Report of the Bishop Assisting

Mission Cooperative: A Strategy for Healthy Congregations

At the 127th Annual Diocesan Convention, the Right Rev. Clifton Daniel, 3rd, Bishop Diocesan, asked the Department of Mission and Development to provide a vision for stronger diocesan support, energy and encouragement of our small congregations. The main thrust of the department’s work was to oversee revitalization and renewal of congregations confronting issues of sustainability.

The bishop appointed the five deans as additional members on the Department of Mission and Development Committee, to represent and act as voices for congregations in their deaneries. Additionally, it was understood that the department’s work would be served best by a spirit of teamwork and team leadership, collaborating with clergy and lay members in the churches.

One way of expressing this perspective is to say that this diocese is a family of churches which finds its essence in mission. Our mission is relational, and our structures serve those mission relationships. But those in mission express God’s calling when they reach beyond themselves, seeking to serve and not be served — offer effective leadership, nurture relationships, affect reconciliation, are alive and moving, flexible, available and accessible. These structures are characterized by the quality of relationships engendered by God’s own relational life in mission (Koinonia): interdependence, integrity, honesty, transparency, acceptance, openness, vulnerability, sharing, brokenness, compassion, and solidarity in pain.

The department began its work with a one day retreat held at Diocesan House where members identified some significant core values crucial to the life of the church and every member:

- We believe that the Holy Spirit calls and leads us in this work
- All congregations are important to the life of the diocese
- Care for all God’s people within and without the church
- Care and nurture all God’s people in the Episcopal tradition

The 13-member group of lay, clergy and bishops also developed a vision statement: “In 3-5 years, we will have energized, affirmed, and supported lay people and clergy who work in community to make all of our parishes’ centers of ministry.”

The importance of fostering intentional participation from already well-informed and highly motivated clergy and lay people has defined the initial approach. We value each person’s place in the “Big Picture” of God for our diocese and are motivated by the prospect of that knowledge.
In its deliberations, the department believes that each church possesses the capacity to be a healthy community in the service God’s mission. We share this feeling mindful of its support both in Pauline and Petrine theological thinking on the baptismal covenant, and succinctly summarized in the work of the Anglican Consultative Council report of 1996:

> All who are baptized into the life of God and live out their calling as members of the Anglican/Episcopal Communion are given a charism of the Holy Spirit for the life of the Communion and for the service of others.

The fundamental challenge before us as a diocese is to develop a model that would empower all God’s people for mission and ministry. Focus on lay empowerment considers the gifts of lay people that are ready to be affirmed and harnessed for the common good of the church.

There are 45 smaller (ASA 75) congregations at present (based on most current dataset of 2009 parochial reports published in last year's Convention journal) which make up 60% of our Diocese (such congregations are the 'regular' congregations of our Church making up some 55% of The Episcopal Church as a whole). Incidentally, we have 10 congregations that are showing signs of growth and transition from smaller style to larger style churches.

Small communities face special challenges. The old East Coast model of at least one priest per parish is becoming more and more challenging for smaller communities. This development is gaining the attention across the Episcopal Church, and new models of parish relationship with Clergy have begun to emerge. Bishop Daniel has highlighted in our diocese the response of one of our larger congregations that is in a magnet, or twinning, relationship with a smaller congregation. Magnet ministry occurs when a larger congregation shares clerical leadership with ministry teams in one or more smaller congregations. The Office of the Bishop hopes that other larger congregations will be able to ultimately engage some magnet work.

The bishop has also alluded to the historical fruitfulness of Coalition 16, and maybe the time has come for a revival of a smaller but more evolved model. The department’s case for this updated version is driven by the model of five deanery or regional entities already in operation in the diocese. We are proposing coalitions comprising small churches living in close proximity to one other. It is a model arising out of the cluster ministry project, in which a small aggregation of parishes might share the services of a priest. Again, this is a group-centered process which uses a priest as a member and teacher of an overall ministry team giving oversight to shared ministry. While we have had large cluster relationships in the design of the Coalition 16, large clusters have proven historically difficult to maintain. Experience in other diocese has shown that small clusters have had more success in recent years.

In this newer dispensation, training and leadership formation will be done at deanery level as well as at occasional gatherings of the coalitions for sharing, fellowship and review of the work
in their respective deaneries. Such gatherings would help to maintain diocesan flavor, oversight and accountability.

Let me humbly remind convention that a Church in mission is characterized by a celebration of commonality and difference at one and the same time. Our commonality and our difference is sustained by apostolic truth and the promise of the unity of all things in the worship of God. Our commonality and difference is sustained by apostolic truth and the promise of the unity of all things in the worship of God. Professor John Koening, Professor of New Testament at General Theological Seminary, introduces the term mission “cooperative” in describing the Luke/Acts model for flexibility widely engaged in small group. It was in the use of small communities of believers that God turned the world upside down (Acts 17: 6-34). This could be where the Church is at this time. To enforce his observation, Professor Koening points out that, “it is the nature of God’s spirit to challenge the self-image of believes so that the gospel may advance.”

The department wishes to note that other models are also being examined. Among these are:

- New ways of engaging "part-time" ministry, which focus upon community formation and life as a group-centered (and not as a clergy-centered) process. The old model of engaging a priest for "part-time" ministry on every Sunday of the month is passing away. Not only does this place a disproportionate burden on the priest, it creates an illusion that the congregation has at least a somewhat full-time presence, which is ultimately untrue and damaging to the congregation. Though we have colluded with this in the past, new part-time contracts are written in a different way.

- In the coming year, The Diocese of East Carolina will offer (on Sundays at a central location) two areas for special training of lay leaders in organizational leadership. One, the Parish Leadership Institute, will focus upon lay leadership development and training opportunities for all congregations of the diocese. The second such program, "New Dreams, New Visions for Lay Leaders" will provide development training of lay leadership skills particularly focused on the needs of the smaller churches which make up 60% of this Diocese.

- We currently offer three areas of collegial group support for clergy: Fresh Start, for clergy during the first two years of a new call; Interim Ministry Conversations, a colleague group for those in interim ministry positions; and the Transition Rectors' Gathering, resources and mutual support for clergy leading one of the 10 congregations of the diocese which find themselves growing beyond "pastoral" size and toward "program" size. In the coming year, we will add another special group, “New Dreams, New

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Visions” for clergy designed to support the needs of clergy serving smaller congregations of ASA75.

Note that for any of these models, the focus is on group leadership and not clergy-focused leadership. It's about mutual ministry and the ministry of the baptized.

We recognize that, in order to move the Church forward, we need to begin the process of helping congregations develop a deeper understanding of the fact that lay people are equally effective in ministry as clergy. Our lay people are some of the most capable and competent administrators and leaders in their communities. This truth is validated by the fact that so many of our churches already are making considerable use of their gifts in this area, but the department recommends taking that talent one step forward.

The department intends to recommend to the bishop the possibility of exploring the use of those in the diocese who have successfully completed the Education for Ministry program, and are willing and available to participate in Lay Leadership Program. We believe some of them may have entered the program for reasons other than academic enquiry, with an implicit expectation to be called to serve the Church in other areas. The diocese hopes to use their presence as a vital component in small-church leadership. This call isn’t restricted only to the EFM graduates, but is open to others in the diocese who feel an urgent calling to become a part of this leadership model, and are willing to make the sacrifice to undergo the required training.

To my fellow colleagues in the ordained ministry, let me reassure you that this is no attempt to undermine your position and/or authority, or to set up any sort of competition between lay and clergy states. The participants will be trained to be a support for clergy and congregations as already described.

As the Office of the Bishop continues to develop the program with broad-based input and advice from clergy and lay across the diocese, I wish to announce that the Albemarle Deanery has agreed to work with the Office of the Bishop to develop an abbreviated version of “mission cooperative” model suitable for deanery level implementation and oversight. The model will be tested in that deanery before being introduced to the other deaneries. However, one point needs to be made clear: each deanery will have an opportunity to offer its input in the program insofar as its particular circumstances may require variations. As much as we are a corporate body, we do recognize the individual challenges in our various parochial and regional settings.

The intention guiding this thinking is lifted out of the Benedictine Spiritual discipline of “less is more” by investing more ownership at deanery level so as to raise the level of vitality in small congregations. It is meant for us to hold each other accountable not simply by glossing over faults and shortcomings. The Office of the Bishop, the Department of Mission and Development and deaneries will work closely in a spirit of collaboration and mutual accountability.
The diocese’s work with our Latino/Hispanic congregations in Newton Grove, Washington, Goldsboro and, in recent times New Bern, continues to enrich our mission cooperative life. The diocese in conjunction with the La Iglesia de la Sagrada Familia is actively engaging the purchase of over 15 acres adjoining the current property. Funds for this purchase are coming directly from the parish’s account. It is hoped that in the not too distant future, our brothers and sisters will be housed in more comfortable worship and educational space. The Rev. Fr. Tony Rojas, Vestry and members should be commended for their commitment and perseverance. It is my hope and prayer that, as a diocesan family committed to mission and ministry; we would all be spirited in our efforts to see this dream become a reality. This is one of our major frontiers which we all need to take credit for and rightly boast of its place in the diocesan family.

As a diocese in mission being led forward by the Holy Spirit, we acknowledge that we are God’s pilgrim people, and therefore, while affirming the patterns and traditions of our past, we realize that these are provisional, and that our diocese is developing as it is being transformed in Christ.