been nurtured and formed by the Episcopal Church’s baptismal theology as it is found in our Book of Common Prayer 1979. As a priest in this denomination for the past 19 years, I have found the promises of the Baptismal Covenant to be the most succinct, accessible and spiritually empowering expression of our common calling. In fact, I believe that the health of a Christian community is in direct correlation to the degree to which the community seeks to actively engage the covenant.

When I participated in the National Clergy Renewal Program of the Lilly Endowment, I had been ordained for 16 years and had served four parishes. In each of them, I had, with varying degrees of success, suggested that we structure parish ministry around the framework of the Baptismal Covenant. It has been here at St. Francis-in-the-Fields, with the addition of the prayer of our patron saint that this vision for ministry has been most fully embraced.
Although they did not describe themselves as “incarnational” the St. Francis’ parish rector-search profile did speak eloquently of love, community and faith in action. They knew that they were blessed with very strong lay leadership (“we are a community of leaders”) and were looking for a priest who would exercise pastoral and spiritual leadership while journeying alongside them. They had conducted a thorough self-study which had indicated three immediate needs: a larger worship space, stronger financial support for the operating budget and additional clergy support. The interview process convinced me that these needs were genuine and that parish consensus in support of them was broad based, but I noticed that each of the parish’s stated goals were going to require major fundraising – a risky endeavor in the first year of a pastor-parish relationship. I requested and the vestry agreed that we wait a year before addressing the parish’s physical needs. We needed time to get to know each other, and I needed time to be incorporated into the life of the parish.

I am a weaver by avocation, and I was already viewing our shared ministry as a spiritual weaving project. Weavers know that a great deal of work in design, pattern and choice of fiber is required before any actual weaving begins. I knew what my vision of the project would be – that of a community woven together in the pattern of the baptism, communion and discipleship in response to the first promise of the baptismal covenant, “will you continue in the apostles’ teaching and fellowship, in the breaking of bread and in the prayers?” But I wanted the response to be organic and I wanted the parish be fully engaged in weaving our future.

With the support of parish leadership we began to speak of St. Francis not just as a parish family but as a community. Adult education and spiritual formation programs were renewed and everyone was encouraged to participate. Fellowship opportunities, already a priority, were expanded. Intercessory prayer during the liturgy was invited, pastoral care needs were shared, and the Prayer of St. Francis was included in every worship service and at most committee meetings. At the same time, the vestry and strategic planning committee met with parishioners and ministry and program leaders, inviting their opinions, goals and visions. Sunday morning town meetings were held on a regular basis to keep everyone up to date. Our intention during that year was that we would make that first promise the warp upon which, with God’s help, we could weave our ministry.

While engaging the first promise, especially the town meetings, we found a weakness in our warp that we might otherwise have missed. People began to express their desire for increased outreach to the larger community asking that any growth in the operating budget be accompanied by significant increases to the Outreach line item. Adding space and staff was good and important, they said, but helping others was essential. A larger building might make us think about “loving God with all our hearts” but it wasn’t likely to do too much about
“loving our neighbors as ourselves.” It was a message that we needed to hear. As a result, the proposed budget for 2002 was the starting point of an effort to maintain the Outreach line item to at least 10% of the operating budget. When the stewardship campaign was concluded, pledge income had increased by 15%. In the past, the parish had been intentional in reaching out to others, but this was the first time it had been given such priority. Our efforts to engage the first promise of the covenant had provided us with an opportunity for self-examination and had resulted in a change in behavior. Such a change in direction, we realized, was actually repentance (metanoia) and led us to the awareness that we were now engaging the second promise: “will you persevere in resisting evil, and whenever you fall into sin, repent and return to the Lord?”

With that modification, we began our second full year together. In order of priority our goals were: maintaining our increasing commitment to outreach, providing a larger worship space and adding clergy support. With 250 active families, a second priest would have been a great help, but the parish was continuing to grow and there were barely enough seats for the folks who were already attending Sunday services, so we chose space over staff.

Our decision was very intentional. Episcopalians don’t easily embrace change and we tend to be reticent evangelists (one of the reasons that we are sometimes referred to as God’s “frozen chosen”), but we knew that if we were going to be faithful to the third promise “Will you proclaim by word and example the Good News of God in Christ?” we would need a place that was large enough to hold us all while we learned what evangelism would mean for us. We also wanted a space in which we could gather for Eucharist as the family meal that strengthens us for ministry in the world. And we were aware that expanding our physical space would involve multi-tasking. We would need to engage an architect to design a space that would satisfy our needs and inspire parish support, while simultaneously conducting both a vigorous stewardship drive and a capital campaign.

Weavers weave samples to test their designs and our leadership recognized that it was time to test the strength of the fabric of parish life that we intended to weave. So, we hired a company to do a feasibility study and after its successful conclusion, to help us conduct our capital campaign. We redoubled our efforts at communicating – the vestry making the case for the need for income for both the operating budget and the capital campaign, while I continued to teach and preach about the ministry of love, joy, service and peace to which we are called.

Weaving is a full body experience that requires the coordination of memory and attention with the actions of hands, arms, legs and feet. It’s a bit like reciting poetry while juggling and riding a bicycle. But weaving is as contemplative as it is active, and can be deeply and spiritually satisfying. With our vision before us –
that of a space in which our parish would be nurtured and fed for the work we were called to do, we settled into the rhythm of prayer, worship and service – in the midst of a construction zone.

Eight months later we celebrated the dedication of a glorious new worship and fellowship space. As predicted, pledges to the annual budget had actually increased during the capital campaign and construction phases – a very welcome trend in light of the fact that we had just incurred a $4000/month mortgage payment.

At the same time, the fabric of the national Episcopal Church was being threatened by a series of conflicts around the issues of human rights and gender orientation. Schism was a very real threat. Congregations and Dioceses were being decimated, and the public incivility of the debate was threatening to make our denomination not only irrelevant but laughable.

St. Francis is a community composed of strong minded individuals, so there was significant diversity of opinion in our own parish around the issues of gender orientation and ordination. The debate, however, had always been civil, respectful, even loving – perhaps because at that time at St. Francis we were specifically moving into a discussion of the fourth promise of the baptismal covenant: “Will you seek and serve Christ in all persons, loving your neighbor as yourself?” We had been talking about the difficulty of seeing Christ in people with whom we disagreed, and now we were going to be faced with the challenge of actually doing so. One Sunday, at coffee hour I was greeted by a delegation of venerably conservative gentlemen whose spokesman announced that they had something to say about the ordination of gay clergy. I remember thinking “here it comes”, but I smiled and took a deep breath as he said, “It really doesn’t matter. The only important thing is that we love our neighbors as ourselves.” We did not lose a single member to the gender orientation conflict.

The parish’s ability to grow through that time was the impetus for some additional risk taking on my part. We were poised to address the fifth promise “will you strive for justice and peace among all people, and respect the dignity of every human being?” The debates over gender orientation had indicated that that we were willing to “respect the dignity of every human being” but we didn’t seem to know how to engage the first half of that promise. So that summer, I did a sermon series on the individual phrases of the prayer of St. Francis in which I focused on Gospel readings about inclusivity, justice and peace in the reign of God. I also identified some folks who were already actively committed to social justice and environmental issues in the greater community and invited them to join the ministry team. A fledgling Social Justice and Environmental Ministry was created. We were taking small but intentional steps toward understanding the
stewardship of creation and the need for greater awareness of and response to situations which challenge the dignity of others.

That year we also adopted a new stewardship model based on Creating Congregations of Generous People by Michael Durall. The model required even greater communication within the parish and very broad based participation in the planning and implementation of mission and programming. A clear sense of identity was required, and with the adoption of the “PEACE” model, our various ministries found their places under the categories of Participation, Endurance, Action, Compassion and Empowerment – each of those categories being paired with one of the promises of the Baptismal Covenant and stressing mutual ministry, shared leadership and diverse membership.

By then we were all exhausted. The parish had continued to grow in a steady and sustainable manner. We knew that a great deal had been accomplished and more importantly, that it had been a group effort. But we were also aware that we had all been moving at full speed for some time and that we were rapidly approaching burnout. In the previous three years we had completed a capital campaign, conducted a major expansion of our worship and fellowship spaces, revised our approach to stewardship and re-organized our parish mission and ministry plans. The congregation and I both needed a rest. I was due for a sabbatical but as there were no funds available, I had instead planned a three month “stay-cation.”

We had heard about the Clergy Renewal Program through the Lilly Foundation but we knew that the application deadline was in early May and that the grant writing process would require that we engage in yet another parish-wide project. We were all too tired for that. I was very tempted to write the grant application myself and then seek endorsement from the vestry, but my Rector's Warden very wisely urged me to continue our pattern of actively waiting while communicating and inviting participation. Instead of racing to complete an application in three months, my sabbatical was deferred for a year. We began forming a sabbatical task force in May and gave ourselves a full year to gather information, build enthusiasm and write the grant. Writing the grant was a remarkable process involving at least half the congregation. Our grant application, “Weaving Justice and Peace” was submitted in May 2007. In October of that year, we received word that we had been awarded a $40,000 Clergy Renewal Grant.

We had designed a sabbatical season that would provide parallel experiences for me and for the congregation. As a weaver, I was looking forward to producing a new set of altar hangings and vestments in honor of our patron, St. Francis. We would purchase two looms, a travel loom that I could take on the road, and a table loom that would reside in the narthex where everyone was invited to stop by and weave a few rows of the table runners that would be used in our fellowship space.
Members of the parish would also be creating hooked-rug kneelers for the altar rail.

The parish and I would both enjoy a time of study and retreat. Mine would take place in a lakeside cabin in Winchester, Tennessee, in the libraries of the College of Preachers and of the School of Theology at the University of the South, and in conversation with my former Liturgics Professor, Dr. Marion Hatchett.

I would study the history of the revision of baptismal theology in the Episcopal Church following World War II with a particular emphasis on the lengthy and controversial process engaged in by both General Convention and the Liturgical Commission. It was during that time that we, as a denomination, reclaimed the ancient practice of understanding baptism not just as a cleansing from sin, but as full inclusion into the Body of Christ and as a call to engage the needs of the world even while planning and praying for eternity.

For some time, I had believed that the Baptismal Covenant of the 1979 Book of Common Prayer would become the defining statement of the Episcopal Church in the 20th century. Beginning with the fundamentals of regular worship and participation in community, the covenant requires that we promise, with God's help, to continue to grow into moral accountability, evangelism, love and respect of neighbor and commitment to peace and justice. I knew that those promises had made an enormous and indelible difference in my own life and in that of St. Francis parish; and I believed that under the leadership of our new presiding bishop, The Most Rev. Katherine Jefferts Schori, the Baptismal Covenant was well on its way to becoming one of the foundational documents of the Episcopal Church. My sabbatical research and would study help me outline the decades-long process of arriving at the Covenant, and my conversations with Dr. Hatchett, who had played a major role in the last revision to the Book of Common Prayer and was present for much of those debates, would give me first hand, anecdotal accounts of the process.

For their part, the congregation’s study would be here in Malvern with half day retreats on personal and corporate prayer led by the sabbatical supply priest, along with weekly lectionary Bible Study and Communion.

And while I would enjoy a spa retreat with my sisters, and spend time with family at a lakefront cottage in Maine (while doing some serious weaving), the community at St. Francis had scheduled its own family time with cook-outs and game nights. Both the parish and I would be keeping a photo journal of the sabbatical. We had even arranged for a small statue of St. Francis to accompany us, and to be photographed in each of the places I visited.
But as our long-awaited and much needed period of rest approached, the congregation and I were surprised to found ourselves becoming anxious about actually taking the time off. Although we did not articulate our concerns, and would only recognize them in retrospect, we were worried that taking three months off might cost us our forward momentum. After so many years at work, we were concerned about whether what we had woven was strong enough to survive a vacation! But, we had the grant, a plan, and the time; so we held a picnic and send-off liturgy, I temporarily closed my email accounts, handed over my keys and left.

Our fears were groundless and our hopes were more than abundantly realized. The sabbatical experience was an extraordinary time of renewal, relaxation and celebration. I read, studied and did my research. My husband and I spent two weeks at a folk art school, taking classes and enjoying the mountains of George and North Carolina. We rented a cottage in Maine where we stayed up late, ate dinner when we pleased, slept in and spent hours reading or just sitting on the porch. We canoed on a profoundly quiet lake accompanied only by the call of loons. There was no internet connection and no signal for our cell phones. And sitting at my travel loom overlooking the lake, I wove the fabric for a new altar frontal and set of vestments. It was glorious.

When I returned, we celebrated the end of the summer with our annual “welcome back” picnic, held a liturgy of thanksgiving honoring our sabbatical interim, and began the new program year. But unlike our previous September start-ups, this time was different – we were calmer, more centered, and certainly more joyous.

We expected a sabbatical to give us some “down time.” What we had not expected was how thoroughly it would reinforce the efforts we had begun. Our focus on the Prayer of St. Francis and Baptismal Covenant had clearly been leading us into shared ministry. And we found that our time apart had demonstrated the strength and resilience of the PEACE model – in particular the fact that our ministry was now markedly less clergy-centric, and that we were engaging in genuinely mutual ministry. The spirit of celebration, confidence and trust in the community was, and (three years later) remains, palpable.

I had also become aware of the need for greater balance and wholeness in life and in my ministry. God has called me to pastor this community but not to work myself into exhaustion. I take my full vacation time now, and am making my health a greater priority. I no longer feel it necessary to be at every committee meeting or to over-fill the program calendar. Parish leaders and program chairs are comfortable taking the initiative in planning their own events and recruiting their own teams. And attendance at our fellowship gatherings has increased dramatically.
The trend toward greater mutuality, balance and a gentler calendar continues. With increased trust in the leadership of the Holy Spirit, we are learning to recognize when a program is not working or when the life cycle of a ministry has ended. For example, after three years of tepid response to attempts at encouraging social justice activism, we have turned our efforts to identifying and celebrating ways in which parishioners are already striving for justice and peace in the larger community. And out of respect for stewardship of time, we have begun to consolidate some of our events. We combined the Men's Group annual spaghetti supper with the Church School's Christmas pageant, inaugurating the exceptionally popular St. Francis Spaghetti/Pageant.

Theologically speaking, the sabbatical experience not only renewed me, it affirmed my belief in the importance of an incarnational faith and made me even more convinced of the wisdom and power of the Baptismal Covenant as the touchstone of parish ministry. Additionally, the act of writing the grant application and of keeping the sabbatical journals, allowed us all to see that God was not just working through us, but was actively encouraging us to grow in our ministry. As the Rector's Warden wrote on behalf of the Vestry: “we think the biggest impacts of Glyn’s sabbatical were how the parish pulled together, drew closer to one another and, we think, developed a stronger sense of our own community. It wasn’t a matter of ‘the sheep of the parish huddling together, waiting for the shepherd to return.’ Rather, we think the parish grew in the knowledge that we had an opportunity and responsibility to become more engaged with one another, parish operations and the needs of our community.”

The impacts of our sabbatical time are very much still with us. Yes, we still need to pay the oil and electric bills and keep the facility in good repair. But our clear glass windows frame the world in which we are called to minister; our pews are a Sabbath resting place; and our altar remains the table at which we are fed before we go out into our jobs, homes, and neighborhoods to bear witness to the love of God in our lives.

Yes, we still maintain a busy schedule with a great many committees, programs and commissions at work, but each of them is subject to review in terms of how well it is challenging or empowering us to honor our Baptismal Covenant, and when a program has served its purpose or run its course, it can be retired with grace and appreciation.

Yes, we find the annual tasks of discerning a stewardship program theme or recruiting church school teachers and vestry members challenging, but we are much less stressed about it than we used to be. And we find that we are increasingly blessed with gifted and enthusiastic lay leadership. As we have consciously chosen service over comfort, joy over solemnity, and reverence over
formality, more and more people are stepping forward to take part in our ministries, and all are being welcomed.

God continues to call us to expand our understanding what it means to seek and serve Christ in all persons, loving our neighbors as ourselves. Like most communities, our membership spans the continuum from progressive to conservative on questions of economics, politics and human sexuality. But we are doing our best not to allow those positions to distract us from our mission of being instruments of God’s peace. And, at every service, we continue to pray that in a world fraught with discord, injury, despair and conflict, God will empower us to embody union, pardon, hope and peace.
Lord, Make Us Instruments of Your PEACE

PARTICIPATION (Exercising Our Discipleship)
Will you continue in the apostles’ teaching and fellowship, in the breaking of bread, and in the prayers?

Worship, Worship Support, Administration, Spirituality and Fellowship Ministries

ENDURANCE (Keeping Our Faith Strong and Alive)
Will you persevere in resisting evil, and, whenever you fall into sin, repent and return to the Lord?

Education Programs, Prayer Groups, Spiritual Growth/Direction Ministries

ACTION (Putting Our Faith into Action)
Will you proclaim by word and example the Good News of God in Christ?

Growth and Evangelism, New Comers, Community Service, and Stewardship Ministries

COMPASSION (Opening Our Hearts to Others)
Will you seek and serve Christ in all persons, loving your neighbor as yourself?

Pastoral Care, Outreach, Friendly Visitors, Individual Community Volunteerism

EMPOWERMENT (Honoring the Reign of God)
Will you strive for justice and peace among all people, and respect the dignity of every human being?

Social Justice and Environmental Ministries
from the website
Resources for American Christianity
http://www.resourcingchristianity.org/