



THE 20 YEAR STORY OF BETHANY MINISTRIES – 1995-2015

1995-2000 ~ Beginning of a Dream

In June of 1995, at the end of his Sabbatical, Peter [Friar Peter Chepaitis, OFM] drove from a convocation at Siena College with Anna [Sr. Anna Tantsits, IHM] to see Sr. Joan Curley, CSJ at St Joseph's Parish in Schoharie, NY. They had learned less than a month before that the house he had planned to move to was no longer available. Joan told them that Fr. Ken Tunny, the pastor in Middleburgh, might be able to help Peter with interim housing until a permanent residence was found. On July 21, Peter moved from East Rutherford, N.J. to Middleburgh. He stayed in the rectory there until Sept 1st, then began a 16 year stay in a rented doublewide mobile home on Mill Lane, close to the Schoharie Creek. He made the move close to his 50th birthday & Anna helped him set up the house. Her yearlong sabbatical began in Aug, 1995, & she visited occasionally from Wellsprings, in Glens Falls, NY to help discern the beginnings of the ministry. When the Middleburgh pastor became ill, Peter covered most of the Masses in Middleburgh & Schoharie from Sept through Dec.



The Mill Lane House



The Schoharie Creek Flooding

In Jan 1996, the Schoharie Creek flooded, but Peter's house was only minimally damaged. After her sabbatical time in Rome, Italy in the spring of '96, Anna & Peter did their 1st Parish Mission in the early fall at St. Patrick's Cathedral [in Harrisburg PA]. Then she interviewed for a position at the Diocese of Albany, NY, got the job & moved to the Albany area. On Nov 18th she began a job as Associate Director of Adult Faith Formation & Evangelization for the Albany Diocese. During April of '96, at the invitation of Jerry Marten, a former NYC police officer, we began a weekly contemplative prayer group based on the 11th Step of AA. And in 2015, it is still meeting.

In 1997 Peter was officially commissioned by his Franciscan Province to continue to minister in Schoharie County, with The Prayer House Community [an ecumenical group that founded a hermitage in Northeastern PA], as a spiritual support group & structure of accountability. Anna & Peter participated in the first Schoharie County Ecumenical Tent Meeting in August, 1998. That year, Bethany Ministries was first listed in the Official Catholic Directory as a ministry of the Diocese of Albany. As we lived out 1999, we saw our lives & ministry through the lens of the ministries of **Prayer, Proclamation & Hospitality**. We have been led to live in a creative tension between prayer, ministry & rest, like Martha, Mary & Lazarus of Bethany.

On the Feast of the Epiphany, Jan 2000, we completed the Initiation into the Catholic Faith of a guest who had come to Middleburgh the previous year. We baptized, confirmed & gave communion to Rose in NYC. She went home to God in the spring, shortly after Anna's mother died. We often tell her story. When Anna's job with the Diocese ended, she began to work full time as part of Bethany Ministries Retreat & Mission Team. This prayer, composed by Barbara Chepaitis, sums up a faith sharing gathering of the larger Bethany Ministries Community & reflects our first 5 years of growth & sharing:

Hospitality Prayer

*Ancient wisdom, Breath of coincidence, Keeper of the winds, All people,
We breathe you Great Breath and are breathed by you into bodies that have wisdom.
We are the patter of the sky, the water, the land, the wind and fire. Dragonflies die of drought and we go with them.
The hurricane grows large and moves closer to the land that we are made of. How much of me is in the hurricane?
How much of the hurricane is in me, will roll over me?
The eye of the storm Is the willingness of the heart to see and know, hear and sing, act and be in stillness.
I don't know my name but today I know yours as I listen to the breath of friends,
breath of life, of all people, the breath of love, of wind.*

2001-2005 ~ Franciscan Ministry of the Word at Bethany Ministries

We visited the Grand Canyon in Sept & had to stay several extra days because of the tragedy of Sept 11th, 2001. On that day we joined the world community in experiencing a deep poverty, grief & powerlessness while at the same time a new sense of connectedness.



Gary Pierce, founder of the *Pierce Cedar Creek Institute* invited us to be part of its dedication in Michigan. For that occasion we created a dramatic reflection based on the great poem by Francis of Assisi –The Canticle of Brother Sun. This was the first of over 20 performances by Anna & Peter as Clare & Francis in ‘*Sacred Creation*’. In 2002, we revised our mission statement to reflect what we had grown into:

Bethany Ministries is a spiritually diverse community of households who seek to live creatively in the tension between solitude & community. The stories of Jesus in relationship with Martha, Mary & Lazarus of Bethany, as mirrored in the lives of Clare & Francis of Assisi, provide the inspiration for the existence & activities of Bethany Ministries. Prayer, Proclamation & Hospitality are the three principal ministries of the Bethany Ministries Community.

In 2003, the *Franciscan Ministry of the Word at Bethany Ministries* led 9 Parish Missions of 5 or 6 days, 4 week-long retreats [mostly for religious sisters] & 7 shorter retreats, 2 of them for ecumenical groups. We have been able to reach out to the poor, including parishes on a Choctaw Reservation in Mississippi. We modeled collaborative ministry by living the reality that we are a “community of households” still discovering what it is called to become & living in the tensions that come from trying to be this new type of community that is more like a ‘*virtual web of relationships*’. Even in a world that uses fear as a weapon to limit freedom & justify war, we are full of hope. In 2004, we did 9 Parish Missions & 3 week-long retreats. One was an ecumenical ‘*Renewal Celebration*’ for 7 different Catholic & Protestant Churches in Catskill, NY. Two other parishes we traveled to were pastored by Sisters of IHM in North Carolina & had considerable Hispanic membership.

During 2005, we led Parish Missions in 8 different parishes & also did 3 confirmation retreats for adolescents from 10 different parishes. We experienced the truth that who we are –a man & a woman; a Catholic priest & sister– speaks as clearly about God’s love & truth as do our words & rituals. We served as the Catholic chaplains for a week at the Chautauqua Institution in Western NY. Anna was the first woman invited to be a Catholic chaplain at Chautauqua. We continued to partner with the local Protestant & Catholic clergy of Middleburgh & experienced the power of partnership in many deep ways as expressed in the song “Living Planet:”

♪ “*We can change the universe by bein’ who we are.*” ♪

2006-2010 ~ Grief & Blessing

We began 2006 in Canada, with a Parish Mission for an English speaking Church in Chateaugay, near Montreal & a weekend at Kanawake, the place where St. Kateri Tekakwitha is buried. It was a year that found us regularly sharing the Good News of God’s love with people from a wide variety of cultures, religions, languages & races. We did 4 week-long retreats in 2006. The highlight of our summer was doing 3 in a row on the newly developed theme, ‘*A Pilgrimage with Mary: Mystic and Prophet.*’ During those retreats we experienced that God’s Good News transcends every language & culture – & can touch each person who opens their heart just where they need it most. That year we did our ‘*Sacred Creation*’ presentation for a United Methodist School of Spirituality & an Interfaith Group in Roscoe, NY & also. 6 Parish Missions.

During 2007, our presentations often included references to the scandal of human trafficking, a practice that puts profit ahead of people. When prompted by Peter’s homily at St. Joseph’s, our NY state assemblyman, Pete Lopez, was moved to co-sponsor a bill to make trafficking a felony in NY. Over this year, we led missions for 12 parishes in 3 states - CT, DE, & NY. On one of those weekends we preached at 13 Masses in 3 different parishes. We also led 6 retreats for various groups, including a Filipino community whose ages ranged from 7 to 67. Our lives are like a violin string that needs to be in tension in order to make a sound, and under *just the right amount* of tension to make beautiful music. Like that string, we are always in a creative tension that is constantly in need of being adjusted. During 2008, we led 4 Parish Missions & 4 retreats, including our first retreat for Catholic priests. While working at a second format for Parish Missions based on the Beatitudes & the Lord’s Prayer we came to a deeper level of understanding that true Gospel Poverty is a state of awareness of our need for connection.

In 2009, we lived a verse of Psalm 126, “*Those who sow in tears shall reap rejoicing.*” In the midst of illness & crisis, we have seen families grow closer & become luminous with love & caring. In the midst of both personal & communal grieving, we have seen new life & creative growth in individuals & parish communities. We continued to enter into grieving for several of our family, friends & communities in 2009. The health of Peter’s mother declined through the year, and in Dec she went home to God. We grieved with the members of St Joseph’s Parish in Schoharie, NY, which merged with St Catherine’s in Middleburgh to form the new parish of Our Lady of the Valley. Peter presided & preached at almost all the Sunday Masses at St. Joseph’s from Nov, 2008 – June, 2009. The 3 parish missions we did that year were for parishes in the process of merging. There were

also 2 evening performances of 'Sacred Creation' that were followed by reflection on & discussion of environmental spirituality in Paterson, NJ & Oneonta, NY. We also participated in 5 other funerals & memorial services in both Catholic & Protestant churches in NY, NJ & PA, as well as 6 more in 2010, several of them in truly tragic circumstances.

In the spring of 2010, we were part of a sung Eucharistic liturgy at Union Theological Seminary in NYC. The music was composed by Kim Harris. In Sept, Peter turned 65. Later in the fall, we blessed an eagle that Peter's sister, Barbara, against many obstacles, had succeeded in bringing to the US from Afghanistan. The whole journey was a parable of Good News which reveals a vision of how all creation is connected & of how compassion for one of God's creatures is a sign of the sacredness of all life & a blessing for both the one cared for & the ones who cared. Our ecumenical journey continued when the Reformed Congregation in Schoharie asked us to lead Stations of the Cross on Good Friday in their Church. Also in 2010, we led 2 Parish Missions, two week long retreats & 6 weekend or day retreats, half of them were variations of our "Mary, Mystic & Prophet" retreat. One of our Lenten Missions was in Lafayette, LA for a parish in Cajun country.



Mitch



The Blessing of "Eagle Mitch"

2011-2015 ~ The Flood & A Ministry of Presence

The car we had been sharing was totaled in Jan of 2011, but we had been offered another one just 2 days before the accident. From Jan to May, we went to a parish in Morris, NY to help the people grieve the loss of their pastor who had died unexpectedly the day after Christmas. During Lent we were at Our Lady of the Blessed Sacrament in Bayside, Queens, NY. We travelled to Michigan in May to lead the memorial service of our longtime friend, Gary Pierce [at whose request we created 'Sacred Creation' in 2001]. When he was close to death, Gary, though an atheist, had asked us to collaborate with his widow, Mary, in creating & leading his service. We went on retreat together in Aug & prayed about the future of Bethany Ministries, sensing that there was a major shift approaching. What happened was not what we expected. **Hurricane Irene** hit Middleburgh on Aug 28 & turned our lives upside down. We lost most of our ministry materials & Peter was driven from his residence. This event launched us into a new mode of ministry – a 'ministry of presence' – and we were only able to pay our bills because of insurance & donations. Both of us had to live in borrowed lodgings for several months & Peter was not able to find a permanent place to live for 2½ years. God provided so generously that we were able to rebuild our puppet collection & give to others who were in need. A new verse of "O Little Town of Bethlehem" – which we composed for 'Miracle on Main St' (a regular pre-Christmas event in Middleburgh) sums up this 'watershed' year:

♪ *O Little Town of Middleburgh your star still shines so bright. ~ Above the valley from the ridge we see your wondrous light. Yet when the darkness threatened, you found a way to rise. The hopes & dreams of all the years shine out through you tonight.* ♪

In Feb, 2012 Anna turned 70 & in Aug, we celebrated the **Golden/Ruby Jubilees** of Anna's 50th Anniversary of her Religious Profession & Peter's 40th Ordination Anniversary at 2 combined events at Middleburgh & the Poor Clare's in Wappingers Falls. In July, Fr. Tom Holmes was transferred from Middleburgh & was not replaced until Fr. Bill Gorman came in early Nov. During that time, Peter was the only priest living in Schoharie County. Both of us visited many who were sick, walked with some on their journey to the next world & attended & led some of their funerals. Not only did we meet Jesus in our participation in an Interfaith Jazz Vespers in Schenectady, we continued encountering Him in an inmate at Woodbourne prison. Peter met him in 2003 & we still correspond with him & regularly speak to him on the phone. In Aug we participated with all the other local clergy to open Middleburgh's 300th Anniversary Celebration with an Ecumenical Prayer Service on the steps of the high school with most of the Village gathered on the front lawn. Except for the summer, our weekly centering prayer group goes to the community meal at one of the Middleburgh Churches before we pray. Peter was a chaplain for an Albany Men's Cursillo NY in late June.

As we journeyed through **2013**, we continued to be surprised that our ministry was alive & well in Schoharie County, in the Albany Diocese & on the road. The Spirit used us to welcome into the Catholic Church the 91 year old mother of someone who comes for spiritual direction. She enjoyed her last year as an official Catholic, & went home to God in 2014. We directed one week long retreat for sisters near Pittsburgh & we led 4 Parish Missions in 2013. The one that was in Sacramento, CA began with a bi-lingual retreat day for their lay ministers – many of whom were Filipino. Another was for 5 Catholic Parishes in Pike County, PA. It took 2 weekends to get to all their weekend Masses. We also did days of reflection, talks on 'Fair Trade' coffee & other products & preached at parishes in the Albany Diocese as well as 5 weekends for the foreign missions both of Holy Name Province & of the IHM Sisters in Peru, South America. Peter, who is a chaplain for the KofC, received his 3rd Degree.

While looking back over the **2014** story of Bethany Ministries we realized an Advent hymn's words, "**Stay awake, be ready**" were the THEME of our whole year. In Feb, Peter moved from the tiny apartment on Main Street in town to **104 Grove Street**. The apartment beneath Anna's became his new residence & our ministry center. We led 2 Parish Missions & 1 retreat for Sisters in 2014. At the end of April, we drove to Pittsburgh to attend a conference, 'Grace In Process: 30 yrs of Gestalt Pastoral Care.' GPC was begun by our friend Tilda Norberg, a Methodist Minister. One of the wonderful developments in 2014 was the beginning of monthly gatherings of our 'Franciscan Spirituality Group'. About 12 to 15 people from Schoharie & Schenectady Counties in NY regularly come. In late Nov, Peter was surprised by a gall bladder attack & was hospitalized for surgery. He recovered enough to participate in "Miracle on Main St" in Dec & to preside & preach at Christmas Masses. We finished 2014 with the conviction that:

Joy is not the absence of sorrow or conflict, it is the presence of God, the presence of Love.

As **2015** began we thought about celebrating Bethany Ministries' 20th Anniversary in some way while we put together & sent out over 2,500 copies of our yearly newsletter. We did a benediction & a reflection for the swearing in of our local NY State Assemblyman, Pete Lopez. Two different people working the AA recovery program asked Peter to take their '5th step' of the program. He & Anna also meet, both formally & informally, with almost 20 people as spiritual companions. Peter was named "liason" for the Emmaus Fraternity by his Franciscan Province. It is a group of Friars who live singly & have met regularly since 2000. In Feb, we helped design & lead a new approach to celebrating the Sacrament of Reconciliation in a communal manner at the annual "Pardon & Pancakes" service at Our Lady of Fatima Parish in Delanson. At the request of the local pastors, we did presentations after the Wed community suppers in Lent in each of the 4 churches in the Village. We called it '**Lenten R[eflection] & R[itual]**'. Peter teamed with Fr. Matt Wetsel, the new Pastor in Middleburgh, to cover the Catholic Holy Week Services in the area. In the spring, we taught 2 courses in Ecclesiology for the Kateri Institute for Lay Ministry of the Albany Diocese for the 2nd time. And most recently we spent a week on the road for 2 convocations. Peter was one of 3 men among 600 sisters at Marywood in Scranton for Anna's OSP/IHM Convocation [a gathering of 4 religious congregations that takes place every 10 years]. Then we joined about 30 Friars & lay partners in Malvern, PA to participate in some media training & reflect on Pope Francis' Encyclical on the environment. The following words express our hopes & dreams for the last 5 years of Bethany Ministries & all that are to come.

"...I am reminded that our true power resides not in money, or status. Not in rage or fear. It resides in our capacity to love. In the strength it takes to choose love over fear. That's the miracle of being human. ...That we're here to move beyond our fear and learn love, to live love, in all that it requires. May the darkness bless you with dreams of light. May the returning light bless you with lessons of love."

–Barbara Chepaitis, 2012

