

REVITALIZE OUR DIOCESAN- PARISH RELATIONSHIPS



MATERIAL IN PREPARATION FOR THE 16TH ALL-AMERICAN COUNCIL DIOCESE-PARISH RELATIONSHIP WORKING GROUP, SEATTLE, WASHINGTON

The purpose of this “Read-Ahead” is to provide participants in the All American Council (AAC) with the benefit of the initial thinking that has been done to date on this important issue in the life of the Church. It is meant as **STARTING POINT FOR YOUR OWN DISCUSSIONS AND DELIBERATIONS** and does not represent *official* Church positions. Please feel free to add to, modify, take away, correct, or challenge any of the ideas in here. It is through your collective inputs and the guidance of the Holy Spirit that we will be able to discern the best path forward in this area for the life of the Church during the next decade.

1. INTRODUCTION

To get a better initial understanding of some of the issues involved in revitalizing our Diocesan-Parish relationships, what has been done on this to date, and what still needs to be done; the Strategic Planning Committee formed a Working Group which consisted of:

- His Grace, Michael, Bishop of New York and New Jersey
- Fr Sergius Halvorsen, Attached, Christ the Savior Church, Southbury, CT
- Fr Michael Senyo, Rector, St Alexander Nevsky Cathedral, Allison Park, PA
- Fr Alexis Vinogradov, Rector, St Gregory Theologian Church, Wappingers Falls, NY
- Mrs Donna Karabin, Chair, OCA Department of Christian Service & Humanitarian Aid
- Protodeacon Peter Danilchick, liaison from the Strategic Planning Committee

The Fathers' vision of the Church is a bishop surrounded by his clergy and his people, united in Christ, and ministering to the particular needs of a given geographical area. This assumes and requires an intimate relationship between the bishop, his clergy and the people. All too often, the "demands of the day" and geographical distances, have led to less than desired interactions and parishes and their clergy can develop a sense of isolation, of being on their own. To overcome this, we recommend much more frequent interaction at all levels – clergy-to-clergy and bishop-clergy-lay – both through simple fellowship gatherings around the Altar table and through participation in diocesan level outreach ministries.

In particular, we would emphasize the importance of growing the Church, reversing the current downwards spiral of membership, reaching out and bringing others into the love of Christ, and taking a team approach to revitalization with all working together. The very act of reaching out to the marginalized, the poor, those in need of Christ's mercy and help, will be a powerful force in impacting today's increasingly secularized society. Our work may be that of a voice in the wilderness, but we need to realize that we do not need to have 100% of the people behind us as we venture forth. We may need to start small and build up, increasing the network of those committed to revitalization and outreach.

2. SUMMARY OF THE WORKING GROUP'S PROPOSED STEPS FORWARD

Some key objectives and action steps that might further contribute to revitalize diocesan-parish relationships include:

OBJECTIVE #1 - RE-ENERGIZE THE CLERGY BROTHERHOOD

"Re-energize the clergy brotherhood through more frequent clergy meetings, clergy retreats, continuing education, and through personal interactions with each other. "

Clergy brotherhood meetings have proven to be very successful in a number of dioceses, with the degree of success being dependent upon support of the Hierarch. Sometimes these have been organized as Lenten or other annual retreats within a given Diocese, and sometimes as inter-Orthodox gatherings in a particular area. It is felt that the most beneficial gatherings were simple fellowship gatherings around the Altar table, around the dinner table, without “business” and “goals”, and simply to be with one another. It is certainly true that a number of OCA Departments provide support and resources to priests, but the effectiveness of these programs alone at avoiding burnout and alienation is questionable. Personal, open and caring relationships among clergy appear to be essential.

It is thus critical to establish as a fundamental principle of Diocesan life the need for frequent, face to face, human gatherings of clergy, during which the participants listen to one another, with the positive encouragement of the Diocesan Hierarch and his deans, and to make these gatherings a joy to attend. It has been said that the Bishop’s job is to love his priests and in turn the priest’s job is to love his people. The Bishop here would serve as a model for the relationship that priests should have with their people. To recognize the critical part played by clergy wives and families, they should be included in social gatherings and retreats. These gatherings could be extended as possible on an inter-Orthodox basis, but not as a replacement for normal Diocesan gatherings.

Diocesan Assembly, Diocesan Council and Deanery meetings, which deal with normal administrative concerns, should not be counted as substitutes for spiritual and human gatherings of the clergy. These meetings are necessary of course but do not represent the informal and spiritual nature of the gatherings desired.

A mutually-supportive environment needs to be established in which clergy are eager to help one another. A clergy network could be formalized with mentoring capability, i.e., those individuals with special counseling skills and experience could be assigned to mentor younger ones or ones who need extra assistance in certain pastoral or organizational areas. It would be useful to twin parishes with similar issues and opportunities, as well as new parishes with mature parishes. This would enable clergy to discuss and share common experiences and concerns and learn from one another.

Objective #2 – IMPROVE BISHOP-CLERGY-LAITY RELATIONSHIPS

“Frequent meetings and personal communications amongst the bishop, clergy, and laity, to include: frequent bishop-clergy meetings; personal communications, initiated by bishop and clergy alike; visits by the bishop to his parishes with a focus on getting to know the parish and the parishioners; and some strictly social gatherings at all levels.”

It would be critical to establish as a fundamental principle of Diocesan life the development of a closer relationship of trust between bishop, clergy and laity. Visits from diocesan bishops are always welcome by parishioners, but sometimes with some amount

of trepidation, ranging from choir and server anxieties, to concerns with meal preparation and lodging arrangements. Visits are generally planned way in advance and often at the time of parish anniversaries or other celebratory occasions, which most times do not allow for informal gathering with parish ministry leaders. Similarly, receptions can be rather formal and place a distance between the people and their Bishop.

On the other hand, some bishops hold informational “Ask the Bishop” sessions which are generally successful, depending on the openness of the Hierarchy, and which help to put the people at ease. The ideal is that the Bishop should feel as comfortable and happy walking into a parish, even without advance notice, as any parent would feel walking into one of their children’s homes. Thus, less formal hierarchical parish visitations could be profitably considered, spending a weekend or a few days mid-week with a parish, without extensive preparations and fanfare, including family picnics during the summer. Such informal and even impromptu visitations will be very helpful in dispelling the “trepidation” mentioned above. Similarly, gatherings of special ministries with the Bishop, e.g., parish councils, could be promoted. Barriers would be broken down with mutual exchange of churchly concerns. Relationships could be strengthened through joint service projects. It is noteworthy that special conferences dealing with this issue have been held, e.g., 2007 Parish Ministries Conference “Clergy and Laity Expectations of one Another.” Such dialogue would be useful to continue on a regular basis.

OBJECTIVE #3 – DEVELOP DIOCESAN-LEVEL OUTREACH MINISTRIES

“Develop diocesan level ministries and/or programs to reach out to the marginalized of our society, those that seem different than us – for they too are icons in the image and likeness of God. As Christ says, when we feed, give drink to, clothe, or visit in prison the least of these, we do it to Christ Himself.”

Most outreach ministries appear to be initiated by the parish itself, in response to general needs of the local community, or to a call for contributions by OCMC, IOCC, OCF, etc. Some efforts are being undertaken by IOCC and FOCUS North America to organize support on a broader-based regional level, but cutting across all jurisdictions. A Diocesan level charity program is under consideration by the Diocese of Washington.

It would be useful to incorporate lay people into priestly visitations (e.g., homes, hospitals, hospices, end-of-life-vigil, etc) and integrate them as much as possible into the institutional ministry. The parish priest would of course play a central role. Existing training material could be utilized. It would be advisable to follow a disciplined Ministry Model (e.g., pre-planning, identification of leaders/ champions, engaging people, ministry launch, peer evaluation, etc). Military, VA and other experienced / retired Institutional Chaplains could and should be invited to offer significant expertise and advice. This process would strengthen bonds between clergy and laity and mutually transform the care-giver and receiver.

Through the clergy twinning mentioned above and extending to include laity, grass-roots ministry projects could be grown, starting small, building upon success, and thus generating enthusiasm and confidence. News could be consciously shared among parishes and dioceses of simple ministries, e.g., feeding the poor from a parish kitchen, fix-up project of run-down parish rectory. A major pioneer project could be established as a model for others, e.g., housing for the elderly using federal grant funds. The OCA Resource Handbook provides examples of such projects but should be updated and re-publicized to reach those who have never read it, consulted it, or are generally unaware of its existence. In addition, the resources of the Departments of Christian Service and Humanitarian Aid and Institutional Chaplaincies could be used to stimulate outreach ministries, for example, via the "Compassion in Action: Parish Ministry Training" program.

3. NOW IT IS YOUR TURN TO INPUT

The preceding sections have given you some initial thoughts from the Working Group on how to more fully revitalize our diocesan bishop-clergy-laity relationships. Now it will be your turn to help revise, modify, refine this goal and the top level steps to actualizing it. During the AAC you will participate in two three-hour Breakout Sessions focused on this Goal. Breakout Session I will focus on what the Church as a whole (parish, deanery, diocese, Church-wide all together) should do. Breakout Session II will focus on the specific programs/projects you and your colleagues in the room, networked together could do to advance this goal.

During Breakout Session I, you and your colleagues will be asked :

- What are the most critical things that need to be done by the Church as a whole to achieve this goal?
- To list up to four specific initiatives for achieving the goal.

During the second Breakout Session, you and your colleagues will focus on specific action steps (concrete projects or programs) that you and your colleagues, connected together in networks, can do to actualize the objectives identified in Breakout Session I. Specifically you will be asked to:

- List up to three specific programs and/or projects that we in this group should commit ourselves to. You will be asked to consider the answers with the context of “What *could* we do with the Lord’s help? What is “impossible with men but *possible with God*?”
- For each program/project list the specifics of the program/project, i.e. what it will achieve, how will it be achieved, and what people need to be involved.

In preparing for these discussions, you might want to consider the questions below and to solicit input from your priest and the people in your parish as well as from other parishioners and clergy that you know, as well as your own Diocesan Bishop. Space has

been left here for you to jot down your comments and bring them to the AAC for your personal reference during the discussions.

- How often do you meet with your Bishop? If clergy, how often do you meet with other clergy in the Diocese? Do the people have frequent interactions with others in other parishes? Do you feel the need to do so?

- What is the quality of your relationships with the Bishop, other clergy and parishes? Are you satisfied with this? What do you think might be done to improve these relationships? What could you do personally?

- If clergy or parish leader, would you be interested in a mentoring program or cross-educational program with other clergy and parishes? Would you be willing to serve as a mentor?

- Do you think that outreach ministries are necessary? Which in particular are ones that you think are important?

- Which outreach ministries would you personally be interested in participating in, or in helping to organize?