

Ministry Models Task Group Interim Report
to the 112th Convention of the Diocese of Northern Indiana
October 23, 2010

“We would rather be ruined than changed; we would rather die in our dread than climb the cross of the moment and let our illusions die.” *W. H. Auden*

Good afternoon. My name is Brian Grantz and this is the interim report of the Ministry Models Task Group. Please fasten your seat belts and make sure your tray tables are in their full, upright, and locked position. We have to go fast.

A little over a year ago, an actual conversation broke out at the Preconvention Deanery Meeting of the former South Bend Deanery. This particular conversation was born in other, prior conversations among clergy and lay leaders around the Diocese in which perceptions were shared about the life, health, and vitality of congregations in our Diocese. Here’s what we were hearing – see if any of this sounds familiar:

Many parishes, which we assume to be most of them, meaning really all but one, and you know who you are, are in some measure of financial distress.

- Parish income is no longer keeping up with inflation, either “flat-lining” or, in some cases, declining.
- Congregations are, generally speaking, maintaining attendance numbers, albeit with aging populations.
- Many congregations are covering increased expenses from cash reserves or other assets, a practice which, obviously, can not be continued indefinitely.

Assuming there is some basis in reality behind these perceptions, the implications both to our congregations and to the Diocese are myriad – and sobering. Congregations are reducing hours, eliminating staff, shifting to part-time or Sunday supply-only clergy, and some are on the brink of closing. Diminishing fiscal resources in congregations likewise means diminishing fiscal resources for the diocese. Again, the implications include staff cuts, reductions in hours and programs, and even more drastically, the possibility of a part-time bishop or, even more, more drastically, a new iteration of our diocese in conjunction with a neighboring diocese. Lest you lament that as a worst-case scenario, let me remind you that if we should ever reunite with our neighbors to the south as the Diocese of Indiana, we reunite with the Lilly Fund, as well. But I digress.

Bearing all of this in mind, with reports of distress of one stripe or another coming from every corner of the Diocese, wondering about the viability of our churches and the Diocese in both the short- and long-term, the Pre-Convention Deanery Meeting wondered, “Should we not be thinking about these things proactively rather than reactively? Should we not ask Diocesan Convention to look at this?” And thus came the resolution which was adopted by the 111th Convention in Plymouth a year ago for that very purpose. The resolution called for the formation of an ad hoc committee, with a balance of lay and clergy members, “to explore and develop future mission and ministry strategies in the Diocese of Northern Indiana.” The resolution also required an interim report to this, the 112th Convention, and a final report at next year’s convention.

So the Bishop, along with the Canon to the Ordinary and me – because when you open your mouth in Church they really do ask you to be in charge – convened what is officially called the Ministry Models Task Group and unofficially called Ministry Models for Parishes in Indiana so that

we could use the acronym MMPI, which is an über-nerdy joke that I will explain if you really, really want me to. Next year.

Here's who answered the call to serve:

Our lay members are

- Ms. Linda Buskirk from Trinity Church, Fort Wayne;
- Dr. Tom Gresik from the Cathedral of Saint James, South Bend; and
- Ms. Michelle Walker from Saint Andrew's-by-the-Lake, Michigan City.

Our clergy members are

- Fr. Andy Hanyzewski from Saint Andrew's-by-the-Lake, Michigan City and Saint Francis Church, Chesterton;
- Canon John Schramm from Saint Thomas Church / Iglesia de Santo Tomas, Plymouth; and
- Mother Kathy Thomas from Grace Church, Fort Wayne.

Additionally, I have been serving ex-officio as convener; Canon SuzeAnne Silla and Mr. Jon Adamson have been full participants from Diocesan staff at each meeting; and Bishop Little has been present and active at each meeting as well.

Before moving on to our work, just a brief word about the Task Group itself: there is not a shrinking violet on it. This is a high-functioning group of people. Every person has contributed freely and insightfully to every conversation, making our meetings lively, challenging, thought-provoking, and fun. As for productive, well, we're getting to that.

But here's the thing: The resolution was crafted to be intentionally vague about both the task and the goals. Why is this? Because we recognize that this is a huge issue with serious implications and it makes all of us nervous to think about doing things differently. And it makes us all the more nervous to think about someone else telling us what we have to do differently. The resolution was vague because we really didn't have an answer before we asked the question, and it was vague because we in no way wanted to intimate that this is a "top-down" process that would ultimately impose the will of "the Diocese" on our constituent congregations. That's not what we're doing. What we are doing, which we will get to eventually, is developing a process by which we, all of us, ye Episcopalians in Northern Indiana, can consider and enact ways to re-organize and re-vitalize for the efficient and effective spread of the Gospel of Jesus Christ throughout the northern third of our state and serve the spiritual, pastoral, and liturgical needs of our congregations. In short, the question is, "Can we, by the grace of God, the power of the Holy Spirit, and good old Hoosier ingenuity, figure out a way to do some really exciting Gospel work in every corner of our Diocese even in this economic environment?"

So the crisis is diminishing parishes, the question is what can we do to continue to provide ministry to congregations, the value is open dialog and broad input into potential solutions, and the goal is renewed energy for mission in every corner of the Diocese.

In a much more eloquent form, here is an excerpt from one of our in-group communiqués:

"We need to take serious steps to move the diocese from being a collection of semi-autonomous spiritual clubs for members' benefit who run their own show (until they get into financial trouble) and are asked to pay for a larger structure at the diocesan level which provides the bureaucratic support for their member-based organization, to a mission-oriented confraternity of congregations under the united leadership of bishops and deans and presbyters, whose objective is to maximize the effectiveness of the mission of the whole

Episcopal Church in this area, drawing the lay folks into an awareness of their identity as part of Jesus' Kingdom Movement.”

With that in mind, it should come as no surprise to anyone that it has taken us the better part of a year to get our bearings. We are observing serious symptoms with serious implications and asking a huge question that goes well beyond “what can we do about congregations in distress,” into “how can we, together, best be Church in our context.”

Here, briefly, are some false starts and detours we have taken along the way, which I offer just to give you an idea what we're grappling with.

1) Our first plan was to gather a lot of statistical data and present a compelling case to Diocesan Convention about the dire straits in which we will soon find ourselves. Jon Adamson, God bless him, compiled parochial report data from the past 20 years to show trends in average Sunday attendance and operating income for each of our parishes. He also began to compile some other demographic data for the ZIP codes in and around each of our existing parishes. Unfortunately, as cool as some of this data was, this exercise proved to be a non-starter. First of all, we already know parishes are struggling. Secondly, as our economist in residence pointed out to us, the data only tell us what but not why, and if this was going to be of any use to us, we would have find out what was really going on parish by parish.

2) Our second start was more theoretical, using a model presented at the Church Development Institute in an effort to understand the work of the Diocese in the current environment. The fruit of this exercise was the articulation by the Bishop of the following distinctive identity of the Episcopal Church:

- The Episcopal Church offers, as the Bishop said this morning, Catholic faith and order. We offer superb historical, liturgical worship that is rooted in ancient faith and practice of the Church.
- The Episcopal Church is characterized by evangelical zeal. We are Christocentric and Biblical.
- The Episcopal Church is open to questions; we are distinct in our beliefs without being rigid.

The conversation that led to this and followed from it was fascinating, and probably very important to continue, but ultimately only tangential to our task.

3) The explanation in the original resolution stated that the parish model itself was in distress. This proved to be something of a red herring in one way, but led to an important distinction in another. The red herring was one of causality. Again, we can describe a lot of symptoms of decline, but it does not follow from these symptoms that the parish model is itself somehow the underlying cause of decline. All we can really say, based upon our observations of symptoms, is that the parish model is in distress, which is itself a red herring because the parish model is the only one we use. If we were actually employing other ministry models, maybe they would be in distress, too. So it is important for us, before we throw the parochial baby out with the distressed bathwater, to understand the true causal elements behind parish distress before we begin to discuss solutions.

The flip side of the parish model conversation was productive, however, in clarifying some concepts. When we, meaning me, I suppose, speak of the parish model, we are referring to the structure of the Church at the local level provided by our canons. Our canons hold up as ideal the notion of a gathering of Christians in a more or less particular geographical area in a Church building or campus that is served by one or more full-time clergy and whose governance is autonomous. So, in other words, the church rule-book paints your Episcopalian happy place as an autonomous Church with its own building served by a full-time rector in every town large enough to support one. In fact, it used to be that the presence of a full-time rector was the criterion for “parish

status.” That’s the ideal – make no mistake about it. But it is also this very vision of parish that we are having an increasingly difficult time funding in more and more places. The key here, though, is that parish is a word that describes structure, and it is not synonymous with congregation. By congregation we mean the gathering of God’s people wherever that occurs. The importance of the distinction is this: As the parish structure fails, how do we, as a diocese, continue to support the congregation that remains. Do you see the difference? It’s the old adage, “The Church is what remains after the building burns down.” The congregation is the living manifestation of the Body of Christ, the parish is the structure by which we administer it. They are very, very closely tied in our experience, but they are not the same thing. So when we talk about ministry models other than the parish model, we are by no means talking about the dissolution of congregations, but rather investigating alternative structures by which mission and ministry are encouraged and provided.

Here are a few observations around that point:

- 1) Our experience of the Church is primarily local, the principle of subsidiarity the Bishop spoke of earlier. Our identity as Christians is formed in local congregations;
- 2) Congregations are, therefore, rather tenacious, which can be both positive and negative. On the plus side, congregations are resilient and resourceful. On the minus side, congregations can become self-absorbed and indifferent to the needs of the broader Church;
- 3) Our project must serve to strengthen local congregations and engage their resilience and resourcefulness in creating new ministry models;
- 4) There is no one-size fits all model, not even the parish model;
- 5) Energy around renewed mission and creative ministry possibilities will likely bear better fruit than parish yoking or clustering, which often simply feels like failure to achieve or maintain the ideal of “parish;” and
- 6) All of this requires significant encouragement and empowerment of the laity to “be the Church.” And that can only be a good thing.

So, in the end, we are holding up a vision of Church that maybe, just maybe, looks a little bit more like the early Christian communities in the Acts of the Apostles than twentieth century Jesus, Incorporated.

One last discovery before moving on to what comes next: Canon Silla put out a query on a listserv populated by diocesan deployment officers and Canons to the Ordinary asking what they felt were the most pressing issues in the Church today. Guess what? We’re not alone. This conversation about congregations and dioceses in distress is unfolding all over the country. In fact, we found out too late that there was a conference in Baltimore this past September that considered many of the issues we are talking about. Our task group will be watching for other opportunities to plug into the broader conversation.

And that brings me, at long last, to what comes next, but hopefully you have some insight into why it has taken us so long to get here.

First, we are asking Bishop Little to continue to articulate his vision for Christian mission, which he has already done last night and this morning. Stay the course, Bishop; a thousand points of light.

Second, we are going to investigate several ministry models, entering into the national conversation as a task group and offering interested individuals and parishes the opportunity to do so as well.

Third, we will host regional gatherings to talk to clergy and laity alike about what is actually happening in your congregations and what your needs, concerns, and questions are.

Fourth, we will gather as a diocese for significant conversation and input and exploration of various models, perhaps as early as next fall.

Fifth, we will encourage and support extra-canonical pilot projects entered into by congregations seeking creative ways in which to rethink and renew their mission.

And finally, we recognize that there are parishes in this Diocese for whom financial relief is a critical concern that cannot wait much longer for resolution. We hold that thought before you as a matter for prayer and as a reality check. In a moment of exasperation, one of our task group members interjected, “Will it take the threat of death to get us to work together?” Well, here we are. But let’s end with a succinct, hopeful, joyful summary on what this is really all about.

All for the Best

Original Lyrics by Stephen Schwartz

Adapted Lyrics by Brian Grantz & Matthew Cowden

When you feel sad or under a curse
Your budget’s bad, endowments are worse
Your priest is sighing, crying and your Sunday school is dying
Deacons are graying and buildings decaying
And dioceses weighing your purse
Your youth and your choir have bid you adieu
You’d bet that God is bored by Rite Two
Don’t forget that when you get to heaven you’ll be blessed
Yes it’s all for the best!

Some churches are born to live at ease; full up as you please; people on their knees every Sunday
Vestry’s feeling grand; buying up new land so they can expand down the block
They’re budget worry free; lots of ministry; hosting ladies’ tea for a fun day
And in their planned giving they’re leaving their stock
They baptize in a swimming pool; kids in Sunday school; priest that’s young and cool (and works Monday)
And that old Rite One just is never done ‘cause it isn’t fun like the rest
But what is the Church for? And who does it search for?
You guessed, it’s all for the best!

Sing verses simultaneously

Sing simultaneously, ending

You guessed it’s all for the – all the mainline’s in distress!
Yes, it’s all for the – the vestry’s really not possessed!
Yes, it’s all for the – someone leave a big bequest!
Yes, it’s all for the best.