

DIOCESE OF EAU CLAIRE
Charting a Course into the Future:
Report on the Work of the Joint Diocesan Committees
October, 2008

I. Background

In March, 2008, the Right Reverend Keith B. Whitmore, fifth Bishop of the Diocese of Eau Claire, announced his resignation in order to take the position of Assistant Bishop in the Diocese of Atlanta. The three primary committees of the Diocese, Executive Council, Standing Committee, and Trustees, initially continued their work independently of one another, but it soon became apparent that there would be benefit in having the three committees meet together and jointly consider the future direction of the Diocese. A joint meeting facilitated by Diocesan Chancellor, James Pelish, was convened on Saturday, June 14, 2008 and a subsequent joint meeting was held Saturday, August 2, 2008. The next joint meeting was scheduled for Saturday, October 25, 2008, just prior to the Diocesan Convention.

II. Process

One of the first orders of business for the three committees meeting jointly was to clarify the role of each body. While roles and functions of these groups are fairly clear when there a Bishop is in place, each of them takes on additional responsibilities in the absence of a Bishop. The Diocesan Chancellor summarized the roles and responsibilities of each committee at the June 14th meeting. It was also decided that minutes of each of the three committees be circulated to members of both of the other groups, and that each committee's meetings be open to members of both other groups.

In addition to clarifying roles and responsibilities, there was also discussion at the June 14th meeting regarding selection of a method for deciding what course the Diocese should follow into the future. A continuum of options was described, from one extreme of maintaining the Diocese of Eau Claire as a separate Diocese with its own Bishop, to the opposite extreme of dissolving the Diocese. Between the two extremes were the following potential options:

- having a part-time bi-vocational Bishop who has part-time secular employment;
- having a part-time bi-vocational Bishop who also functions as a Rector in one of the congregations;
- sharing a Bishop with another Diocese;
- merging with another Diocese to create a new Diocese (known as junctioning according to the canons of The Episcopal Church).

Restructuring the congregations of the Diocese, for example, yoking or merging congregations, and alternative models of lay and clerical ministries, could be considered in combination with any of the potential options other than dissolution. The June 14th meeting concluded with the each member of the three committees being asked to submit the questions

they would need to have answered in order to proceed with the work of charting a course for the Diocese of Eau Claire.

At the August 2nd meeting the issues and questions that were surfaced from questions submitted by committee members were summarized and discussed. Predominant issues included:

Financial Status

- The Trustees and newly appointed Treasurer, Bob Allen, reported a serious budget shortfall and shortage of cash that was not projected to resolve until several months had elapsed without the expense of the Episcopate.
- There was strong consensus that the financial situation of the Diocese was dire, and concern that some people seemed not to grasp the seriousness of the situation.
- There was also strong consensus that the current apportionment system was inequitable and unduly burdensome, and needed to be fundamentally overhauled.
- Committee members agreed that it was important to inform members of the Diocese about its financial problems.

Leadership

- Although there was not a general consensus on the need for a leader in the short term, committee members noted the difficulties of running an organization by committee and the unmet needs for pastoral oversight and episcopal functions (such as ordinations and confirmations).
- It was agreed that an interim plan to secure the services of a Bishop on an as-needed basis should be developed. It was also agreed that, because of the financial condition of the Diocese, reimbursement of a Bishop for episcopal services rendered would need to be strictly limited and carefully overseen.

Identity

- Some members of the committees reflected their personal identification with the Diocese of Eau Claire and wondered whether the membership of the Diocese would respond similarly to the concept of the Diocese being restructured or dissolved.
- It was recognized that going forward as a separate Diocese would require the interest, desire, and effort of the membership, both lay and clergy.

Commitment

- A few committee members expressed concern that commitment among the Diocesan membership may be lacking. Examples cited were previous unsuccessful attempts to revitalize the Diocese (e.g., Capital funds Drive; Blue Ribbon Commission; Purpose Driven Church).
- Some members expressed the importance of rebuilding trust and confidence in order to move forward.

Immediate Actions

- There was consensus that the apportionment system be given immediate attention. A sub-committee of the Executive Council had already begun collecting information from other Dioceses about their apportionment procedures. This information was to be brought to the Executive Council for a decision on restructuring the apportionment system in order to be incorporated into the 2009 budget.
- There was consensus that a series of Listening Sessions be held in four locations in the Diocese. Topics to be explored at the Listening Sessions were to include:
 - Identity: as Episcopalian; as the Diocese of Eau Claire; effect of sharing a Bishop; effect of merging with another Diocese
 - Mission and Ministry: what is needed to attract others to the local congregations; effect of financial focus on outreach, proclamation of God's word; effect of becoming part of a larger Diocese with a stronger resource base
 - Community: population trends of the past 5 – 20 years in the areas served by congregations; important events of the past 5 – 20 years in the areas served by congregations

Listening Sessions would be facilitated by a team of one layperson and one member of the clergy. Listening Session facilitators were to be from areas of the Diocese other than the congregations included in the Session. Facilitators would also take the opportunity to disseminate information regarding the financial status of the Diocese during the Listening Sessions.
- Exploration and analysis of alternative structural models for congregations and for the Diocese were to occur simultaneously with attention to the apportionment system and the Listening Sessions (see section III. Information Gathering).

III. Information Gathering

Community and Congregational Information

- An initial review of demographic data on the towns and cities in which congregations of the Diocese of Eau Claire are located revealed a picture of mixed trends:
 - Overall there was net loss of 7.2% of combined population from 2000 to 2006.
 - Some communities saw significant growth in the six-year period; e.g., Hudson (35.8% increase), New Richmond (26.2% increase) and Mauston (13.7% increase) while others experienced severe population declines; e.g., Park Falls (11.6% decline).
- The median age of the populations of cities and towns in which there are congregations were generally above the state median of 36.0, with the exception of the communities where colleges and universities are located (e.g., Eau Claire, Hudson, La Crosse, Menomonie, Superior). Some of the median ages are significantly higher than state median, denoting a predominantly retiree population (e.g., Bayfield, 45.4; Park Falls, 42.3; Owen, 41.1; Hayward, 40.2).
- The estimated median household income in 2005 in cities and towns in which there are congregations was generally below the state median household income of \$47,105, with the exception of Hudson (\$61,300) and New Richmond (\$52,200). A lower median household income than state average is consistent with a large student and/or retiree population.

Listening Sessions

- Listening sessions were held in four locations across the Diocese during the month of September to explore the thoughts, preferences, and concerns of members with respect to the Diocese of Eau Claire and its relationship to their congregations, and their congregations in relationship to their communities.
- Facilitator teams selected questions in the areas of Identity, Mission and Ministry, and Community. All comments were noted and compiled for this report.
- Common themes that emerged in the listening session discussions:
 - Identity: Congregations were described as having individual identities; e.g., “old”; “poor”; “family”; “in transition” (several congregations); “vital”; “caring”; “loyal”; “diverse”; “stable”; “small but strong”; “friendly”.
 - Diocesan Identity: There was a lack of consensus on the importance of the Diocese to the congregation’s identity. Some comments cast the Diocese as extremely important, while others stated it was inconsequential whether or not the congregation was connected to a Diocese. Sample of comments: “Dioceses are to bring common purpose in a geographic area”; “Geography doesn’t matter”; “More of our identity is from the parish”.
 - Concerns Regarding Relationship with Diocese: Some comments regarding the role or function of the Diocese suggested perceived deficiencies in the existing relationship between their congregation and the Diocese. Comments indicated that more could be done in the way of support to congregations and in communications with congregations: “Most important is to belong to an *active* Diocese”; “It is important to have a connection to the Episcopal church whether it is the Diocese or something else”; “We need pastoral care – an Episcopal presence”; “The Diocese should be a resource, a place to call for help and resources. But it isn’t now”; “If we joined up with another Diocese, we’d never see a Bishop;” “Tell us the need. When the need is communicated, people speak up and get involved”; “We need more communications from the Diocese”; “Why aren’t the people told what is going on?”
 - Mission: There was strong consensus on the mission of the congregations: to spread the Gospel/witness to Jesus Christ/to bring people to a personal relationship with God/to reach out to the community and grow. A theme of service to others and the community was also present: “Use God’s power to sacrifice self and serve others.”
 - Fulfillment of Mission: Participants thought their congregations were very effective in many ministry areas including community outreach, hospitality, youth ministry, pastoral care, prayer, fellowship, hunger programs, and ecumenical collaboration. They expressed wishes to expand ministries in peace and justice, Christian formation, ministry to youth and young families, and evangelism. They reported that obstacles to expanding ministries included lack of people and commitment (e.g., “it’s always the same people ...”; “need leadership”), training in evangelism and Biblical literacy, and concerns about financial stability.
 - Community: Trends reported in communities served by the congregations were consistent with the trends observed in the demographic data: “plant closings”; “limited job market”; “community is static”; “downtown has died off”; “the kids all leave our community”; “the school population is declining and the churches are declining”; “the 65+ population has increased and so has our need”. Some communities reported population growth: “rapid growth [in] white, employed,

- college-educated, middle- and upper-class”; “now we have two communities [those who have lived here for a long time and those who are moving in]”.
- Congregation’s Position in the Community: Participants reported that congregations are a vital and needed presence in their communities: “I feel a great vitality in our smaller churches”; “The congregation has gone from looking in to looking out. We have become known in the community”; “Residents know ‘the little red church’”; “People see the joy”. They also saw value in collaboration: “We need to bring small congregations together.”

Networking Information on Alternative Structural Models

- Calls were made to the Dioceses of North Dakota, Wyoming, Nevada, Eastern Oregon, Northwest Texas, and Central New York; to two Episcopal parishes in Texas; and to two Episcopal congregations that had joined with congregations in other denominations (Lutheran/Episcopal – Ft. Myers, FL; Presbyterian/Episcopal – Park Rapids, MN).
- Information and advice from the networking calls:
 - Regarding different ministry models:
 - The interim period is a time for self-study and ministry needs assessment. Focus on ministry, not on survival. Seek solutions that use resources that support and enliven ministry at the congregational level. There is no “magic fix” somewhere “out there”; solutions must come from within the Diocese.
 - Mutual ministry, in which local ministers are raised up based upon their individual gifts (i.e., some preachers, some teachers, some singers, some deacons, some priests) has been well received and is working well in the Diocese of Wyoming, the Diocese of Central New York, the Diocese of Nevada, and the Diocese of Eastern Oregon. A seminary trained priest (Missioner) supervises a group of churches making rounds every week. Local ministers are non-stipendiary. The model works well in areas that are predominantly rural with few churches broadly distributed across the geography. From the Diocese of Central New York: “The Church is truly the People.” From the Diocese of Nevada: “strongly recommended.” (Note: Some of the Dioceses that have seen success in mutual ministry are comparable in size to the Diocese of Eau Claire; e.g., Eastern Oregon: 23 congregations; average Sunday attendance 1229.)
 - Regarding different structural models:
 - Experience sharing a Bishop with another Diocese, including all pertinent expenses of the Episcopate (salary, pension, insurance) has been favorable and is planned to continue. Example: Bishop of North Dakota spends one week per month in Diocese of Louisiana. Diocese of Louisiana pays travel; other expenses prorated. Arrangement in place for one year.
 - Diocese of Eastern Oregon in interim situation, without a Bishop, since May, 2007. Working with Bishop Matthews and a search consultant in California who works through Bishop Matthews’s office. Plan is to recruit a part-time provisional Bishop for a term of three years. Mutual ministry model is in place.
 - Both examples of congregations joining with congregations in other denominations arose from facility needs. In Ft. Myers, FL, the Episcopal parish wanted to move from its location but could not afford relocation. A Lutheran

congregation offered its large, new facility to the Episcopal congregation, which was followed by the Lutheran pastor and Episcopal priest initiating discussions regarding what the congregations might do together. In Park Rapids, MN, the Episcopal mission congregation was without a vicar, using a supply priest when available. The Episcopal/Presbyterian partnership was patterned on the example of a congregation in Cincinnati, OH. Worship services tend to alternate, for example, an early Sunday morning Rite One Eucharist followed by a later morning Lutheran service. Both cases report some loss of denominational identity, but both also report increased membership and vitality in the combined congregations.

IV. Analysis: Priority Issues to Address in Evaluating Models for Structure and Ministry

Based on the discussions of the three Diocesan committees, the feedback from Diocesan Listening Sessions, and the information discovered in the course of networking and demographic research, the following issues emerge as priorities for the Diocese to consider in evaluating potential directions for both the short-term and long-term future.

Primacy of Mission

At the congregational level, the top priority is mission. Congregations report success in identifying needs of their communities and creating ways to minister to those needs. As a result of their successes, congregations are well-positioned to identify further needs for ministry and mission, but lack resources to meet these opportunities. Directions for the future of the Diocese need to recognize and build on the successes that congregations have experienced, and provide resources to expand mission and ministry at the congregational level. In particular, members report the need for training and support in evangelism, to foster growth in local congregations.

Utilization of Resources

There is widespread concern for the level of fiscal resources, especially given the rural character of the Diocese and its small size. Directions for the future need to be affordable by a Diocese of the size and composition of the Diocese of Eau Claire. In addition to concern for finances, there is also recognition of considerable gifts and talents at the local level. Directions for the future of the Diocese should include the development and utilization of its human as well as financial resources.

Relationships between Congregations and Diocese

Feedback from the listening sessions indicates that identification with a Diocese of The Episcopal Church is important, although there are differences of opinion among individuals and congregations on the level of importance or priority that is placed on this identity. Of more immediate relevance is the relationship between congregations and the Diocese. Listening session participants indicated they wanted to be part of a Diocese that was actively engaged with its congregations. Directions for the future of the Diocese need to identify ways for the Diocese to be involved at the local level in visible, tangible, and practical ways.

V. Process Recommendations

Each of the range of options open to the Diocese of Eau Claire for short-term and long-term future directions requires more in-depth analysis and consideration in light of the priority issues identified in the work to date. It is recommended that teams of lay and clergy members be designated to undertake this analysis and report their findings to the three Diocesan Committees over the course of the next few months. The work of various work groups during the analysis phase will require staff assistance from the Diocesan Administrator, Diocesan Treasurer, Diocesan Chancellor, and potentially other members of the Diocese or The Episcopal Church.

It will be crucial to keep the congregations informed as to the progress of deliberations throughout the analysis phase; therefore, it is also recommended that a communications network be developed for regular dissemination of information directly to congregations by members of the analysis teams. The importance of direct and regular communications cannot be over-stated. Even when no progress has been made since the prior communication, it is important to communicate the message, “No progress since last communication.”

Respectfully submitted,
The Rev'd Deacon Jo K. Glasser
October 22, 2008