

The Northern Highlands Benefice

The Diocese of Eau Claire has an historical reputation throughout the Church that includes the assumption of High Church liturgy and Anglo-Catholic theology. While our roots are firmly planted in the footsteps of Blessed Jackson Kemper and the Oxford Movement, our diocese (like most dioceses) is comprised of a complex tapestry of liturgical styles and political views. In recent years, the reputation of the Diocese has been that of a very small grouping of congregations that barely manages to maintain regular operations. In actuality, our diocese has managed to support operations with apportionment set at 10% for the last decade. While other dioceses have turned to endowments to offset costs, we've managed to rebuild financial reserves while providing increased supports for parishes. We've jettisoned unneeded properties and streamlined administration, while encouraging creative congregational ministries. There's no miraculous recipe to what we've done, because we're simply employing the same pragmatic missional approach that created a series of small parishes that once dotted nearly every stop on the railways that cross our Northern Wisconsin landscape. There are countless stories in our parishes that highlight our approach, but perhaps there is none better than the development of the Northern Highlands Benefice.

The Northern Highlands Benefice (NHB) is an association of four rural parishes in the northern half of our Diocese. St. Alban's in Spooner, St. Luke's in Springbrook, Grace Church in Rice Lake, and the Church of the Ascension in Hayward have each been yoked or connected to other parishes through their varied histories. Many of those other congregations closed over the decades and the communities have shifted and changed as industries have entered and exited and re-entered the towns in which they were planted. These parishes have known and built shared ministries in several forms through the years and by the end of the 20th Century they had settled into stable congregational lives. Over the next decade, there was a growing sense within each parish that there was more to be done in ministry than their respective congregations could effectively support. As early as 2013, the clergy of these parishes began to speak in informal ways about potential methods and opportunities for collaborative ministry. As those clergy were called to other ministries over time, the lay leadership of the parishes began to find more ways to include one another in mission work and frequently shared clergy while searching for long-term priestly

coverage. At the same time, diocesan leadership was having similar conversations in an attempt to find stable clergy coverage for all four parishes. Though several models were suggested, the Diocese and the congregations couldn't find that perfect structure (or that perfect priest) that could bring the whole system together.

Throughout 2019, Diocesan administration spoke with a number of potential candidates that included bi-vocational priests, married clergy couples, and retired bishops. Though none of those conversations ended with a Call being extended, they did bear a great deal of fruit as a new model began to emerge as a potential fit for these four wonderful parishes. This new model would not only provide stable clergy coverage, but would also introduce a different opportunity to address the sense of untapped missional opportunities that each parish had felt for many years. The new model wasn't, in fact, new at all. It was borrowed from the Welsh, English, and Irish churches that draw together in geographical groups not only to share clergy, but to share in a larger regional identity. This "benefice" would include the coverage one stipendiary priest buttressed by the support of area deacons and retired clergy.

By the summer of 2020, and despite the limitations of the lockdown, the model was further developed, spurred by the interest of a priestly candidate who felt drawn to the development of that regional identity. The new model for the NHB included the establishment of the "Benefice Board," comprised of members of each parish who would be mutually responsible for the support of area ministries that extend beyond the bounds of a particular parish as well as maintaining the structure of clergy coverage for specific services. The intention was to have the Benefice Board help to establish (or re-establish) ministries in the various communities that would be supported by members of all four parishes. By summer of 2020, the model was enacted as the NHB called their first Priest-in-Charge. Unfortunately, the role of the priest and the Board shifted from creating missions to maintaining the lives of the parishes through the burdensome first years of CoVID-19. As the parishes navigated the difficulties of those years, the first Priest-in-Charge of the NHB received a Call to ministry in the Church of Ireland, resigning her post in Summer of 2022.

After a few months of self-reflection, the parishes of the NHB determined that the parishes are still being called (individually and corporately) into this new vision for the Church in rural areas. What they have built to this point is the strong skeleton of viable, full-time ministry

shared with area clergy and laity that could bring a renewed vitality to the individual parishes while providing the community impact of a Pastoral size parish. The NHB and the Benefice Board have worked throughout the Fall and early Winter with the help of local clergy and diocesan administration to develop profiles for the individual parishes as wells for the NHB as a distinct entity. They are currently receiving names for the open position and are happy to answer any questions about the past and future of this template for collaborative ministry in rural areas.